

**Tuesday 1 September**

**Luke 4:31-37**

Yesterday the cycle of Gospel readings changed from Matthew to Luke. Omitting the first three and a half chapters, we began with the opening of Jesus' public ministry. In Luke, this occurs in a synagogue where Jesus publicly reads from Isaiah and then astonishes everyone by saying that the text is being fulfilled even as the people are listening.

It is surely significant that, in Luke, Jesus begins his public life by showing that a reading from the prophet Isaiah applied to himself. Not least because, at the end of his public life on earth, after the resurrection, Jesus explains to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and then to the rest of the disciples, that the whole of Scripture (meaning what we call the Old Testament) was speaking about him. It is as though Luke places the whole account of Jesus' public life, death and resurrection between these two explanations of Scripture referring to himself.

Luke seems to be setting the scene and helping us to understand that all of Jesus' actions and words are to be understood in the light of the Old Testament. We notice in today's reading and in subsequent readings this week that there is a highlighting of 'the word' and of Jesus preaching 'the word of God'. In the context of Israel at that time, 'the word of God' would have referred to Israel's Scriptures.

The scene in today's reading has moved from Nazareth to Capernaum, where Jesus enters another synagogue on the Sabbath and is teaching. Notice the people's reaction: they are 'astonished at his teaching, for his word was with authority' (v. 32).

Immediately, Jesus is confronted by a man possessed by an unclean spirit, which he 'rebukes'. The people say to one another, 'What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out' (v. 36).

It seems evident that Jesus is showing in a practical way that he is fulfilling the Isaiah passage that he read out in the synagogue in Nazareth – 'He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives' (see Luke 4:18). It is the first indication that the Scriptures were indeed speaking about Jesus. There is also a hidden implication that the seemingly effortless word of Jesus is the same as the creative word spoken by God in Genesis 1. But this time humanity is set free from the power of the evil one!

1 Thessalonians 5:1-6, 9-11 • Psalm 26(27):1, 4, 13-14

Luke 4:31-37e

**Wednesday 2 September**

**Luke 4:38-44**

Today's reading continues the theme in Luke's Gospel of Jesus fulfilling the Scripture that he read in the synagogue in Nazareth, indicating that he was anointed by the Spirit and sent by God 'to proclaim release to the captives..., to set at liberty those who are oppressed' (4:18). While yesterday's reading was concerned with a word of rebuke spoken to an evil spirit, today's reading uses the same word 'rebuke', but this time it was the fever of Peter's mother-in-law that was rebuked.

It seems as though the sickness is endowed with personality. It is not the way that we typically think about illness or the way of dealing with it. Are we facing here a somewhat naive and unscientific approach to sickness, which reflects a first-century understanding of things? It is not insignificant that the author of this Gospel, Luke, was himself a physician. However primitive we might consider first-century doctors to have been, it is not the case that they treated sickness simply in terms of demonic causes. What is being revealed is an insight into the mystery of sickness.

At one level, fevers and other ailments have their physical causes. Nevertheless, even today, it is not difficult to see that they also have spiritual repercussions. The whole person can be affected, and insofar as sickness touches the human spirit and can become an obstacle in a person's relationship with God, we can understand that sickness has some connection with the whole mystery of sin and evil in the world, and is linked to the fallen condition of humanity. Jesus came into this world precisely to liberate humanity from this fallen condition.

Often in the Gospels, the fruit of being healed by Jesus is that those healed, and even the bystanders, begin to glorify God and are amazed at God's power manifested in Jesus. In today's reading we are told, 'and immediately she [Peter's mother-in-law] rose and served them' (v. 39). We may be tempted to read this text with cynical eyes, and even secretly feel a little sorry for the lady as though she was only healed so that someone could get the dinner ready – had that thought occurred to you? But surely the words 'rose' and 'served' have other resonances in the Gospel. She has begun to take on the likeness of Jesus himself. This is the true fruit of healing.

Colossians 1:1-8 • Psalm 51(52):10-11

Luke 4:38-44

## **Thursday 3 September**

### **Luke 5:1-11 • St Gregory the Great (Feast in England only)**

Among all the Gospel writers, the phrase ‘the word of God’ is almost exclusively used by Luke. The phrase also occurs frequently in the Acts of the Apostles, which also was written by Luke. Today’s reading records the first occasion when the phrase is applied to the teaching and preaching of Jesus.

Earlier in the Gospel, Luke tells us that ‘the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness’ (3:2). With this phrase, Luke is continuing the pattern of the Old Testament prophets – for example, the word of God came to, or was addressed to, both Hosea and Jeremiah. What is remarkable is that nowhere does the Gospel state that the word of God came to Jesus! The word of God is simply equated with the words of Jesus.

We have noted already that the people recognized the uniqueness of Jesus’ word. They perceived in it both the power and the authority of God himself and, indeed, the very effortless power of the word of the Creator. The same theme continues in the incident of the catch of fish. After borrowing Simon’s boat to enable his teaching to be more easily heard, Jesus invites Simon to ‘put out into the deep’ for a catch of fish. The fisherman is doubtful, having toiled all night, but responds: ‘at your word, I will let down the nets’ (v. 5). Simon’s reaction recalls Old Testament reactions to manifestations of God’s presence and glory (for example, Isaiah in the temple: ‘I am a man of unclean lips’, Isa. 6:5.). As with Isaiah, this encounter with the divine presence also leads to Simon’s calling, not as a prophet but as a follower of Jesus who will share his mission of drawing people into the kingdom of God.

Today, especially in England, we are celebrating the feast of Pope St Gregory the Great. As the successor of Simon Peter, Gregory played a significant role in drawing the people of England into God’s kingdom. In Rome he saw some young child slaves, and on learning they were from England, he was so moved that he despatched Augustine to go and evangelize that country. This was not the first time that the gospel was proclaimed in England, but it was a particularly fruitful mission and at length brought about the conversion of England to Christ.

Thank you, Lord, for the power of your word. May your word be heard again in this land.

Proper of Saints: 1 Thess 2:2-8 • Ps 95(96):1-3, 7-10 • Mt 16:13-19

Proper of Season: Col 1:9-14 • Ps 97(98):2-6 • Lk 5:1-11

**Friday 4 September**

**Luke 5:33-39**

For the last few days, since we began reading from the Gospel of Luke, the overriding theme has been ‘the word of Jesus’. Whether it be the word of his teaching and preaching, or whether it be a word of rebuke against evil spirits or against sickness, the word of Jesus is both authoritative and powerful. Indeed, the word of Jesus incarnates the divine word of God. Later, the Gospel of John will be even more explicit. Jesus is the Word, who in the beginning was with God and was God: ‘And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us’ (John 1:14).

By the manner in which Luke records the various incidents of healing and exorcism, the teaching of Jesus and the call to discipleship, it is clear that the Word has taken flesh in the person of Jesus. Luke however, does not focus directly on ‘the beginning’ as John’s Gospel does. Rather, Luke links Jesus with the word of God which is the Old Testament. Remember that, a few days ago, Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth read from the prophet Isaiah, and then declared that the text was being fulfilled at that very moment.

We have already mentioned that, at the end of his Gospel, only Luke records the encounter between the risen Jesus and the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Once again Jesus speaks of the Scriptures being fulfilled. This time, however, it is the whole of Scripture (Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms) that is being fulfilled. It is as though Jesus has gradually taken to himself the whole of the Old Testament, beginning with the Isaiah passage read in the synagogue, then at the Transfiguration – when Moses and Elijah (representatives of the Old Testament) are themselves transfigured, and seem to become one with Jesus (where else did they go?) – and finally through his death and resurrection, when he passed through the veil (itself an image of the Old Testament) into the new reality of the risen life – the new wine! The Old Testament is so transfigured by Jesus that it now speaks, in its entirety, about him and about all that he has accomplished. The Old Testament has become like the flesh of Jesus, like his garment, which serves to reveal his true identity.

Jesus, in today’s reading, has taken imagery from the Old Testament – the bridegroom, the new garment and new wine – and has applied it to himself.

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

Luke 5:33-39

## **Saturday 5 September**

### **Luke 6:1-5**

Another aspect of Jesus taking the Old Testament to himself, just as the second person of the Trinity took human nature to himself, is that the Lord gives a renewed understanding of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a central component of the revelation contained in the Old Testament and of the Jewish faith and practice. The Sabbath was celebrated at the end of each week, not simply as a day of rest, but as a celebration of God the Creator, who, as Genesis recounts, completed the work of creation by resting on the seventh day.

This rest is full of meaning. As the climax of creation it establishes the truth that while the creative activity of work is an essential aspect of human life, the ultimate purpose of God's work of creation was to establish a stage on earth for human beings to be in a relationship with God and to worship him. As the Old Testament gradually reveals, the creation and the celebration of the Creator through the Sabbath was directed towards the establishment of the covenant between God and humanity, represented at first by Israel. In other words, God created humanity so that humanity could enter into a relationship with him. The acknowledgement and worship of God was central to the purpose behind the creation of human beings.

God chose Israel and formed them as a nation, because humanity had turned aside from his true purpose for human beings and became fallen – making idols rather than worshipping the true God, even making work itself and the works of human hands into gods.

Although it was Israel's vocation to be the means by which God's purpose for all of humanity would be made known, and to be a pathway for the restoration of humanity, in fact, Israel's infidelity to the covenant showed that she was not so much a solution to the problem of the Fall, but was herself also part of the problem. Israel herself seemed to embody the very fallenness that was the sickness of all humanity.

At this point, a new and amazing stage in the unfolding of God's plan of salvation begins to be unrolled. The vocation that Israel was ultimately unable to fulfil was brought to fulfilment by the Son of God, Jesus Christ. He is the place where God and humanity are most intimately united. Jesus completely fulfils humanity's purpose to obey and worship the Creator. He is the real meaning of the Sabbath!

Colossians 1:21-23 • Psalm 53(54):3-8

Luke 6:1-5

## **Sunday 6 September**

### **(B) Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time • Mark 7:31-37**

The Sunday Gospel readings are at this time taken from Mark, while the weekday readings are from Luke. As a result, there is a break in the sequence of readings that we have been looking at. Luke, in fact, has no record of this incident of the healing of the deaf-mute. Actually, today's reading is unusual even for Mark, in that Jesus not only speaks the word of healing, but also puts his fingers in the man's ears and touches his tongue with spittle. Why might this be?

Perhaps it is significant that the man in this incident is deaf and would not initially be able to hear the word of Jesus. The actions of Jesus could therefore be seen as an alternative means Jesus takes to communicate with the deaf man. The actions of touching both his ears and his tongue reveal that Jesus wants to bring healing precisely to the man's hearing and speech impediments. Touch is a very powerful means of human communication, and this aspect of Jesus' ministry is also found in the sacramental life of the Church, especially through 'the laying on of hands' in the sacrament of confirmation, the sacrament of the sick and the sacrament of holy orders.

Perhaps Jesus' interaction with the deaf-mute also highlights another aspect of the way God deals with human beings. Several of the recent readings from Luke's Gospel have focused on the effortless power of the word of Jesus, and reveal the power and authority of God himself. However, in today's reading we also see that, in order to be effective, the word of Jesus needs to be received and welcomed in faith. This, of course, is not true in the case of the word addressed to evil spirits, but usually Jesus' healings are carried out in the context of faith. So much so that we are sometimes told that when there is lack of faith, Jesus is unable to perform the miracles.

In the light of this, Jesus' actions with the deaf man not only communicate his willingness to heal him, but also allow him the opportunity to receive and put his faith in what Jesus is doing.

Today in the liturgy we proclaim in faith: 'Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.'

Isaiah 35:4-7 • Psalm 145(146):7-10

James 2:1-5 • Mark 7:31-37

## **Monday 7 September**

### **Luke 6:6-11**

We pick up again in Luke's Gospel, continuing from our Saturday reading, and find Jesus in dispute with the Pharisees over the true meaning of the Sabbath. It was another Sabbath, another synagogue. How many times has Luke shown Jesus teaching and performing miracles in a synagogue? And each occasion set against the background of Jesus fulfilling the Scriptures, as he declared when he read from Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth (see Luke 4:16-21).

On Saturday we considered the true purpose of the Sabbath in the Old Testament as a means by which God was intending to restore humanity to its original purpose in his plan of creation. Humanity's purpose is centred upon acknowledgement and worship of God. We can see how far from this understanding of the Sabbath the Pharisees have strayed through their overemphasis on the keeping of meticulous regulations. The Pharisees' hearts are further revealed in the way that they are pursuing Jesus in order to catch him out and find cause for condemning him as a breaker of the Sabbath.

But Jesus has come precisely to heal and restore humanity from its fallenness – removing those obstacles which prevent us from worshipping God. Indeed, we might say that he came to restore humanity to 'the image and likeness of God', which Genesis reveals as the real nature of men and women. It is highly significant that Jesus carries out his mission precisely in the context of a synagogue and on a Sabbath. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, both in the sense that he reveals what Scripture teaches is the heart of the Sabbath in God's plan of creation and salvation, and in the sense that his coming actually brings about the restoration of humanity, of which the Sabbath was the anticipatory sign.

There is a further indication in today's reading of Jesus fulfilling the Old Testament. Jesus cures the man with a withered hand. But first he asks if it is right to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it. Since surely the answer is obvious, why did Jesus ask? Perhaps the question implies God's own action in creation ('he saw that it was good') and in his saving acts in the history of Israel. The words of Jesus, 'Stretch out your hand', also recall the words of God to Moses at the time of the Exodus. Jesus is doing what he sees the Father doing.

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

Luke 6:6-11

**Tuesday 8 September**

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

‘This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit’ (v. 18 NIV). When a child is born, so is a mother. It’s like a hand clap – the two come together in the same instant: clap! A child’s birthday is also the mother’s birthday. So it is worth taking a moment to think about St Anne today.

The name Anne comes from the Hebrew Hannah, which means ‘grace’. It is thought that Anne was born in Bethlehem and was married to Joachim. It is suggested that they had been married twenty years before Anne became pregnant with Mary. Like any child, Mary was a gift from God. After her birth, it is also thought that Anne and Joachim dedicated her to God at the temple in Jerusalem. The life of St Anne and her connection to Mary, and her grandson Jesus, was very popular with early Christians. What must Anne have thought when she discovered her daughter was pregnant? St Anne is the patron saint of mothers and women in labour.

Like the Holy Family and their extended families, our own families can be viewed as a microcosm of God’s love for us, which is personified in Jesus who is the foundation of the Church. New parents often feel overwhelmed with a sense of awe and wonder, and as their children grow they begin to see – through their child’s eyes – all things new in God’s creation. In *The Baby Book: How to Enjoy Year One*, Rachel Waddilove writes that she believes that God can equip us as parents with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). Rachel comments that one of the special qualities of parental love is that parents love their children unconditionally – just as God loves us.

Dear St Anne, you were especially favoured by God to be the mother of the most holy Virgin Mary, the Mother of our Saviour. By the power of your most pure daughter and with her divine son, kindly obtain for us the grace and favour we now seek. Please secure for us the forgiveness of our past sins, the strength to perform faithfully our daily duties and the help we need to persevere in the love of Jesus and Mary. Amen.

Micah 5:1-4 or Romans 8:28-30 • Psalm 12(13):6-7

Matthew 1:1-16, 18-23

**Wednesday 9 September**

**Luke 6:20-26**

The Gospel of Luke pays attention to the role of women in Jesus' life and ministry, and thus it is apt that a reading from Luke is the first Gospel following the feast of the Birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Women played a more open and forceful part in the Greco-Roman than the Semitic world, and Luke's attention to the role of women is evidence of his cosmopolitan background. In his Gospel, Mary is the first and prime example of the disciple: she hears the word of God and keeps it (1:38; 8:21; 11:28).

Another notable aspect of Luke's Gospel is evident in his Beatitudes, which we read today. These contrast those of Matthew (5:3-10). Luke has four Beatitudes while Matthew has eight. Matthew's Beatitudes concentrate on attitudes of spirit: for example, while he focuses on the poor in heart who hunger for righteousness, Luke focuses on those who are in fact poor and hungry. In addition, Luke balances his Beatitudes with four woes directed towards those who are rich and comfortable, e.g. 'But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger' (6:24-25).

In his Gospel Luke does not back away from criticizing those who have wealth and pointing out the dangers of wealth (see also 12:16-20 and 16:19-31). Those of us without material wealth are in a fortunate position, because wealth, full stomachs, contentment and human respect – which appear good in themselves and which we might strive for – can distract us from God.

This Gospel is as much of a challenge for us today as it would have been for those sitting listening to Jesus. Jesus turns our world upside down: we are happy if we are poor, hungry, weeping and hated. How can this be? We tend to associate happiness with pleasure and comfort. How can we be happy if we are poor and hungry? It is the contemporary use of the word 'happy' which is the difficulty here, because true happiness is spiritual and moral. The source of all happiness is God, and the saints in heaven are described as supremely happy because they are with God.

I pray daily that my cheerful heart lifts me up, and brings joy to everyone around me.  
Amen.

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

Luke 6:20-26

**Thursday 10 September**

**Luke 6:27-38**

If we thought that Jesus was turning conventional understanding on its head in yesterday's Gospel reading, today's compounds it: 'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same...But love your enemies, and do good...expecting nothing in return' (vv. 32-35). This is a radical challenge at whatever point in history we live in. Jesus is talking here about more than a smile and a few words of polite conversation to someone who has previously wronged or attacked us. He is asking us to actively do good to those who have caused us pain. How do we begin to approach this challenge? It is not easy to find the face of Jesus in those who have hurt us. But we can start by praying for those who are our enemies and asking God to help them and heal our relationships.

The key verse in this Gospel reading is verse 31: 'Do to others as you would have them do to you' (NIV). This is about mercy. It may be worth meditating upon this as we approach the Holy Year of Mercy which begins on 8 December. The 28-page bull announcing the Year of Mercy opens with the declaration, 'Jesus is the face of the Father's mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith.' This document goes on to elaborate on the theological understanding of God's mercy in the life of people and the Church. 'The mercy of God is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality through which he reveals his love as that of a father or a mother, moved to the very depths out of love for their child', the Pope writes. For those of us grappling with the challenge of what we are being asked to do in today's Gospel, it can be useful to think in terms of parental love. Everyone is someone's beloved child. We are all beloved by God. Each one of us is of equal value to him.

Dear Jesus, we pray for our enemies and those who attack and oppose us. With the help of your Holy Spirit, may all people learn to work together for that justice which brings true and everlasting peace. Amen.

Colossians 3:12-17 • Psalm 150:1-6

Luke 6:27-38

**Friday 11 September**

**Luke 6:39-42**

GK Chesterton said that ‘Men do not differ much about what things they will call evils; they differ enormously about what evils they will call excusable.’ While Chesterton wrote ‘men’, we could substitute the word ‘people’. When we say we follow Christ and his Word, do our actions show that we do? If we have integrity, we have values that mean we behave in a way that is honourable, truthful and reliable. We keep our word and do our best, even when no one else knows what we are doing. This is important in relationships, in developing other people’s confidence in us, and in evangelizing. The word ‘integrity’ comes from the Latin adjective integer, which means whole or complete. Integrity is about the sense of inner ‘wholeness’ of a person, deriving from qualities like honesty and consistency of character.

Jesus poses an interesting question in today’s Gospel reading: ‘Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?’ (v. 39). There may be an allusion here to the scribes and the Pharisees blindly leading the Jewish people in the wrong direction. The key question is, what was the motivation of the Jewish leaders? Did they have integrity? This is what today’s Gospel reading is about. Integrity. ‘Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, “Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,” when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye?’ (vv. 41-42 NIV). St Faustina Kowalska said, ‘The soul will not attain sanctity if it does not keep watch over its tongue.’ Do we have integrity? Are we as good as our word? Jesus calls us to integrity. This is the demonstration of who we are in Christ, and that our faith is real and is backed up with our words and actions.

Heavenly Father, you know the true content of my heart, though others may be fooled by my words and actions. So it is with you that I must keep a short account, and pray from a genuine heart, that I will act in accordance with your will, and think about those things which are honest and just. Help me to think about what I say before I say it. Help me to stand for what is right, and live my life with integrity. Amen.

1 Timothy 1:1-2, 12-14 • Psalm 15(16):1-8, 11

Luke 6:39-42

**Saturday 12 September**

**(Optional Memorial) Holy Name of Mary • Luke 6:43-49**

During the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, 'The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks' (v. 45). So the question is, what is the content of our hearts? Khalil Gibran said, 'Faith is a knowledge within the heart, beyond the reach of proof.' We hold our faith in our hearts. What else do we hold there?

Honouring the Holy Name of Mary is another way of honouring Mary as the person who was chosen to be the Mother of God. Mary gave a heartfelt yes to God. We are told in the Gospel of Luke that she kept all kinds of joys and sorrows in her heart: 'Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart' (2:19 NIV).

On 13 October 2013, Pope Francis dedicated the world to the heart of Mary. Before the image of Our Lady of Fatima, the Pope asked for Mary's help to 'revive and grow faith'. At the close of the Mass in St Peter's Square he said, 'We celebrate in you the great work of God, who never tires of bending down with mercy to mankind, afflicted by evil and wounded by sin, to heal and save it.' Mary was faithful, even in moments of difficulty. Are we?

The themes of mercy and integrity flow through the Gospel of Luke, and living out these themes in our daily lives is key to evangelizing. It is written in Psalm 19:14: 'May the words of my mouth always find favour, and the whispering of my heart, in your presence, Yahweh, my rock, my redeemer' (NJB). The faithful heart of Mary shows the Christian response to God. Her heart was pure. As we move towards the Holy Year of Mercy, it may be worth meditating upon what we are storing in our hearts and how we can come to repentance and a true change of heart.

'Guard our lives in your arms: bless and strengthen every desire for goodness, revive and grow faith, sustain and illuminate hope, arouse and enliven charity, guide us all on the path to holiness. Amen.' (A prayer to Our Lady by Pope Francis)

1 Timothy 1:15-17 • Psalm 112(113):1-7  
Luke 6:43-49

## **Sunday 13 September**

### **Mark 8:27-35 • Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

Jesus is a puzzle in the Gospel of Mark, at least to the characters whom he meets. Mark himself is clear on who Jesus is from the very first verse of his Gospel: 'The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (1:1 JB). But in the majority of people Jesus arouses curiosity: 'The people were so astonished that they started asking each other what it all meant. "Here is a teaching that is new," they said, "and with authority behind it..." (1:27 JB), and "Who can this be? Even the wind and the sea obey him" (4:41 JB). Jesus doesn't particularly help out those he meets by way of an explanation of who he is. He doesn't accept the titles conferred on him, either in today's Gospel reading (v. 30, where Peter names him as the Messiah), or in later chapters where he is called 'Lord' (10:51) and 'Son of David' (12:35-37). But Jesus does refer to himself as 'the Son of Man'. This title is used in Mark's Gospel fourteen times. What does it mean?

Henry Wansbrough OSB wonders whether the expression merely means 'human being', or whether Jesus is alluding to the 'son of man' in the book of Daniel (7:13), who receives all power on earth from the Ancient of Days. Wansbrough suggests that Mark certainly understood the expression in this way. It seems that Jesus wants people to come to their own realization of who he is. Having heard Peter's profession of faith, Jesus demands that the disciples tell no one. It is a tacit confirmation from Jesus that Peter is correct, but why not openly tell others this himself? Why ask Peter and the other disciples to remain tight-lipped? In the Gospel of Mark in particular, Jesus is portrayed as commanding his followers to silence about the Messianic mission. This is known as the Messianic Secret.

The characters in Mark's Gospel come to know Jesus by spending time with him. This is how Jesus wants all of us to get to know him and love him. He doesn't come into our lives demanding recognition. He waits quietly to be invited in, and for us to recognize his importance in our lives. This is a Gospel account which is about self-realization, because it is when we recognize who Jesus is that we realize who we are too.

Dear Jesus, give us the grace to recognize you in our daily lives. Amen.

Isaiah 50:5-9 • Psalm 114(116):1-9

James 2:14-18 • Mark 8:27-35

## **Monday 14 September**

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

How many of us have tried to help someone who doesn't want to be helped? Whether that person is an addict who has not yet reached a point where they want to help themselves get better, or a child who is determined to be independent and 'do it their way', even if we as adults know better. We know that our attempts to help where it is not wanted are unsuccessful. Parents all over the world have at some point struggled to wrestle their determined toddlers into a pram, high chair, car seat or similar. Anyone who has tried to lift up a small child who does not want to be picked up, knows that lifting someone up requires active participation! The last line in verse 14 of today's reading is striking: 'the Son of Man must be lifted up' (NIV). Jesus was an active participant in his own crucifixion: these verses in the Gospel of John tell us that Jesus knew what was coming.

Jesus was nailed to the cross and lifted up. He was then lifted, or raised up, by his Father. This was all part of the divine plan, 'that everyone who believes may have eternal life' (v. 15 NIV). Christ was an active participant in his passion and resurrection. We also have the opportunity to be active participants in God's plan for our lives. Mary and Jesus said 'yes' to God's plan. We are invited to let him into our lives and use the gifts and talents he has given us in a positive way. The challenge for us is standing before the cross and discerning what our vocation is.

'God has created me to do him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do his work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it if I do but keep his commandments.' (Part of a prayer by Blessed John Henry Newman)

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

**Tuesday 15 September**

**Luke 7:11-17 • Our Lady of Sorrow (Memorial)**

It is a hot day in a little town called Nain, about five miles from Nazareth. Jesus is entering the town with his disciples and a group of followers, and there before his eyes is a funeral procession, complete with official mourners, some wailing, others bearing spices. It happens that the deceased man was the only son of a widow. Jesus' heart goes out to her, and he makes a series of moves which might at first surprise us. First he approaches and comforts the woman (not normally done by a man in that culture); next he touches the bier (something which would have rendered him ritually unclean according to Jewish law); then he tells the young man to get up, which he duly does, to the astonishment of those around.

One of the most unusual features of this story is that on this occasion Jesus asks for no sign of faith from anyone else – he himself is the only person whose compassion brings about the miracle. We hear nothing about the faith of the mother, nothing about mourners approaching him to appeal for a healing, and nothing about the faith of the deceased himself. But none of this matters to Jesus, for now that his compassion has taken over, everything else is incidental. 'Compassion' is a quality often associated with Jesus, that ability quite literally to 'suffer with' another, to enter right into their area of pain and to stay there with them, upholding them with an indescribable love. It is a quality we would want to reflect on and replicate during this coming Holy Year of Mercy.

Jesus goes a step further, raising the young man to life. We know that the man would eventually die a natural death, but this story surely has another purpose, however covert. Is it not that Luke wants us to make a link in our minds with the death and resurrection of Jesus himself, and to remind ourselves that, in his case, death would be conquered forever and all would be invited to share the new life in Christ? Meanwhile, we are treated to a wonderful example of the power which emanates out of Jesus, God incarnate, through his great love for suffering humanity.

Jesus, as you identify with each of us in our sufferings, great or small, we pray for the grace to enter daily and with joy into the mystery of your life, death and resurrection.

1 Timothy 3:1-13 • Psalm 100(101):1-6 • Luke 7:11-17  
(Proper of Saints: Luke 2:33-35 or John 19:25-27)

**Wednesday 16 September**

**(Memorial) SS Cornelius and Cyprian • 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. 31). 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 a 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’ (see 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 is 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 Timothy 3:14-16 • Psalm 110(111):1-6

Luke 7:31-35

**Thursday 17 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 Timothy 4:12-16 • Psalm 110(111):7-10

Luke 7:36-50

**Friday 18 September**

**Luke 8:1-3**

In life we owe a great debt to many people we will never meet. Take, for example, those brave soldiers who fought in the Second World War against the dark forces of fascism and dictatorship so that we would continue to enjoy the freedom of a democratic society. Or those who campaigned for the right to vote or who dedicated their lives to ensuring that we would have access to a free health service and free education or who stood up for the rights of workers.

As believers we also owe a great debt to the silent women of the Gospels who supported Jesus and his disciples out of their own means. In today's passage Luke records the names of two of these women: Joanna, the wife of Chuza, and Susanna (v. 3). How they supported and served them we do not know, but what we do know is that their devoted love and service enabled the Lord and his disciples to dedicate their lives to proclaiming the kingdom of God.

Of course, every Christian community is underpinned by the same kind of love and service. In our parishes and dioceses there is a whole army of people – church cleaners and parish helpers, for example – who are prepared to do the unglamorous, behind-the-scenes tasks. This kind of dedicated service is at the heart of the gospel, although the message does not seem to have hit home with many Christians. A young, newly ordained priest once complained to his bishop, 'I find myself having to count up the newspaper money and clean out the drains in the presbytery. I was not ordained to do such tasks.' The wise bishop replied, 'I am afraid that this is exactly what you were ordained to do – to serve God's people in its many and varied forms.'

The women who ministered to Jesus have left a rich legacy of love and service. How wise and true are these words of St Irenaeus: 'A human being's true glory is to persevere in the service of God.' Today, we remember these women of the gospel, to whom we look as models and witnesses of how to live our lives. Of course, the wisdom of holiness informs us that when we serve others we are truly serving God.

'I sought my soul, but my soul I could not see. I sought my God but my God eluded me. I sought my brother and I found all three.' (William Blake)

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

Luke 8:1-3

**Saturday 19 September**

**Luke 8:4-15**

Parents and educators understand well enough that if they remind those in their charge of how blessed, lucky or privileged they are, their exhortation can fall on deaf ears – there is something in the human heart which can be resistant to such guidance. But the truth is we do need to be reminded and exhorted about many things. Children can be ungrateful and easily forget their blessings; students (at all levels) fail to register the effort and work behind the service they receive. We are all prone to such weakness – whoever we are – and we often need to be reminded (the wise and the mature often will remind themselves) of the grace and blessing we have received.

This preamble is necessary today because many are familiar with the parable of the Sower and therein lies an inherent danger. The danger is that we fail to deepen and grow in acknowledging, understanding, appreciating and (perhaps most importantly) appropriating the rich teaching contained herein.

We at Bible Alive believe that the parable of the Sower is the key into all the parables. What do we mean by this? We mean that this parable addresses the condition of our hearts and minds and, if we are open and receptive to its message, we will be formed, educated and enlightened by the Word of God, and therefore better able to live the Christian life on a daily basis.

Three of the four types of soil in the parable did not provide the conditions in which the seed of the word of God could thrive, and they alert us to the very real temptations we all face: the first is that we become overwhelmed by the philosophies and mindsets of the world and God's word is whisked away; the second is that we believe at first but, being shallow and fickle, the seed cannot put down roots; and the third is that our hearts become choked by the allures and attractions of the world and our fledgling faith is suffocated.

The daily challenge is, how can we be the good soil? The daily opportunity is, how do we mature? The daily invitation is, how do we become solid and mature in faith? The answer is by and through grace and perseverance.

'I pray my God that he will grant perseverance and allow me to prove a faithful witness right up to the time of my passing over, for my God's sake.' (St Patrick)

1 Timothy 6:13-16 • Psalm 99(100)

Luke 8:4-15

**Sunday 20 September**

**Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time • Mark 9:30-37**

It would have been interesting to have been a fly on the wall or to have eavesdropped in on the disciples on their journey to Capernaum. A spat broke out as they disputed who among them was the greatest. Sadly we are given no insight or steer on criteria they applied or who was the most vocal in this most undignified of fracas. Given a good number of them were fishermen, were they comparing nets, boats or their biggest-ever catch? Was Matthew boasting about the money he'd made during his time as a tax collector? Or was the row about physical prowess, stamina or endurance (they were all men after all!). Or was it about personal matters, and to do with family wealth, their children, their wives?

Because we will never know, it's impossible to speculate (although good fun and an interesting exercise)! There can be little doubt, however, that the detail of the row would have been at a very low level and clearly cast them all in very poor light indeed. In a way, though, such incidents point to the utter reliability and authenticity of the Scriptures because if the gospel writers were simply writing propaganda (as they can sometimes be accused), they would have sought to gloss over or cover up this kind of embarrassing weakness and failure. Instead, their insecurity and self-doubt are on show for all the world to see for all time.

If you want to be great – Jesus tells them and us – become the least, the servant of all; better still take on the disposition and attitude of a child (children and women were virtually non-citizens in these ancient cultures). This teaching is staggering – so refreshing, so radical, so alternative, so counter-nature, let alone counter-cultural. There is true freedom in humility but it is always grounded in a true knowledge of God and of self. We grow in humility to the degree that we grow in our knowledge of God's greatness and our littleness. 'God is great' is the prayer of the humble. True humility has nothing to do with self-loathing or self-disgust or a negative self-image, actually rather the opposite. In the light of today's Gospel we can understand humility as a kind of spiritual science, to be studied, reflected on and then applied in our daily lives.

'The science of humility rests upon the knowledge of God and of oneself.' (Bishop William Ullathorn)

Wisdom 2:12, 17-20 • Psalm 53(54):3-6

James 3:16–4:3 • Mark 9:30-37

**Monday 21 September**

**Matthew 9:9-13 • St Matthew (Feast)**

St Augustine famously said, 'Love the sinner, hate the sin.' This beautiful dictum is wonderfully illustrated in today's Gospel reading. In first-century Palestine it would have been hard to find anyone more despised, hated, reviled and utterly contemptuous than a tax collector. The Romans were shrewd and manipulative in the ways they went about extracting taxes from the peoples they oppressed, appointing tax collectors from within the subjected nations. These traitors were without morality – prepared to exploit their own people for personal gain. As we know, tax-collecting was Matthew's occupation before he met Jesus.

Religion has always been understood to be for the righteous, the holy, the good, the worthy and the noble. Jesus turned this idea on its head in that he came to call 'sinners': men and women who would never be described by these words. However, and this is what was really revolutionary about the gospel, he also revealed that, deep down in our hearts, we are all sinners. It is this idea or principle which can be hard to accept or really understand. Jesus expressed it like this: 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick' (v. 12 NIV). What Christian revelation makes clear is that we are sinners and since sinners sin, we all need healing and therefore a physician. Jesus is the physician of our souls and he came to heal and restore us. This is why no human being – regardless of what they have done, no matter how heinous, despicable or utterly vile – is beyond God's redemption. This is why the gospel is such 'good news' and why it continues to change and transform people's lives all over the world.

Every single one of us needs to receive a personal revelation to help us to understand that we ourselves are the first recipients of this kindness and mercy. Only when we have received this revelation will we truly begin to grasp the beauty and mercy of the gospel of Christ. 'What revelation makes known to us is confirmed by our own experience. For when we look into our own hearts we find that we are drawn towards what is wrong and sunk in many evils which cannot come from our good Creator' (Gaudium et spes 13).

Lord, on the feast of St Matthew I ask for mercy upon me a sinner. Teach me that there but for God's grace and mercy go I.

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

Matthew 9:9-13

**Tuesday 22 September**

**Luke 8:19-21**

Practising what we preach or giving witness to our faith is necessary for faith to be authentic. We all know that practice makes perfect in every walk of life and the same is true of the Christian walk. The great pianist Paderewski was once asked how he achieved such mastery of his instrument and he replied, 'The only way to become master of any skill is first to become its slave. And that takes practice, practice, practice.'

Our vocation is very simply to live a life in the power of the Holy Spirit. The problem with the simplicity of this statement is that our task is actually very challenging and in one way very difficult. If it were easy and we could do it naturally, we would not need the Holy Spirit – and we do. The foundation we need to build every day in living a Spirit-filled life is learning to discern and obey God's will. Jesus affirmed that those who seek to do his will are truly related to him: they are, if you like, truly his mother and brothers (Matt. 12:50).

Abba Anthony the Great was asked once, 'What must we do in order to please God?' He replied, 'Whoever you may be, always have God before your eyes.' The key then to doing God's will is prayer and striving to practise the presence of God. Brother Lawrence (1611–91), who was the cook and chief bottle-washer in a monastery, wrote a wonderful book called *Practising the Presence of God*, in which he shared his secrets for striving to live in God's presence. We invite you to let him speak to you today:

I worshipped God as often as I could, keeping my mind in his holy presence and recalling it as often as I found it had wandered from him. I found no small pain in this exercise, and yet I continued it, notwithstanding all the difficulties that occurred, without troubling or disquieting myself when my mind had wandered involuntarily. I made this my business not only at the appointed times of prayer but all day long; for at all times, every hour, every minute, even in the height of my business, I drove away from my mind everything that was capable of interrupting my thoughts of God.

Lord, teach me to practise daily being in your presence and in so doing learn to do your will with a joyful heart.

Ezra 6:7-8, 12, 14-20 • Psalm 121(122):1-5

Luke 8:19-21

**Wednesday 23 September**

**Luke 9:1-6 • St Pius of Pietrelcina (Padre Pio) (Memorial)**

God has called us into communion and mission. We can be more comfortable with communion than we are with mission. Mission involves us stepping out of our comfort zone, witnessing to Christ and serving others. We don't do such things naturally: if we did we wouldn't need the help and grace of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the principal driving force and power behind all mission. Our missionary endeavour needs to be always rooted in reality and a good read on the signs of the times and the people to whom we are reaching out.

There was once a young mission worker who had adopted a rather super-spiritual and exaggerated way of seeking guidance from God. However, God was kind and merciful and he was sent off to South America and into the mission field. Once there he met a seasoned missionary. Seeking to impress him with his spirituality, the young man told him that one of the reasons he had chosen South America as his first posting was because, while seeking God's will, he had come upon a chocolate bar which had 'Brazil nut' on the packaging. Quick as a flash the old missionary replied, 'What would you have done if it had been a Mars bar!'

We can hide (and God knows we all do) from the call to be missionaries in our workplace, in our homes, in our lives. We can convince ourselves that this just means being kind, good and serving others (which of course it does), but it also means having the confidence and freedom to witness to why we believe. Christian faith is to be shared and given away – but you can't give away what you yourself don't have. Pope Paul VI taught: 'One cannot be Christian in name alone. It is not enough to say that one possesses the faith in one's own individual conscience. The faith is both a communal and outgoing thing. Consequently, it carries with it the obligation of involving oneself with it and of spreading it. You yourselves must be apostles of the faith, and grow in love for the Church. You must foster within yourselves a deep missionary spirit, showing interest and zeal not only for the countries but also for all the people you meet in the contacts of daily life.'

Lord, teach me to be always prepared to share with others the reason for my hope in the gospel.

Ezra 9:5-9 • Tobit 13:2-8

Luke 9:1-6

**Thursday 24 September**

**(Memorial in England) Our Lady of Walsingham • Luke 9:7-9**

Herod was intrigued and fascinated by Jesus. He was also, it has to be said, perplexed by him. Herod was no soft touch: he was a tough man of the world, who had disregarded God's laws against committing adultery and murder. Nevertheless, his desire to meet with Jesus was sincere and genuine. People were coming up with all sorts of theories about who Jesus was and he wanted to find out for himself: 'John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?' (v. 9). Herod would indeed get to see Jesus but not until the time of his arrest and trial (see Luke 23:8-12).

Herod could not have realized the significance of the events unfolding before his very eyes. C.S. Lewis once said, 'Christianity, if false, is of no importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.' The Christian faith is of infinite importance to our world.

We live in a secular culture, in which God, Christ and the Church are being pushed to the margins. We also live in a society in which the idea of right and wrong has become an issue of preference and choice, relegated to the realm of the private and personal. Jesus unleashed the most radical revolution the world has ever known and his kingdom poses a threat to every government which promotes a culture of death, quashes religious freedom and undermines the dignity of the human person.

We have dual citizenship: we are citizens of the world and citizens of the kingdom. We are to be salt and light. We are called to live as signs of contradictions, resisting values and mores which are an affront to God and the human person. Totalitarian regimes throughout history have always sought to suppress and oppress believers in our Lord Jesus Christ. Herod was attracted to Jesus but ultimately he rejected him and his message. We are called to get involved in civic life, to engage our political rulers and to be prepared to stand up for the gospel of life. Rather than taking God out of politics we believe that we are called to put God and the message of Christ back into politics.

'It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible. Do not let anyone claim to be a true American patriot if they ever try to separate religion from politics.' (George Washington)

Haggai 1:1-8 • Psalm 149:1-6, 9

Luke 9:7-9

**Friday 25 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. 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 like one of us, became like 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)

Haggai 1:15–2:9 • Psalm 42(43):1-4

Luke 9:18-22

**Saturday 26 September**

**Luke 9:43-45**

On 8 December Pope Francis will declare a year devoted to the virtue of mercy, and throughout this year we will be invited to pray, contemplate and meditate upon the greatest sign of God's mercy – the cross of Christ.

In today's Gospel we encounter the disciples' slowness of heart to grasp the importance of Jesus' cross. To be fair, there is a slight air of mystery in the way the Lord refers to it, but he does prefix his words with the caution: 'Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men' (v. 44 NIV). What is interesting is Luke's commentary on the reaction of the disciples. He says that Jesus' meaning was also 'hidden from them'. Furthermore, fear kept them from going any further – they were terrified, it appears, to probe deeper, ask questions and discover the meaning of Jesus' words.

We can be like this too. The cross stands at the very heart of Jesus' mission. The cross also stands at the very centre of human history because Jesus' sacrifice reveals the profound depth of God's love and mercy for every human being. It is as if we asked God how much he loved us and Jesus spread out his hands on the cross and said, 'This much.' The cross reveals both the depth of human misery and the depth of divine love.

In order to take up our own cross we need first to understand the meaning of Jesus' cross. The theologian Jean Baptiste Lacordaire OP wrote, 'A God on the cross. That is all my theology.' Many centuries before Paul proclaimed that he resolved to know nothing except Christ crucified and clearly expressed his heartfelt desire that 'God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Gal. 6:14 KJV). To him, the cross was a mystery into which he had been immersed through the grace of conversion and the sacrament of baptism. If we are to plumb the depth of God's mercy, touch his love, feel his compassion, and know his kindness and infinite beauty, we can only enter this blessing through asking God for wisdom to enter the mystery of the cross.

'The world is full of mysteries; heaven is all mystery to us earthly creatures. But whoever embraces the cross with open heart finds there the explanation of all mysteries.' (Archbishop William Ullathorne OSB)

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

Luke 9:43-45

**Sunday 27 September**

**Mark 9:38-48 • Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

There are a number of things we just don't do: we don't put our hand into a fierce flame because we know we will get severely burnt; we don't put our hand into a bucket of ice and keep it there because we know we could get frostbite; we don't put ourselves in danger, because we have a built-in instinct to live. When it comes to metaphors for sin, fire is perhaps better than ice: although sin can make our hearts cold, playing with sin is like playing with fire – and we will definitely get burnt.

The problem is that sin isn't really about playing – sin is a rather serious affair and Jesus informs us in no uncertain terms how dangerous it is. Adopting harsh and graphic but, most importantly, not literal language, Jesus unpacks his teaching on sin. In a nutshell, sin is so serious that cutting off our hand (if it leads us into sin), our feet (if they lead us into sin) and plucking out our eye or eyes (if it or they cause us to sin) is preferable than the very real danger and threat sinning poses to our eternal destiny.

This teaching is definitely amongst the more harsh and stark teachings of Christ. He certainly does not mince his words, but socks it to us, plain and simple. Sin is so deadly, so serious, so corrosive that a radical, life-changing decision is required if we are to cut ourselves off from it. We need a certain clarity of spiritual sight or vision to understand sin – in the world, in others, but most importantly in ourselves.

The problem is we are often blind to sin in ourselves. St John Cassian put it like this: 'There is in us some very bad habit. We treat our sins against God, however, with appalling gentle indulgence; but when by contrast it is a matter of sins against ourselves, albeit tiny ones, we exact reparation with ruthless severity.' The Spirit is the One who both convinces and convicts us of sin. God disciplines those whom he loves, and clarity about our own state – although painful at times – is a spiritual blessing because it allows us to return to the Lord in humble repentance and healing.

Lord, forgive me, for I have sinned and am no longer worthy to be called your son or daughter. But you lavish your grace upon us, sinners that we are.

Numbers 11:25-29 • Psalm 18(19):8-14

James 5:1-6 • Mark 9:38-48

**Monday 28 September**

**Luke 9:46-50**

Deep in the hearts of us all there is a desire for greatness. It is part of the human condition – a thirst to be the first, to be affirmed and to be recognized. The truth is that few of us achieve even regional or national recognition, let alone make an impact on the global stage. We live, we die; we leave no legacy other than with our nearest and dearest.

Jesus teaches that true greatness is a total contradiction to the way of the world. In fact, his standard of greatness is not so high that few can attain it: it is so low that few can stoop to its depths. This is because true Christian greatness isn't rooted in pride or achievement or education or legacy, but in love and humility. The greater we are, the greater we strive to put into practice the virtue of humility.

One characteristic of the truly humble is that they have a realistic grasp of human time. By way of explanation, think for a moment of the lyrics of the hymn Amazing Grace, composed by the former slave trader John Newton: 'When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun.' In other words, the humble know and understand that we will be dead a long time. No one will be remembered in 1 million years' time on earth – if the planet can, indeed, survive another million years. We are just drops of water in the ocean of time and in the vast expanse of the cosmos. There is a way in which the truly humble scoff at the trappings of human greatness because it is a deception, an illusion, an irrelevance.

The problem with humility and service of others (the characteristics that make us great in the kingdom) is they are a cracking idea until they have to be put into practice. Thankfully, God has given us the witness of Pope Francis, allowing us to observe one who holds the highest office in the Church but is truly the servant of servants; yes, first among equals, but a man who seeks to humble himself, put others first and be the last in order that he may be first.

Lord, teach me to serve humbly, to seek the interests of others before myself and to strive to be great in the kingdom, not in the world.

Zechariah 8:1-8 • Psalm 101(102):16-23, 29

Luke 9:46-50

**Tuesday 29 September**

**Revelation 12:7-12 • SS Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Archangels (Feast)**

In the day-to-day hustle and bustle of life we all encounter a good dose of reality. Bills to pay, children to feed, illness to cope with and our daily burdens ensure that most of us live with our feet very firmly rooted to the earth. This, of course, is a good thing – it is called life. However, through the course of the liturgical year the Church brings us into contact with another ‘reality’: a world beyond what we see and know; a realm outside of our grasp but which impacts upon our lives.

The following extract from the Catechism of the Catholic Church casts further insight on this other reality: ‘The whole of human history has been the story of our combat with the powers of evil, stretching, so our Lord tells us, from the very dawn of history until the last day. Finding himself in the midst of a battlefield man has to struggle to do what is right, and it is at great cost to himself, and aided by God’s grace, that he succeeds in achieving his own inner integrity’ (para. 409). Today’s reading from the book of Revelation, which forms part of the Bible’s apocalyptic content, points to and alludes to this cosmic battle between good and evil.

There is a war against God being waged day and night, beyond human time, and in a realm we can only glimpse through the Scriptures and the grace of revelation. This war began when the angel Michael, under God’s instruction, banished the archangel Lucifer from heaven, casting him down to hell. Ever since this tragedy, which we refer to as the Fall, the world has been under the influence of Lucifer. Of course, paying bills, filling up with petrol, buying our groceries and being stuck in a traffic jam seem a million miles from such drama – nevertheless, the war against God is being waged with relentless fervour and we must play our part. God has given us a spiritual arsenal and armour with which we combat and struggle against our enemy.

‘Take courage and do not be afraid of the dark fury of Lucifer. Always remember this: it is a good sign when the enemy shouts and roars around you, because it shows he is not inside of us. In Jesus and in the power of his cross, name and blood we proclaim, “Get thee behind me, Satan.”’ (Matthew 16:23)

Revelation 12:7-12 • Psalm 137(138):1-5

John 1:47-51

**Wednesday 30 September**

**(Memorial) St Jerome • Luke 9:75-62**

Today's reading contains a number of pithy and challenging statements Jesus made about being a disciple and following him. There is an uncompromising, even harsh feel to these words. Their accent is very much on the bitter not the sweet of following Christ. Our understanding of discipleship can lack this more gritty, cutting-edge and demanding element. Let's look at this Scripture in more detail.

Jewish tradition taught that the eldest son had the responsibility to bury his parents. The would-be disciple in today's Gospel was simply stating that although he wanted to follow the Lord, the time was not right for him as he had a family obligation imposed on him by his culture and religion. Jesus' response, let's face it, sounds harsh to us: 'Leave the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God' (v. 60). Another potential follower simply wanted to say farewell to his family. Again Jesus appears totally uncompromising: 'No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of heaven' (v. 62).

So what are we to make of these 'tough' sayings of Jesus? The truth is that the call of discipleship is radical – it is demanding and moves us very quickly out of our comfort zone. However, when we read the Scriptures we cannot simply read a verse in isolation. In and of themselves these words do sound rather harsh and overly demanding. However, there is a deeper message, which is that only when the kingdom of God is grasped and understood as the pearl of great price, the very meaning of human existence, the great joy and supreme purpose for living, are we prepared to forsake all else. Because, you see, at the heart of being a disciple is love.

Billy Graham, the great American evangelist, said: 'Comfort and prosperity have never enriched the world as much as adversity has. Out of pain and problems have come the sweetest songs and the most gripping stories.' To follow Christ we are invited to die to our old life and rise with Christ to the new life in the Spirit. This can only mean, at some level, renunciation, suffering and hardship, but the reward is the joy of Christ and the promise of eternal life.

Lord, teach me to turn my back on everything that prevents me from giving my life to you completely and wholeheartedly.

Nehemiah 2:1-8 • Psalm 136(137):1-6

Luke 9:57-62