

WRESTLING *with the* WORD

HOW THE LORD INSPIRES THROUGH HOMILIES

Father Patrick Jackson SAC



YEAR A

FOREWORD

Homilies for Sundays and Feast Days for Year A

by Fr Pat Jackson SAC

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Trying to understand the readings for a particular Sunday or Feast Day, who the writer was speaking to, and the issues that were being addressed in the context of the culture, I had the sense of wrestling with the Word like Jacob, to grasp in the darkness of my initial perception, the Spirit's meaning. The Word shone light on my own experiences, hoping that in sharing them they might resonate with others' experiences and help them. Even in giving the Homily for a particular congregation, I experienced the Spirit at work suggesting better ways and helpful words to feed the hungers in the human heart.

I have always felt the obligation to preach well for the sake of the people; a craft with the help of the Spirit to make the homilies personal and nurturing, relevant to those who listened. Delving into the scripture guided by the insights of scholars and homilists, listening to the wisdom of ordinary people, writers, current news and events, but especially having time to ruminate and be guided by the Spirit in what I have to say to the congregation on any particular Sunday was both fascinating and challenging.

I wish to thank my friend Anthony Lim for his encouragement and for bringing all these homilies together in printed form in line with the lectionary. Thanks to Fr Michael Kelly Csr for his assistance with Year C, Fr Brendan Byrne S. J. for his advice, Deirdre Heffernan, Rev Sharne Rolfe for reading and offering helpful comments, and finally, Annie Frances Hall who edited the three years of Homilies and added the scriptural citations to complete this work.

After some thought I decided to put all these homilies on our Pallottine Website, hoping it can be of service to other priests and people in their own Wrestling with the Word. Praise be to the Father, Son and Spirit and thanks to all who have inspired me to write.

Fr Pat Jackson SAC

Dedication

I wish to dedicate this work to my twin brother

Dr Michael Jackson D Theol, (Manly); D. Psych, (Deakin)

Who died on October 21st, 2022 at 3.00am in Bunbury

mourned by his loving wife and companion, Ann.

He lived for Jesus, sought for truth, had great empathy

for people in need, and for me and for many a source

of wisdom, understanding and life-giving spirituality

And to mum and dad who laid the faith foundation for their six children

and who inspired us to live it as a team,

supporting each other throughout our lives.

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LECTIONARY

Year A

Gospel of Matthew

THE PROPER OF SEASONS

Year A

THE SEASON OF ADVENT

Year A

First Sunday of Advent

Isa. 2:1-5

Rom. 13:11-14

Mt. 24:37-44

The theme of the First Sunday of Advent is: *It's time to wake up*. Time to wake from the mindless Black Friday frenzy pre-Christmas sales, from the same frantic buying when bushfire devastation and the Covid-19 pandemic took hold, taking us beyond selfish consumerism to a communal realisation that we're all in this together. Christmas turns out quite differently from what we expected, not people out to get, but courageously giving, risking their lives for the sake of others.

A family was going on a holiday and stopped in at a motel. The next morning, the wife feeling a bit tired and weary started to pack things into the car. Still tired she went into the motel, and thinking it was her husband still in bed, she yelled angrily: 'Get outta that bed!'

The man sat up wide-eyed; the woman realised she was in the wrong room and made a quick exit. As she was going, she heard the man say: 'Boy, that was some wake-up call!'

In the reading to the Romans, Paul tells us more gently but insistently: 'You know the time has come, you must wake up now; our salvation is even nearer than it was when we were converted' (Romans 13:13).

Advent is the preparation to receive a gift — to really welcome the Lord coming to us; and to have an alert yet quiet expectation, waiting and working for the Lord instead of the mindless bustle.

Advent brings us to the doorstep of something really big; but doesn't open the door yet. There's excitement and expectation as we wait for the door to open. So, what's it like — this feeling, this joyful expectation?

It's like having a big Christmas present, all wrapped up — you can see its shape, but you can't make out what it really is. You're about to undo the ribbon and pull the bow and someone says: 'Wait, it's not Christmas yet.'

This feeling of waiting is like the blast-off of a manned spacecraft — all systems are ready to go — when suddenly a fault is detected and there's a signal — delay!

What's coming is a blast, a radically new thing. It's a redemptive act of God on behalf of all who suffer and struggle to bring peace, to join hands for people in distress. It is time for us to wake up for our salvation is near at hand.

This day that's drawing near is not a threat but a free act of God's unqualified goodness whereby he raises the weak up in strength and makes sinners righteous by his power. He wants to change us, to deepen and renew personal, family, and social relationships.

Advent is preparing us for a celebration that sets us free, not one that tells us to let go and

regret it afterwards. Like the man who said, 'I had a wonderful Christmas, but I can't remember a thing.' Rather, Advent is a new dynamism within, that enables us to live.

Advent prepares us to celebrate firstly and above all else, the awesome mystery of a God who, loving us so much, desired to become one of us; a God who, wanting to be so close to us and to share every aspect of our human life and living — even that of our first beginnings in life, chose to come among us in the freshness and innocence of a new-born babe.

It's an offer of a fresh start, the recovery of innocence, of coming into the light, and it starts now — this Advent. It's time to wake up to the One who enables us to be converted and deepen what began long ago: To reshape our weapons of war into ploughshares; to feed the poor; to vanquish our negative attitudes, lay down our spears to bring about reconciliation. Jesus is coming as a gift; Jesus' gift to us is to share in his mission to his and our world.

'O people of this parish, come let us walk in the light of the Lord!'

Second Homily

There's a sense of urgency in the readings for the first Sunday of Advent; prophecies of hope and deliverance which did not come at the hour of Israel's triumph, but were wrung out of defeat and exile. God's presence often comes under the cover of darkness and defeat to affirm and console us, not to condemn.

In such a situation Isaiah had a dream. He lived in days of crisis when his country had come to the end of its prosperity. The shadow of an enemy nation lay menacingly over the land. Isaiah dreamt of the dawning of the Day of the Lord. He imagined people from every nation streaming to the holy mountain of the Lord. It reflects our situation and calls us to walk in the light of the Lord and transform weapons of war into instruments of peace.

For Paul, the Day of the Lord is no longer a dream. It began with Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. But we do not yet enjoy the full sunshine of the day of the Lord — that is still to come.

'The night is almost over; it will be daylight soon.'

We live in an in-between time: Christ has come and begun the day of peace and justice; and he will come again to bring it to completion. It's time to wake up, to be alert and to be ready for the day.

Jesus says that the Day of the Lord will come suddenly and unexpectedly. His message is to stay awake and be ready. He uses two people Noah, and a burglar, to illustrate his words. Noah would have been out of joint with his whole neighbourhood, with the ark sitting in his backyard.

He had his eye on another horizon not yet come. His neighbours would have thought him crazy because he was aware of another dimension to life which gave direction to all the ordinary things he was doing. It was only as the rains came and the ark began to lift off that the neighbours would

have realised another side to life. They were totally unconcerned before.

Advent reminds us that there is a God, that the issues of life and death are in our hands, and we must be ready. Jesus tells us that he will come as a thief who could burst through the wall. If you knew when, you could be ready. But he comes at a time when we least expect it.

If we only have the horizontal level of this world, that is, eating and drinking with mates, marrying, a job and material success, and we have not developed the vertical level, which is our relationship with God, with Christ in our lives, what will happen when we lose everything, when we are estranged from friends and family?

The fundamental anchor in our lives is that we are sons and daughters of God in Christ; he is coming to meet us today and tomorrow. What does he want from us? His terms are peace: to be instructed in his ways and to walk in the light. To make peace with those around and beyond us. What are the swords that we must beat into weapons of peace? Only we can answer that by looking at our life and our attitudes toward people and toward God.

When the new day, the Day of the Lord comes, says St Paul, throw off the old as you throw off bedclothes. It is Christ we have put on that enables us to be alert, to seize the opportunities to bring God's healing to others.

Advent means a new beginning, a renewed coming of Jesus, not only to be with us sharing our flesh and blood, not only by the grace of his word to instruct us in his ways, and his sacraments to nurture and challenge us, but also by the unknown timing of his coming at our end to have his final accounting with us. Matthew's Gospel calls for watchfulness.

Advent is an untidy time, a time of preparation, of expectant waiting, like Mary, shown pregnant with Jesus, on the altar frontal. Pregnancy isn't a very comfortable thing. Its hope is tinged with nausea, awkwardness, and anxiety. You can't see the face of the one who is to come. That's what Advent is about.

The splendour of God's presence is hidden in the fragmentary untidiness of our lives and lies beneath the pain of this world. This season, like the pregnant virgin, is short on explanation and heavy with meaning. Let's begin it, seeking to deepen our relationship with the One who is to come, who establishes his Kingdom within us and wants us to spread his light in word and witness.

Second Sunday of Advent

Isa. 11:1-10

Rom. 15:4-9

Mt. 3:1-12

We have looked at Christ's coming from a cosmic perspective: earthquakes, plagues, famines, and Noah's flood. This Sunday we focus on the personal, what we must to prepare for his coming. That shift is expressed in the comments of astronauts as they gazed down on the earth from space. They said: 'The first day we all pointed to our own countries. The second day, we pointed to our continents. By the third day we were aware of only one earth.' Their vision shifted from competitive national pride to the realization that they were one family, with spaceship earth as their common home.

Isaiah does the same. When the mighty Davidic Kingdom had been cut down like a tree to the ground, cut down by the Babylonians in 587, with nothing left but the stump of Jesse, he foretold the coming of a person, a new shoot from the stump, an ideal David. Filled with the gifts of the spirit this new David would bring about what seemed like a fairy tale, a vision of peace and harmony among all peoples, in images such as wolf and lamb living together, led by a little child.

How to bring this about seems impossible when we look at our world. We gain hope from visions but need to bring it down to where the tyre hits the road. To change the world, we need to start with ourselves. It is first and foremost in our relationships, our families, our friends, that God is encountered, that faith is given flesh, that our theories of justice are tested out, that our prayer is made real, that dreams are actualized.

When people came to the great mystic, Teresa of Avila, and asked about the heights of holy prayer, she would ask how their relationships were going. Or the late Fr Silvester, who worked extensively in marriage enrichment, would often ask couples, 'How is your love life?' Our most profound sufferings, our greatest heroics, our most significant encounters with God are here with these people we know and love, in their goodness, in their weakness. Where else do we most intimately encounter what Paul calls the requirements of love: patience, humility, the courage of forgiveness, the comfort of kindness? When we ask how to change our world in practice, St Paul brings it down to everyday realities. He says: 'Treat each other in the same friendly way that Christ has treated you.'

Our world can change if we change. Hence, the relevance for us of John's call to repentance. To repent means to change our understanding of what's important in life, and to change our lives accordingly. To mark this change, John baptized people, immersing them in the Jordan River, and they confessed their sins. He fiercely rebuked some people who came for baptism without wanting to change their life. John's call became his life work: to prepare for the one who is to come.

Isaiah's vision is not a fairy-tale, an escapist dream. It corresponds to the deepest longings of the human heart. It challenges us to anticipate what it promises. Every time we forgive a neighbour,

make a child smile, show compassion to a suffering person, take care of animals, prevent pollution, work for peace and justice among peoples and nations, we are making Isaiah's vision come true. His vision lives on as a task for today and a promise for tomorrow.

Second Homily

I'm meeting people who no longer feel they believe: they are hurt by the lack of vocations; the disappearance of many of our old church institutions; the terrible ongoing clerical child sex abuse scandal; the lack of positive and inspiring leadership, coupled with feelings of uncertainty and anxiety about what's happening to the Church they knew. They find themselves out of the Church, their horizon has changed.

They say: 'I'm into spirituality not religion' and shop for all kinds of practices without Christ and the ethical demands of his teaching. I meet others who are so fearful of their salvation that they cling rigorously to laws, and have lost the freedom and openness to work toward a new Christian vision of the church which faith in Jesus promises.

John the Baptist's Advent cry, in Matthew's Gospel, 'Reform your lives. The reign of God is at hand,' is primarily addressed to us Christians. The Jewish Christian community that Matthew was writing to around 80 CE had undergone a crisis similar to our own. The Romans had destroyed the Temple, in 70AD, and had broken up every Jewish group except the Pharisees and the Christians. The Pharisees, however, had pulled away the protective umbrella over the Christian group. They could no longer be seen as a Jewish sect and so became the target for persecution by Roman authorities.

Within the Christian community, there was also a split — one group of Gentile Christians, claiming the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, were not living according to the ethical teachings of Jesus. Another group retreated from Jesus to the leadership and ideas of the Pharisees — that the way to salvation is to keep the law rigorously, and lacked Gospel freedom. Matthew could be writing to our community today!

To the Christian Pharisees the message is this: Reform means there's a choice inherent in being a Christian. We can't be Christians by descent, claiming Abraham as the guarantee of our salvation; that by being baptized and having a Catholic education we will automatically grow up Catholic. God wants more, we must be Christians by decision. What are the fruits to show that we are Christian, to really know the effects of Christ's salvation in our lives? Otherwise: 'Every tree that is not fruitful will be cut down and thrown into the fire!'

It's urgent! 'The axe is already being laid at the root of the tree.'

Matthew's Gospel is about conversion. Our faith is not an automatic thing. There's no such thing as Christians by descent — it must be *my* faith. Even if the Church was suddenly suppressed, as is also happening today, our lives would still bear the fruits that show we are Christian.

Certainly, we need to live our Christian life within a tradition, but that tradition has to be personally taken in by each of us in the context of our own life and search, and in the decisions we face each day. And the road must lead to a personal relationship with Jesus.

To the second group, Matthew's message is: we can't claim we've got the Holy Spirit — our own brand of spirituality — and that's enough. We must work with the Holy Spirit, putting our lives in order, and living according to the commands of Jesus. If we accept faith as a free gift, then at the heart of faith is conversion, which is more than accepting certain truths. It is submitting to Christ, letting him shape our thinking and action.

I have found that Catholics who are drawn into the mega-churches, love the music and the preaching, but they have no idea of what it means to be Catholic. In ecumenism, working towards unity with other Christians, we still need to understand our own traditions. John Paul II and Pope Francis call us to the Second Vatican Council as the great grace bestowed on the Church; as the compass by which to take our bearings. Two developments of the Second Vatican Council are: that salvation comes through Christ and that the salvation of Christ is mediated to us through the mystery of the Church, his body.

Today we've lost the sense of the church as a mystery and see it as an institution. We end up with an opposition between my peak experiences as an individual and institutionalised religion. In true religion you do not pick and choose; you learn a whole way of life. For us Catholic Christians, that way of life is Jesus in his life, death and resurrection that is re-enacted in each Eucharist. We are there not as spectators but as active participants, bringing our whole life into the action, the breaking, the thanking, being given. It is the Eucharist that constitutes us as the church. We are redeemed around the sacrifice that has saved us. Again, it's not automatic.

Paul Claudel, the French playwright was agnostic and caught up in a series of marital affairs when he attended Notre Dame for vespers. At one point, light shone through the window on the statue of Mary just as the *Hail Holy Queen* was sung. He cried within at the joy of conversion: 'Jesus you have become a person for me.'

Jesus breaks into our lives, not necessarily when we are righteous but often when things aren't right in our lives. This faith-conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit. If faith in Jesus transforms, saves, causes me to live fully, it is because it gets through to my heart, right into the unique quality of my life.

Third Sunday of Advent

Isa. 35:1-6a, 10

Jas. 5:7-10

Mt. 11:2-11

When I was a young boy and visitors came to the house, invariably as it came near to parting I would be sent out to see if the bus was coming and if so to give the alarm. The visitor would cross the street and easily catch the bus. I remember one incident around Christmas when a lady came to visit. I was outside swinging on the gate, looking down the road for any sign of the bus coming, waiting, it seemed, a long time. All the family was inside where it was cozy, I was feeling I was missing out, so I left my post, ran back to the front door and called up the stairs: 'If you're giving anything away, don't forget me!' Everyone was shocked.

Is that John's feeling in the Gospel? Don't forget me! His cry from prison is not vague. It's a matter of life or death for John. He has staked his whole life — driven his life like a stake into the earth — into this time and place so that the kingdom and the Messiah would come. From his vantage point, from where he's watching and waiting, he's unsure about what Christ is doing. Has he missed the bus? With his heart in his mouth, unsure, a matter of life or death, John sends his disciples to Jesus with the question: 'Are you "the One who is to come" or do we look for someone else?'

And Jesus' reply is equally concrete: 'You tell John', salvation, the good news for life — the Gospel — is being affected now. The lame walk, the blind see, lepers are cleansed, and the dead are raised to life and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor.'

What Isaiah prophesied of the Messianic era is now happening. But prophecies are fulfilled, not verified. You can't tick off your list until you're satisfied that this is the one. And John, looking out from prison bars doesn't see in Jesus what he thought the coming Messiah should be like and do. Had he, all his life, gone after the wrong man? There's no show, no flare of trumpets, no finery. That's the very thing that Jesus praised in John — he was a fitting forerunner for the Messiah.

Jesus' salvation is not show, but service: not fanfare but the transformation of persons, inner and outer wholeness, their release from any prison. Jesus therefore adds, and he's saying it to you and me in our prison whatever it is — 'Blessed is he who does not lose faith in me — who finds no stumbling block in me.'

I believe that Jesus' words are not mere metaphors. He became one with us so that our salvation would be real, total, and personal. It's the concreteness of that salvation, 'for us and for our salvation ... he became Man' which makes Christians shout with joy on this Gaudete Sunday.

If Jesus only vaguely became a man, Jesus only vaguely saves us.

The first focus: my own inner struggle. At least John recognizes and voices his own doubts. Isaiah's words speak God's promise — that no matter how seemingly impossible, no matter how hopeless and unfree we are, God's love is the power that will bring life to us. A holy way is opened

for us (Isaiah 35:8). In Isaiah 51:10 — Rahab, the serpent and symbol of chaos, is split in two by the Lord and made a way for all the redeemed, so transcendent and untrammelled is God. The Lord can take our chaos and make it the way for our salvation. So: 'Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication...he comes to save you.'

The second focus: 'Are you the One?' 'Blessed is he who does not lose faith in me' leads us to direct our struggles to Jesus. He is the One who is for us. He is our Saviour. We don't have to save ourselves — that's surely good news, joy's source. The least in the Kingdom is even greater than John the Baptist. There's something new here and Jesus Christ is the doer of it.

He is one of us. He will see our cause through. He works divine salvation in a human mode — working through our human weakness, not by passing over but by utilizing our human resources which are empowered by grace.

Our Advent waiting is not like swinging on a gate waiting for something that's so long in coming, but the eager joyful expectation of the coming of him who effects a radical becoming in us — becoming who we're meant to be in God. In our struggles the Lord comes in wonderful ways as the Saviour. Let's not forget, but rejoice in the Lord always.

Second Homily

Two men gazed from prison bars. One saw mud, the other stars. As John looked out of his prison cell, it seemed that gloom had overtaken him. Nothing seemed to be happening! He, John, had driven his life in like a stake to bring about the Kingdom of God. He called religious and political leaders to task; even kings like Herod wanted him brought for them to hear him, even if it was in chains. But Jesus' approach seemed low key, dealing with each person, changing people from the heart outwards. So, he sends his disciples to ask Jesus if he is the one, the Messiah who is to come, or should he look elsewhere? John is doubting, despondent, broken-hearted.

Have you known someone with a broken heart? Or has your own heart been broken? Of all human afflictions, this must be the most painful. Hopes are crushed; dreams vanish, and memories of time past become bitter reminders of what once was. Even our bodies are affected when our hearts are broken; perhaps we don't sleep, can't eat, or eat too much; or we become prone to physical illness. And worst of all we find it hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Our suffering can seem unending.

Yet Jesus came to bind up the broken-hearted. Through his tender love and his healing power, Jesus wants to restore us, give us new sight, raise us from our deadness, and make us whole again. It may happen suddenly, or it may take time, but Jesus really does have the power to heal our deepest hurts. All he asks is that we do not lose faith in him; that we dare to open our hearts to him and let him see the pain we are in. And we find that very difficult.

The incident that broke our hearts we can remember clearly — the date and the circumstance

are rooted in our memory and heart. But to get it out into the open, to speak it out, can be frightening, and embarrassing.

In my own life when my heart was broken, I felt like I was coming apart. It took four years of grieving on the inside while continuing on the outside, seemingly as normal, until one day at the Marist Retreat Centre at Mt Macedon something happened. I was reflecting on Henri Nouwen's book, *Reaching Out*, especially the chapter on 'The journey from loneliness to solitude'. Loneliness is wanting someone to hold you to ease the pain. Solitude is the ability to remain alone before Jesus with the questions still in your heart and waiting until the pain eases and the questions are somehow resolved. As I read and reflected on this chapter, it was as if a light had gone on in my head and my grieving was suddenly over.

Henry Moore, the famous sculptor, in an interview one year before his death, shared the memories of his life as a young boy in a Welsh mining village, playing among the dirty, mountainous slag heaps from the mines, the pitch black of the underground tunnels, the grime, the soot, the sun just managing to penetrate the fog. When he became a sculptor, working with massive stone, he created holes simply to let the light in, to overcome the darkness and the heaviness he knew as a boy; carving through stone until he came to the light.

John described his mission and identity as making way for the light, as a voice calling attention to the only one who is the light for our lives. John claimed no title to himself, only to be the voice calling us to someone greater than himself — the one in our midst who can heal us.

This work of healing and restoration is the very heart of the Gospel. 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised to life, the Good News is proclaimed to the poor,' and then, that other beatitude: 'Blessed is he who does not lose faith in me.' The Kingdom is already here in Jesus. It is happening in people's lives. These are the very things we are meant to celebrate this Advent.

It can be so easy to focus on the dark side of ourselves: the bitterness when we've been hurt, the lack of forgiving and the lack of love, that we lose sight of the love Jesus has for us, a love that is active, passionate and transforming.

With John we are asked to make way for the light, to work quietly on the darkness that hides within that we may regain courage, a courage that comes from the sureness of God's coming that puts a new resolve into our tiredness; courage that strengthens our weary hands, trembling knees and faint hearts. So that we become light ourselves, good news for others. Do we believe that we too are called to bind the broken-hearted? To comfort those who mourn, and bring the Good News to the afflicted? We are called to be Christ's presence right where we are.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Isa. 7:10-14

Rom. 1:1-7

Mt. 1:18-24

The Gospels are very frank. What husband would talk about his problems with his wife for all the world to read, as we hear it in the Gospel? Yet beneath the frankness is God's positive purpose working itself out in the lives of Mary and Joseph. I want to talk about prayer in this context. We often talk about prayer as lifting the mind and heart to God, being apart in a quiet place.

But have you prayed when your whole life, your being, your total self is on the line, as Mary and Joseph did? It could be the sudden diagnosis by your doctor that you have cancer, or being called into the boss's office and the door is closed, and everyone knows that you are getting the chop or severe financial losses in the share-market that put your family at risk. Emotions flood in, tears come, anger rises, and fear takes hold, because your life, and your family, are all affected. Prayer becomes a struggle for survival, a cry that rises from our depths to God.

The Jews, from Moses to Esther, to the Holocaust, have known such prayer. We don't understand today's Gospel unless we understand this. Mary, out of profound and deep silence, was suddenly faced with God's call on her life and was greatly troubled. Fear and anxiety gripped Mary. She said yes, fully aware of the consequences.

Without even asking for a confirming sign, she willingly risked her impending marriage to Joseph and the possibility of being put to death. But who could she tell? In the two-fold Jewish ritual of the marriage contract signed in the bride's home and, later, the bride coming to her husband's home, Mary was still in her parent's home. When did she muster the courage to tell Joseph? In a patriarchal society did she wait, quietly and resolutely, for Joseph's decision?

'She was found to be with child.' Now Joseph's whole life was on the line. Why has this happened to me? Joseph would not have been an old man who was past it, but a young, vital man who was deeply in love with Mary. Like her, he was a strictly observant Jew, a good and just man. Would he report Mary to the authorities and stoning? Yet he knew Mary, her goodness, the incredible depth of her soul and mind. There was something mysterious going on that he was unable to get his mind around.

Have you noticed in the Scriptures when God has work to do, he puts a person's rational mind to sleep? Adam was put in a deep sleep because the creation of woman was God's work. God speaks to Joseph in a dream, 'Do not be afraid...' and his fear is overcome. God whispers gently into the hearts of those who are open to him, a call that is humanly impossible, absurd, unbearable, yet mysteriously a call that is heard. Joseph and Mary both wrestled, cast about in their minds with the implications of this call from God.

They experienced the same emotions we do, but they also let their faith and trust in God take the upper hand. Faced with very unlikely and troubling news Mary and Joseph, each in their inner

selves, concluded in faith that the miraculous birth was possible because it came from God.

Mary reasoned that God would not leave her abandoned, however unexpected a vocation God had for her. On Joseph's part, he fulfilled the prophecies about the Messiah, born of the line of David who would be registered in David's city, Bethlehem, and incredibly, one who was God-with-us. Emmanuel.

My brother, Jim, about to undergo an operation for bowel cancer during the Easter period, visualised himself as the lamb ready for suffering, as the doctors marked him out for the knife. He said he surrendered himself to God and that enabled him to overcome his fear and face the pain. Prayer, then, is letting God's Word, not our confused thinking, enter deep within us so that we can face whatever comes.

We tend to think of Mary and Joseph abandoning themselves to God, and we miss God's incredible abandonment into our hands. God depends on our capacity to love, and to be faithful no matter what the cost, what the suffering, in his fidelity is our faithfulness. God wants to convince us that whatever he would do for us will turn out for the best. It's okay to be afraid or nervous. Just don't forget that God is all good, even when we're not sure what he's up to!

Second Homily

We don't understand today's Gospel unless we understand this. Mary, out of a profound, deep silence, is suddenly faced with God's call on her life, and she is greatly troubled. Fear and anxiety grip Mary. 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. Now, this is what God wants to do in and through you.'

For the Lord, to make himself known is a long and slow process. God whispers gently into the hearts of those who are open to him; a call that is humanly impossible, absurd, and unbearable, yet mysteriously a call that is heard. Mary wrestled and cast about in her mind on the implications of this call from God. She experienced the same emotions we do, but she also let her faith and trust in God take the upper hand. Faced with very unlikely and troubling news, and an unusual messenger, Mary concluded in faith that the miraculous birth Gabriel had spoken of was possible because it came from God. She reasoned that God would not leave her abandoned, however unexpected a vocation he had for her.

The Greek word for Mary's working things out, is 'symbolein', putting two and two together, from which comes symbol or creed. Mary's clear-sighted response came from her belief and deep trust in God. The opposite of clear-thinking is the Greek word, 'diabolein', it is confused, twisted thinking, encapsulated in the expression 'I can't work it out or get it together'. Diabolus is the devil who twisted the thinking of Adam and Eve. Alcoholics Anonymous calls it 'stinking thinking'. We use any kind of rationalization to keep doing what is destructive.

Look at Mary who clearly recognises the implications of her 'Yes'. Without even asking for a

confirming sign, she willingly risked her impending marriage to Joseph and accepted the possibility of being put to death for adultery. She surrendered her will to God: 'Let it be done to me according to your word.' Prayer is letting God's word, not our confused thinking, enter deep into us.

Fear never overpowered Mary. From this moment on, she can face whatever comes: 'A sword will pierce your own heart.' She knew this from early on, yet she still said, 'Yes'. Do you remember Cassie Bernall, the sixteen-year-old student at Columbine High School who was asked by Dylan Klebold if she believed in God? She said, 'Yes' and was killed point blank. She had encountered God and experienced a dramatic change that gave her confidence to face both her life and death.

We tend to think of Mary as abandoning herself to God, and we miss God's incredible abandonment into our hands. God depends on our capacity to love, our capacity to be faithful no matter what the cost, no matter what the suffering. In our fidelity is our faithfulness. 'Without me, you can do nothing.' God depends on us. He wants us to handle our fear as Mary did, and not let it overpower our faith. God wants to give us the same abandonment, trust, and good reasoning skills that Mary had. He wants to convince us that whatever he wants to do in us will turn out for the best, so long as we cooperate with him. It's okay to be afraid or nervous. Just don't forget that God is all good, even when we're not sure what he's up to.

Mary is our Advent model of faith, not the active, challenging faith of John the Baptist, but the receptive faith of Mary. She prepares us to let Christ be born again in us. Will we really say 'Yes' to his plans for our lives? Mary said: 'Let what you want be done to me.' Mary said these words and Christmas happened. Jesus said them and Easter happened. What might happen if I said them?

Third Homily

I received a letter from Father Alphonse, one of my Pallottine confreres at Balgo Mission, right out in the desert, five hundred miles from Alice Springs. In preparation for the Pope's visit to Australia the three Aboriginal communities that make up the Pallottine Mission at Balgo — Billiluna, Lake Gregory and Balgo Hills, decided to return to the original spot where the mission began forty-seven years before, when Mass was offered on Christmas Day, 1939. The place was Tjaluwan.

Father Alphonse wrote: 'It was as remote as it had been in '39, a few days before Christmas when I and Brother Frank Nissl first arrived by camel and mule and gave each other an orange and some tobacco for Christmas. All that was left was very little...a small heap of stones that had served as a fireplace for cooking, a few square feet of mud floor where the chapel had been...the bore for water that Father Alphonse had dug by hand in the heat which could hit 140°F and marks from an axe on an old tree.

Nothing had changed...a person could ask: 'Why be sent out here? The same desert, dry, arid, dusty and the flies, the burning sun, and the clear starry sky at night.' By choosing to stay and

share the conditions of the Aboriginal people a remarkable change had come about when God's will was done. Here it was no longer arid. 'Dew' or 'rain' had come down from heaven and given new life. People had changed and now Tjaluwan had a sacred meaning for them.

They expressed this in their own tongue at Mass as they sang: 'At Tjaluwan they saw Jesus lying in the manger' — and 'Father showed us the way to the little baby'. It was this simple and yet unspeakable truth which led the people from Billiluna, Lake Gregory and Balgo Hills to Tjaluwan where, forty-nine years before, the Lord had found shelter and became their Emmanuel God with them.

At that time, he came as a stranger, as one they did not know. Now they have come to know him and his Gospel. They have accepted his word and become Christians...at least most of them. The people that lived in darkness have seen the light. There are over six hundred families in Balgo, and Christian renewal is going strong among them, led by Father Kriener. The Christmas message is timeless — it can reach any culture — it is missionary, and it needs people to bring it — people with little but open to God's will.

When you listen to the stark simplicity of that story you realize there's too many things between us and God. Only four days to Christmas and what's taken up most of our time? I know it's for people, for the family, but often we're spiritually dry inside.

I guess that's why God allows desert places or moments in our lives so that we can find him and his plan for our lives — like a desert, in these times there are no lush diversions, supports, or escapes. He wants to be with us and so the desert is a chance to choose him or choose to remain with the dry, dead centre of ourselves. To choose him is not so easy or so clear.

Ahaz, a young king of the southern kingdom of Judah at Jerusalem, (the Jews were split into two kingdoms, north and south) faced the threat of the northern kingdom of Israel teaming up with Syria, a powerful nation even then, to remove him from the throne. Ahaz was frantic, manoeuvring to find military allies for resistance and political survival. But Isaiah, as God's man, was telling him: 'Be still, do nothing. God is with you.' God's plan for Ahaz was reliance on God alone, not an alliance.

But that wasn't the way for Ahaz — no way would he listen. He would not commit himself to God by asking for a sign. God's sign for Ahaz was that the maiden was with child. The Davidic line would go on. God was with his people. Reliance is all right if everything's going okay, but when things are really bad — to step out in faith? — that's too hard. Yet that seems to me to be what God is asking of us — to really trust him as the only way to salvation, the only way to go.

Wally and his wife Olive had a big family of ten children when one day Olive collapsed and died while doing supermarket shopping. Wally went from being a busy carpenter providing for his family to suddenly being father and mother to ten children, doing the ironing, cooking and washing. His children were aged between three and eighteen years of age. Social security would

unexpectedly check up on him to see if he was doing jobs on the side and kept threatening to take his social security cheque away. He was lonely and sometimes went to dances, but the company wasn't morally good. He decided not to go to dances anymore. God would have to provide him with a wife. And he did after a very painful 18 months.

To still all our doing and let God act in our lives — to be still is not easy when the events of our world are filled with turmoil; when essential supports are taken away — there's no retreat — like in a desert having to decide for God's way or so many easier ways that open up.

The desert place for Joseph was right in the middle of his relationship with Mary. He was faced with a mystery that totally overwhelmed him — like Wally faced with the news of his wife's death, or King Ahaz, under attack, not knowing where to turn, or Father Alphonse in the desert. There was no going back.

Joseph and Mary were just married (the first stage of the Jewish ceremony, soon to be followed by bringing his bride into his own home (the second stage). He knew Mary, her strength of character, her goodness which he had found with no other woman. His love for Mary had made it easier for him to accept Mary's desire to remain always a virgin. They had never lived together and here she was pregnant. It was too much for Joseph to comprehend. He knew the law, that it demanded tough penalties. Adultery didn't fit with Mary. Yet as a just man, a righteous man he had lived by the law, and had tried to do God's will always. But what was God's will in this situation? How could he protect Mary whom he loved and yet obey the law?

He chose God's will as he saw it. He intended to divorce Mary quietly. It seemed to be the end of all his plans, dreams, and desire. But in a dream, God brought Joseph into his plan and desire. What Joseph was struggling with was the fulfilment of Isaiah's simple prophecy — the Virgin is with Child, Emmanuel, God is with us — this is how God chose to come to us.

He needed people willing to let all other considerations go, to do his will in all things. God got through to Joseph. Mary has conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit. She is to have a son, Jesus, who will save his people from their sins. God was telling Joseph — God is not only with us, but for us. Trust him, Joseph did.

The Word was made flesh and longs to be made real in our hearts if we open our whole selves to him. Will we?

THE SEASON OF CHRISTMAS

Year A

The Nativity of Our Lord

Isa. 62:1-5

Acts 13:16-17, 22-25 Mt. 1:1-25 or Mt. 1:18-25

Christmas Eve, Children's Mass

Leader: 'Said the night wind to the little lamb, do you see what I see?'

All: 'Do you see what I see?'

Leader: 'Way up in the sky, little lamb, do you see what I see?'

All: 'Do you see what I see?'

Leader: 'A star, a star, dancing in the night,

With a tail as big as a kite.'

All: 'With a tail as big as a kite.'

Priest: Look! ...a star! ...There's mystery here! ...

I can spend a long time at the crib, looking and taking it all in. It's so simple...and I'm simple. Yet it speaks to me at great depth. Christmas means so much more to me each Christmas because it speaks to me out of my own experience. I now know him whom my soul longs for.

A mystery isn't imagination. It's like entering a lift that moves up and down so quickly that it transcends space and time and allows me and you to really enter in and see the same reality but in a new way.

Leader: 'Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy, do you hear what I hear?'

All: 'Do you hear what I hear?'

Leader: 'Ringing through the sky, shepherd boy, do you hear what I hear?'

All: 'Do you hear what I hear?'

Leader: 'A song, a song, high above the trees,

With a voice as big as the sea.'

All: 'With a voice as big as the sea.'

Priest: Can you hear the footsteps of the shepherds? ... The sound of camels and kings?... searching quietly for the newborn child.

Our human way is to make our presence felt ... censuses ... people moving everywhere ... passports stamped ... tighter security ... commands over loud speakers ... A little child slips in among us ... quietly.

Leader: 'Said the shepherd boy to the mighty king,

Do you know what I know?'

All: 'Do you know what I know?'

Leader: 'In your palace warm, mighty king, do you know what I know?'

All: 'Do you know what I know?'

Leader: 'A child, a child shivers in the cold, let us bring Him silver and gold.'

Priest: God's word is silent yet spoken powerfully in this baby lying helpless in the manger.

... He doesn't want money or gold, but the warmth of our heart to keep out the cold ...

What a wonderful thing to know the warmth of a hug from mum or dad ... knowing that they love us ... How many children in our world need our love ...

Leader: 'Said the king to the people everywhere,

Listen to what I say!'

All: 'Listen to what I say!'

Leader: 'Pray for peace, people everywhere!

Listen to what I say!'

All: 'Listen to what I say!'

Leader: 'The child, the child, sleeping in the night,

He will bring us goodness and light.'

All: 'He will bring us goodness and light!'

Priest: Let us do what the king asks us to do ... to kneel before this child and pray ... Here is God made visible ... coming to us in poverty that we may share what we have with others ... start in your home ... no fighting to get your own way ... pray for peace ... Let it spread out from your home to others ... He will bring you goodness and light. His gift to you this Christmas.

A happy Christmas to you all! Let's offer it to each other.

Second Homily

What is Christmas? Christmas is...people hurrying, intent, trying to get this or that gift, 'something extra' which is just right for Mary, John, and the kids. So much thought and thoughtfulness go into the buying, the wrapping, and the timing of the gift.

Christmas is getting together as family. The expectant hope in the eyes and faces of parents, spouse, brother, sister, or friend, that this gift will really please; hoping to make this a 'perfect' Christmas for everyone. Christmas sometimes is a disappointment, because the gift and the love behind the gift are not acknowledged and instead the gift is grasped as 'mine'. Grasping, grabbing, acquisitiveness is what Christmas is not, and yet it's there. In grasping our gifts at Christmas, we mistake the gift for the giver, the giver's love, intent and care.

The Christ-Child comes with open hands, totally poor yet giving all, vulnerable, dependent, sharing our human condition in every way except sin. The Christmas gift is Jesus — the Father's gift to us — the intent, thought, love, the timing is right; in the fullness of time God thought of us, loved us so much that he sent his Son in a way that could reach into our heart and human lives. 'He came to his own, and his own did not receive him.' What about us?

Christmas is a contemplative experience. We need to take time not to do, but to be still, to gaze at the gift and feel and know the love, the intention of the giver. Sit tonight by the light of the Christmas tree, no other lights, no TV, and just look at the crib, the Christ-Child. It can be lonely, but it can take us to a point that allows Jesus to touch us.

A card I received said Christmas is celebrating the wonder of a snowflake and the one who created it. Who was it who discovered, who photographed the infinitely rich variety of snowflakes? Yet they've always been there whether we have seen or not seen the creative design of their maker.

Christmas is a contemplative moment that allows us to wonder at and celebrate God's design for me, and for you. Really listen to the carols as we sing 'Silent Night, Holy Night'. 'What Child is this?' Constantly he comes as our Saviour and Lord, and we bow down, adore, learn from him. Allow him to take hold of our lives to grasp us. He is the Holy One come to us sinners to redeem us.

Christ is born. Rejoice! It's happening in mystery and in grace. The Good News of Isaiah that God is coming to save us is happening in the Gospel — the Good News that is Jesus. Don't regret that you haven't had time, that Christmas is on you too quickly to prepare. Receive him. To those who received him he empowered them to be sons and daughters of God. Christmas — the word become flesh is happening when the word is proclaimed, when the priest says over the bread and wine — This is My Body, My Blood given for you — so that sins may be forgiven, when we receive the Body of Christ at Communion and allow him room. God has come in Jesus to save us.

Christmas is giving and forgiving. Not a forgiving that is simply a cover-up for things that are

bad in our lives and relationships, so that it's a 'nice' Christmas for the family; everyone knows anyway but forgiveness, in that Jesus comes to share our human condition except sin — to offer us repentance, salvation, the gift of new life. He empowers us to live divinely as sons and daughters of his Father.

Jesus doesn't give us an example to live by. He enters into every area of our human struggle to heal; he brings new strength. Kierkegaard makes the distinction between 'ontic' and 'ontological'. Ontic means that the Word has taken on a concrete human nature. He is Jesus of Nazareth — God with us — Emmanuel. Yet as he lived his life, loving, redeeming, caring and obedient to the Father, he redeems human nature at the deep ontological level that touches us all. He empowers us where we feel powerless, weak, and hopeless. We had grown old in sin. His birth is a new beginning offering the gift of God to each of us.

What is Christmas?

C is for Carols and their beautiful sounds

H is for Holy One whose glory still abounds

R is for Rejoicing because of Jesus' birth

I is for Immanuel, God who came to earth

S is for Salvation, the Father's gift to all

T is for Tiny Child resting in the stall

M is for Mercy that's freely found in him

A is for Atonement that frees us from sin

S is for the Saviour, the Lamb, the Righteous King.

I wish you all a very happy and holy Christmas! Let's turn to the people around us and wish them the love, forgiveness and blessings of Christmas, before we bring our gifts to the Lord.

Third Homily

There's something wonderful about Christmas — it's the spirit of Christmas.

Sure, it's commercialized, but people do go out of their way to be kind and helpful to others with a word or a gesture. It's the powerful currency of the Christian tradition, but a currency that can be devalued. Unless Christmas is in our hearts, we will not find it under the tree — I mean, unless we personally meet Christ, all the presents, the material things don't really satisfy.

The gifts we chose and wrapped so carefully are often ripped open and perhaps, after ten minutes, the toys are discarded. More and more expensive can be the cry and we are disappointed!

We need to awaken the inner creativity, love, and imagination of the human spirit.

We are invited this Christmas to make Christ not the spare tyre, but the driving wheel of our lives — not when there's a breakdown, we call on him, but Christ as the direction, the polestar in our thinking, acting and relating to others.

He is the reason for this season, but let's not make him a seasonal thing.

So, what is the reason for Christmas, for you and me? The deepest reason, shown graphically in an early Christian television ad was that God became human. The early church added: 'So that humans could become God.' But I think, so that we could learn to be truly human the way God intends us to be. Jesus comes as the sign and cause of our human transformation. He comes to save — by working his salvation deep within our humanity and our world.

God in Christ didn't slip on human nature, like a workman putting on overalls to repair some damage. He entered our lives — our sexuality, our sweat, our emotions, anger, hurt, sorrow and our pain. Gregory of Nazianzen wrote, 'the unassumed is the unhealed'. There was nothing about us that appalled Christ. He truly became our brother.

He comes to encourage, to bring us to mature personhood. Each Christmas for me is a question and challenge: how have I grown in my humanity? Before I can witness as a Christian, people must experience me as truly human! How alive am I to this world I live in? I want to make loving Christ the central, totally absorbing energy and aim of my being, and at the same time the love and emotional drive towards interpersonal love. As Jesus matured through birth, childhood, teenage and adulthood — he is the sign and cause of our maturing.

Wise men are still searching for that star to discover how to be human now. Wise women have already discovered that star and encourage their men also to discover the ways into deeper humanity. May this Christmas not just be about gifts — but the gift of ourselves in loving, human, and divine ways.

Fourth Homily

Welcome everyone to celebrate this holy night, the night when Jesus Christ, Son of God, son of Mary, was born. If we come to this night out of nostalgia, then the Church will be full. If we come only in faith, what would it be like then? Yet it is the children who draw us here, who lead us to wonder, who want to lead us into what the poet Blake called our second state of innocence. Small and close to the earth, children see things that miss our attention, a cicada shell, a leaf, a bird that slipped into the drain outside. Children have a real sense of mystery, of God at the heart of life. They help us to see with wide-open eyes, as Mary, Joseph and the shepherds see, with wonder at the sight of the baby Jesus. Don't be too grown-up, afraid to kneel at the crib and wonder, and take it all in — here is God becoming one of us, going through what we all go through, to transform and make holy our lives.

The thing about wonder is that it draws us close to something that is beyond us, greater than we are. It counters the aloofness or cynicism we may feel toward God and the distance we put between us. In Jesus, God drew near to us in person — there was no loving from a distance. He loved us at close quarters, literally got under our skin, to feel what we feel, both the exhilaration of life, the joys of family and friends and the pain that we experience.

I lost my tooth on Friday night and now it's back. A miracle? No! But the loving action of a dentist who opened his door when his staff had gone home and did remedial work on my tooth. It made me think gratefully of all the loving actions of so many of you for which I thank you and thank God. On the other hand, how do we keep open the door to people who are homeless or to others who don't want the help they most desperately need. I'm not a saviour of all the people or problems that life throws up, but we need a Saviour who wants to reach out to people through us.

It reminded me of the story of a farmer in Canada who didn't believe in all this Christmas stuff. His family had gone off to Christmas Eve Mass, when a flock of migrating geese attracted by the house lights landed at his farm in the freezing cold. Despite all his efforts to get them into his barn for shelter, he frightened them away, scattering them in all directions. He wished he could get into the mind of the lead goose and bring them to warmth and safety. The bell rang in the nearby church steeple. It was then he realised that God had done what he would have liked to do, in becoming one of us to save us.

St Augustine who found a new start in Jesus wrote: 'How much you loved us, O God. If your word had not become flesh and had not dwelt among us, we would have had to believe that there was no connection between God and humanity, and we would have been in despair.'

Let's give ourselves a Christmas gift this year and replace the 'I can't' that may have led us to become stuck, giving up on ourselves, denying our giftedness and becoming fatalistic about the future, with possibility thinking, 'I can'. What is waiting to be born in us? What dreams of our childhood are still awaiting fulfilment? Let's take time or seek help to make them come alive. May you experience the gift of an ever-new start, the ever-offered possibility of restoration of innocence among us, in the gifts we give to one another — gifts of goodwill and peace, of goodness and love, symbolised in the material gifts we give to one another. A blessed, holy and fully human Christmas be with you and yours.

The Feast of the Holy Innocents

1 Jn. 1:5-2:2

Mt. 2:13-18

It hasn't been long since the birth of Jesus, the Son of God coming to us as a helpless little child, and already a dark shadow is hovering over him as both a Jew and a threat to those in power. This feast takes us into the cultural milieu and struggle facing Matthew's community and has implications for our time.

As John in his Gospel portrayed Christ as the one who replaces all the Jewish festivals and institutions in his own person, so Matthew speaking for the Jewish members of his community, seeking to be true to Jesus and truly be Jewish, portrays Christ as the new Moses. His Gospel is divided into five books like the Pentateuch, and his infancy narrative about the slaughter of the innocents reflects Moses' escape as an infant from Pharaoh's killing of all male children two years and under.

There is an obvious comparison between the ruthlessness of Pharaoh, fearful of the growing number of the Jews, and Herod, a Nabatean, paranoid about any threat to his rule who had no qualms about killing his wife and two sons suspected of conspiring against him, in his lust for power.

After Herod's death, Matthew writes of Jesus, 'I called my son out of Egypt as Moses, now an adult, had done.' It identifies Jesus as the Son of God, but also suggests that he is the personification of the people of God. 'Just as God called Israel of old out of Egypt in order to create a special people for himself, so he calls Jesus out of Egypt into Israel in order to create a new people. The principle of continuity between the old people and the new people is Jesus the Jew' (Daniel J Harrington, *Collegeville Bible Commentary*, p.866).

Matthew, seeing how Jeremiah interprets events, links his prophecy to the story of the child Jesus, 'called out of Egypt' against the backdrop of Jewish mothers bewailing the terrible killing of their children. 'A voice was heard in Rama...Rachel weeping for her children...because they are no more.' Rama was where Rachel, wife of Jacob, was buried; it was also the place in the 6th Century where the Jews were brought before being marched off into captivity in Babylon.

What do these stories mean for us? the Church urges us to pray, respect and actively work to save human life from the cradle to the grave. But today there is also urgent action needed to save refugees, women and children abandoned in the squalor of crowded camps, to see them as human beings irrespective of race or creed and bring them home.

Into the global magnitude of this task Matthew inserts the coming of the Magi. They represent wise people, men or women willing to travel, to journey far, inspired by a vision, a star to get things moving, who consult the Scriptures such as Micah and those in authority. They are people who have the wisdom to distinguish words that lead to life, and those which would crush it. People

moved with compassion at the plight of others, who kneel to help and in service to them are moved to awe and wonder. They bring gifts, but the strange gift of myrrh given to this child signals that he was to suffer, and signals to us that he was the suffering Son of Man (cf. James A Wallace, *Preaching to the Hungers of the Heart*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2002, p 65).

It is into present-day society's culture of death; from Covid, Aboriginal deaths in custody, the death of boat people seeking a new life, abortion, and euthanasia that we are called to actively enter as followers of Jesus.

The Holy Family

Sir. 3:2-6, 12-14 Col. 3:12-21 or Col. 3: 12-17 Mt. 2:13-15, 19-23

Christmas is universally a feast of welcome and sharing. No matter what the differences are between people and cultures, family is the magnet that draws our thoughts or physically draws us back home, to be together for Christmas. There's something comforting and precious about belonging to a certain group of people, a culture, and a place we call home.

The liturgy at Christmas invites us to return to Bethlehem and relive and retell one particular family story. The family of Mary, Joseph and Jesus is central to the Christian family. Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of Love (Amoris Laetitia)* writes: 'Every family should look to the icon of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Its daily life had its share of burdens and even nightmares, as when they met with Herod's implacable violence' (par 30).

His exhortation draws together the results of the synod on the family. It spells out in real and concrete terms: the family in scripture; the challenges facing the family; the vocation of the family in the teaching of Jesus, in the documents of the Church; the sacrament of marriage in its richness; marriage as a realistic spirituality of conjugal love. This feast of the Holy Family is not to be understood only as a celebration of the nuclear family, but as a continuous celebration of the incarnation of God in the human story. Jesus lived and grew up in a human family, not protected from the stress and heartache which is part of every ordinary family's life.

For Matthew, Joseph plays a key role in the family. Many things come about, as God wants them to happen, because Joseph is listening to God and his messenger and promptly obeys. Joseph takes Mary to his home; goes to Bethlehem for the census; he flees with the child and Mary into Egypt and he returns, when it's safe, to Bethlehem and then to Nazareth. The calling power of Joseph, his authority, is one of service. With a listening heart and prompt action, he preserves Jesus and Mary from danger. God communicates to Mary and Jesus through Joseph and keeps his protecting hand over the Holy Family.

Prayerful oversight, energetic action, a providing and mediating role, are often at a discount with retrenchment of men after a certain age or the excessive hours of overtime, so that a father may feel a stranger coming to his own home, late. A key role of the father is that of affirmation. He does not nurture like the mother, but he can affirm the growing sense of self, competency and beauty in his sons and daughters. Don't sideline the father, but fathers must exercise authority by drawing out the best in his children in collaboration with his wife.

The first reading highlights the relationship of children to parents and the quality of reverence they owe their parents. Young people from an early age are also under attack. The 'Mc world' of consumerism works to brand a child by the age of three. The influence of teen magazines and music wants to influence the young by twelve or thirteen years of age. Anti-Christian values are

being pushed in every area. You need to be strong to stand against them.

Old age is regarded negatively in our society, but the first reading presents another view. Older people need not accept the negative image of old age as burdensome. They represent the historical memory of the younger generations. Older people carry faith and fundamental human values tested and true through life experiences. Young people without roots, fearful of the future, gain hope from you.

You bring perspective that can soften the painful side of life. Today there are sixty million people over eighty years.

You bring prayer and a lived union with God, mellowed throughout your life.

You seek and provide opportunities for charitable action in your community.

You stand for a commitment to a culture of life from the cradle to the grave by your voice and vote.

You contribute to personal and community growth.

The second reading is a checklist of how we should live as Christians in our family, community, church and in society with the virtues of mercy, compassion, kindness and humility, gentleness, and patience. Actively living out these values in bearing with the niggles and differences that arise between us; forgiving each other, not letting the sun go down still holding anger or hurt toward the other; and above all, continuing to love. Then may the peace of Christ reign in your hearts, home, work, and social life.

Second Homily

We take our family for granted. It's when the extended family gets together, especially at this time of Christmas that, despite unresolved issues with some members, we strengthen the bonds and experience the joy of being a family. At a basic level we all need a community to grow. It is where we belong and find our identity.

In my work with youth and young adults on camps, retreats and in a young adult community, I have met hurt people coming to our community to belong and find some healing, to restore a sense of their worth and dignity. At a meeting one fellow sat behind the couch and just listened. On one occasion he made a comment which the group made a lot of in appreciation and over a few weeks he emerged and joined the group. Being a community or a family doesn't just happen. We need to work at it, not just parents but children also. Others just came to dump their drug problem on the community and then go away. I had to tell them, 'I'm not throwing you out. Your behaviour is preventing you being part of this community. If you want to change you are most welcome.'

Belonging, identity, begin in the family. Erickson the psychoanalyst noted that the basic task of

early childhood was one of trust/mistrust engendered by the parents which is of fundamental importance for the child's growth.

As church, but also in the family we are learning the horrific consequences of the breach of trust that creates a deep wound that is carried into adulthood, unless acknowledged. When there is trust you notice the young child venturing away from the mother or father and then hurrying back for reassurance, touching base and then exploring further. The parents play a key role when to gradually loosen attachment between themselves and their children so that they discover their own giftedness and move out to make their unique contribution to life.

This trusting faith is meant to lead to the Christian community. With little trust at home the person finds faith difficult. That's why the family is called the domestic church. From trust in the home one learns to pray, to give and receive, to learn to socialise. Nowhere is our character more deeply fashioned, our basic belief system more inflexibly developed, our feelings about God, life and the world more deeply imprinted.

From a young age a child experiences love of God by a process of symbiosis from the loving hugs or touch from parents. How we experience love from our parents affects the way we love others. The kind of affirmation and support we receive has an impact on our ambitions, motivations, and our ability to handle our problems. Every child is different. Parents ask each other: How did this child come from our genetic package? We blame the other — it's your child! How does healing take place? I think women notice what needs to be done, but it is important that men give it. It is teamwork.

My parents taught us to think of ourselves as members of a team in which everyone is needed. That gave us resilience — having real work to do. We had a market garden, and one day I came home from school with a bad earache. Mum put a balaclava over my head and asked me to go and feed the chooks, a bus ride three miles away. My two brothers and I would be weeding rows of cabbages. Dad asked us to weed so many rows. When that was finished, he asked us each to weed another two rows and then we could go home. There were no complaints. We felt we were part of a team. It wasn't a matter of feeling badly done by. We were not into comparison.

No marriage is perfect. As a couple you are faced with ironing out difficulties. If that is hard to do, there are excellent trained counsellors in CatholicCare. I have noticed that couples when selecting readings for their marriage choose a reflection in which there is commitment, open communication on many levels, support, and love. Today's second reading expresses it well: Bear with one another, forgive each other as soon as a quarrel begins, don't keep a score of wrongs. Put love over all these.

May God bless your family. Ask Mary, Joseph and Jesus for grace and wisdom and seek help from the community.

Third Homily

The Gospel presents us with a model family that is not free of conflict, misunderstanding and hurt. Mary possibly thought, 'Jesus is becoming a man, he is with Joseph'. Joseph may have thought, 'He's still a child, he's likely with his mother'. It's only when the caravan stops for the night that they realise that he's not with them, nor with relatives. Then there is the worried search for him. Parents worry about what happens to their children, Mary and Joseph were no exception.

They were overcome when they found him, but like many a young person, Jesus seems unperturbed by their anxiety, asking 'Why are you looking for me?' to Mary's question, 'Why have you done this to us?' Jesus replies without wilfulness or twisting the truth, but with frank, open and honest expression: he points to the direction to which his Father is calling him. 'Did you not know I must be about my Father's business?' Mary and Joseph don't understand.

This kind of conflict is a regular one for parents: to give guidance and to distinguish between wilful disobedience and the legitimate aspirations that flow from their child's uniqueness. In the latter case, parents can only create an environment for the expression and growth of this uniqueness.

Notice that it is Mary who asks the question. Some fifteen-year-olds finding they are taller than their mums, so they back-chat or even try to intimidate her. The dad hearing this, might walk into the kitchen, lean on the fridge behind the boy, and say: 'You listen to your mum, or you will have me to contend with.' It's crucial that parents work as a team. We live in a highly individualistic culture where no-one can tell me what to do. We don't live as single entities but as a family, a community where there needs to be respectful dialogue and cooperation.

Young people often assert their individual rights and give religion away. Yet here is Jesus opting for the affairs and concerns of his Father and his Father's kingdom but still goes back to Nazareth in obedience to them. But Luke notes in doing so he grew in wisdom and grace before God and men. Jesus' yearning to put the Father and his kingdom foremost in his life, strangely will bring him into conflict with religious traditions that confine; yet his struggle is to get to the very heart of his rich Jewish tradition, to God himself.

A Jew on a train brought his problem to the rabbi sitting beside him. 'Rabbi, I did everything I could to bring my son up in the Jewish religion, but he has gone and become a Christian.' The rabbi wrung his hands, and confided: 'My son too, I gave him all my learning and wisdom, and he too became a Christian. Let us bring this to God himself.' God listened and then with a deep sigh said, 'My Son too...'

At the centre of Jesus' family life and at the centre of his ministry is one irreplaceable person: God, his Father. That relationship is the most important of his life. Ultimately it is what gives him direction and support and will sustain him in the conflicts that will lead to his passion and death.

Mary and Joseph had a key role in that direction and support. Not understanding, yet pondering in their heart, and laying the foundations of Torah and practice to enable Jesus to hear his Father's Word. That support took Mary to the Cross. Many a parent is taken to the cross as they try to understand the direction their child has taken.

When we speak about difficulties in families, we have a lot to talk about. But do we meet, in our families, the difficulty Mary and Joseph were facing in Jerusalem? Are we as a family realistically and concretely interested in the will of the Father for our children, concerned to lay deep foundations of truth and emotion that touch the heart of your child?

We need to create opportunities where parents can share their values with their children of all ages and listen to the aspirations and struggles of their children. I am very aware that even as adults, we are still sons and daughters — how important mum and dad are to us — that we return to them in times of illness or difficulty as well as joyful moments — to hear their wisdom and sustain them in their old age.

Restore the place of grandparents in the family. Then you see unexplained traits in yourself. Grandpa's temper is mine; the one who looks so different is really like grandma. Bring back the family dinner once a week with candles, a table-cloth and the best crockery. Create an environment for growth, sharing and bonding. Paradoxically, a strong family with strong traditions is the springboard for the emergence of unique individuals with a strong sense of direction.

Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

Gen. 3:9-15, 20 Eph. 1:3-6, 11-12 Lk. 1:26-38

Here we are at the beginning of the New Year, an opportunity to think like Einstein, create like Da Vinci, and invent like Edison. I encourage you to think and act creatively, to find your own voice. Do you remember the film, *The King's Speech*, about George VI coming out of the shadow of his older brother and finding his voice — this year is a time for you to find your voice, your faith and your purpose.

Where is the time of silence, to think your own thoughts? That was the greatness of Einstein, Da Vinci and Edison, they thought their own thoughts. Thinking new thoughts is the beginning of positive change in yourself, but it happens by taking new actions. How do you turn loose the creative energy tapped and untapped within yourself and with others?

Inspired work comes from passion borne of purpose. It took Edison twenty years and 50,000 experiment to create a light, durable, efficient battery like we use in torches. Someone said to him: 'You've failed 50,000 times. What makes you think you will get results?' 'Results,' replied Edison, 'I've gotten lots of results. I know 50,000 things that won't work.' There was no learned helplessness here. He shed light on the true meaning of persistence.

Is there room for silence in your life, to tune in to God's thoughts for you? Mary opened her life beyond the plans of her own making and said yes to God and was thereby taken into the sweep of God's plan for the world. A plan that only God could conceive, that his Son be born of a virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit. This child of hers reveals God's face, lets his face shine upon us and gives us peace. Fittingly Mary stands at the entrance, the threshold of each New Year that marks us with the sign of God's covenant, names us as Jesus was, and invites us to say yes to God's plan for us.

Sir Kenneth Clark wrote, 'Civilisation grew out of humanity's confidence in themselves and in the future'; we would say, grew out of faith in God who leads us into our future. Read, pray, reflect on your experience. We need faith, interaction with others and experience to ground us.

When you are leaving this year behind and working to find yourself, what place will the role of faith have? For many the time of their adolescence and young adulthood was exactly when they began to see the meaning of faith for the first time through their own experience, from their own perspective. In this way they found their purpose in life and became lights for others.

How can we live to lead people who are searching to look beyond us to the God who gifts us? God put us in the world to make it a better place. We have a role to play in God's plan of salvation. But in the last analysis it is up to us. We can say yes to God's plan and get involved. Or we can say no and do our own thing.

As we begin the New Year, the Gospel presents Mary to us as a model of that new life in Christ

that all of us wish for ourselves. There we see that Mary was prepared to do something to realise God's goal for her life. We are told that Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. The Greek word for ponder, means to piece together; to come to grips with what God was doing in her life. She made time to ponder the Word of God. She constantly pondered God's plan to respond at each stage of her life.

The shepherds pondered, took time to approach the mystery and wondrously saw Mary, Joseph and the child. 'Once they saw, they understood.' They became disciples after seeing the child. Contemplation leads to action. So, also for Mary! What was happening in her life was a great mystery to be discovered little by little that led her to respond to God's plan for her life.

Mary gave birth to God's Son by faith's burning love and brought Christ to birth in others by a faith that works through love. She brought forth the salvation of the world through the operation of her faith. If we truly savour this mystery of Christ with us through the Virgin Mother's faith, and savour the lives we've been gifted with, we may find ourselves joining the long march of witnesses, sent to all times and nations, to bestow the blessing that the Book of Numbers gave to us: 'The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord's face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord look kindly upon you and give you peace.'

As the year runs out of time, are we ready for him to come? Are we ready for this New Year?

Second Homily

We have just celebrated Christmas, the birth of Jesus, the mystery of the Incarnation, God become man in Christ, so that we might become sons and daughters of God. The birth leads us to the mother. And so, today we celebrate Mary's motherhood, her faith, her mothering of the God-Man, Jesus Christ. The Church associates Mary with her son in the work of redemption. The feasts of Mary throughout the liturgical year are an echo of the essential mysteries of Jesus, our Redeemer.

Mary points beyond herself to her son, Jesus Christ. Yet her role of mother, mother of Jesus, mother of the Church, continues today as she helps in a subsidiary yet real way to form Christ in us anew, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Seven years ago, I attended the Pallottine General Assembly at Arricia, just outside Rome. I went for a walk and discovered an old church with the title 'Maria Dei Latens' which is a direct translation of the Greek word Theotokos, (God bearer), coined by the 4th Century Council of Chalcedon to describe Mary's birthing of the God-Man Jesus.

When the shepherds came, they found Mary, Joseph and the baby lying in the manger. They saw and they understood, the poor have had the Gospel preached to them, the essential Gospel — God's Son, born of a woman, so that we might become adopted sons and daughters of God, able to live in a new way.

It is in Jesus that I have a new relationship to God my Father; or rather it is Jesus in me, who speaks in me to his Father. The Holy Spirit crying out in us 'Abba — Father' which proves that we

are sons and daughters of God (Gal. 4:6-7) relates to that mystery Paul talks about in Gal. 1:19 of 'God choosing to reveal his son in me', not just to me but *in* me. Mary has a part in this wonderful process of transformation through her 'yes', spoken in faith. When we say 'yes' to God, Mary is also at work mothering our faith, so that we become open to what God wants to do in us.

If our parents do so much to open us up to our faith, to doing what's right, how much more does Mary and the Holy Spirit want to open us up to God's will in Jesus? The shepherds found Mary, Joseph, and the baby. They saw and they understood. Faith in Jesus is transmitted in the family. The Church, in the person of Pope Francis, asks us to think *family*, not self-interest; to work to build the basic cell of the Christian church, and of society to counter the negative pressures that break up families. The family is the crucible of competence where one learns self-esteem, self-worth, where values and attitudes are formed, where one learns to go beyond self and say 'yes' to others.

We can operate in age-segregated patterns that split kids from parents or we can develop activities in the parish that encourage or empower and affirm families — family ministry, camping, and worship. We need to spend time as families, to enhance the quality of family life together. We need to give Mary a place in our families because it is here that faith-mothering, forming Christ, learning to say 'yes' to God really happens.

Little Harry Bennet died at the age of three. At his funeral I managed to get a little statue of Jesus as a little boy. Children came forward after the Mass, touching and talking to Jesus, not just as a baby or a grown person but as someone their own age. The mysteries of Jesus speak to us at every stage of our life. Make resolutions this new year that enhance your lifestyle: be early to Mass; read the Scriptures beforehand so that when proclaimed at Mass we understand them better.

This divine child marked with the sign of Abraham's Covenant painfully sealed with circumcision is given a name which points to his nature and mission. Jesus means 'Yahweh saves' (Yeshua). Jesus' life was a lived 'yes'. Mary shared in that 'yes' of her son with her own 'yes' to life, people, and situations. As we face another year let us imitate Mary's 'yes' and ask her to mother us.

King George VI at the outbreak of World War II in 1939, gave his New Year's speech and quoted from M. Louise Haskins's poem, *The Gate of the Year*:

'And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year; give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.

'And he replied: go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God.

'That shall be to you better than a light and safer than a known way.'

As we begin the New Year, let's put our hand in God's as we go with hope and with Mary's mothering to take up our mission for this year.

Thoughts for 1st January, and the Mother of God

It is fitting to celebrate the Feast of the Mother of God and New Year's Day.

John Donne in one of his sonnets about Mary's role in the Incarnation writes:

'Yea, thou art now thy Maker's maker

And shutt'st in small room, Immensity

Cloistered in they dear womb.'

Eternity and time meet in the womb of Mary — eternity, a contemplative moment and an invitation.

Our world is shaped by time. When the medieval monks first designed a clock, it was to call them to prayer at terce, sext and none (9am, 12 noon and 3pm).

Today we have a digital clock that indicates the NOW — 24/7.

We have no time for relationships — we're racing the clock. Our lives ruled by the clock creates stress which is one of the killers today. Hurried people looking at a digital watch that gives no clue to past or future, as someone wrote in a rather cynical poem:

'This is the age of the half-read page,

The quick hash and the mad dash.

This is the age of the bright night

And the nerves tight,

And the plane with a brief stop.

This the age of the lamp tan in a short span,

The brain strain and the heart pain.

The catnaps till the spring snaps

And the fun is done.'

Lord, you who live outside of time and reside in the imperishable moment, we ask your blessing upon your gift of time.

Bless our calendars: those ordained lists of days, weeks, and months; of holidays, holy days, fasts and feasts.

May they remind us of birthdays and other gift days, as they teach us the secret that all life is meant for celebrations and contemplation.

Bless, Lord, this new year, each of its 365 days and nights.

Bless us with happy seasons and a long life.

Grant to us, Lord, this new year's gift of a year of love. Amen.

Taken from William J Bausch, *Story Telling the Word*, pp 214-16

Epiphany

Isa. 60:1-6

Eph. 3:2-3a, 5-6

Mt. 2:1-12

Tragic pictures and pleas for help came to us from television, radio and newsprint with people searching for loved ones, grieving, lost, and hopeless, among the ruins, after a tsunami struck Banda Aceh, Indonesia, on 26 December 2004, and claimed nearly 228,000 lives, from Sri Lanka to Indonesia. Our hearts went out to them. And yet, unless it touches us personally, we are still to some extent spectators.

People had come to the region for different reasons: for a holiday, good times in surf, sun and on sandy beaches, luxuriating in top class hotels, and within minutes it was washed away. Others were going about their ordinary occupations, men at work, mothers feeding babies and caring for families; struggling Aceh was almost exterminated more ruthlessly than by any repressive regime.

Even if we are totally secular and living for this world only, (how flimsy it is before nature's onslaught) when death comes there is an umbilical cord that connects us to metaphysical meaning. We are stamped at the gut level, with 'return to Maker'. Where is God in all this wreckage and human carnage? Love is found among the ruins. And may our love reach out to them by prayers for the dead, and any help we can give.

It happened after Christmas on the eve of the Epiphany. Three men came searching and they found shepherds; they found a young couple, poor peasants of the countryside who wore travel-worn clothes. They found a child in a feeding trough for a manger. They found God in and among human existence, with its limitation, flaws, and devastation. It was a potent and palpable sign of God's desire to embrace our brokenness (William J Bausch, *The Word In and Out of Season*, p. 35).

Mark Searle has one of the Magi writing: 'By this they knew him: that he, like us was marked for death; and, knowing this, we knew ourselves no longer strangers. We fell down before him and offered gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh, the wealth of nations laid at his feet, nothing held back. We had observed his star at its rising and had come to pay him homage. In facing death, we had arrived. Before this child marked for death we were no longer fugitives or strangers. In the presence of this child, we were at home.'

And you know what? As this child grew up he didn't change one bit. He was criticised for mixing with outcasts, prostitutes, for touching lepers and he died between two thieves. From the cradle to the grave the Word dwelt among us. To be born in poverty under the circumstance of violence is disturbing. That an infinite God will take on suffering and death seems incredible; he turns justice into mercy.

The famous Russian writer Dostoevsky wrote that 'love is a harsh and dreadful thing'. In his semi-autobiographical novel, the *House of the Dead or Prison Life in Siberia*, where he spent four years, he describes Christmas Day in a Siberian prison camp. The prisoners were disconsolate,

huddled together as the bells rang in the cathedral and they cried: 'God has forgotten us. It was Christmas, Christ's Mass, but not for us who are cut off from all humanity.'

Finally, when the long cathedral service had ended, a priest came to the prison and set up a crude altar and began the service of worship. 'Now God has come to us,' the convicts shouted in surprised joy. 'Oh yes,' replied the priest. 'This is where he lives all year long. You see, he goes to the cathedral only on special occasions' (*ibid p 36*).

Where is love among the ruins? You saw it after the tsunami. Tamil Tigers worked side by side with the military; police and medics worked to identify the dead and bring them home. The outbursts of charity from nations. Countries and regions opened to receive aid. The whole world was involved, tourists, strangers and survivors worked to help the poor.

Second Homily

The Magi symbolise the Gentiles finding their way to Christ. The Magi coming from the east were priestly sages from Persia or Arabia who were experts in astrology and the interpretation of dreams. They are seekers, sincere and persistent in their search for the baby. Guided by a heavenly light, a star, they did not know where the star would lead them. Their journey was very much a journey of faith. And even when they saw the child, they still had to make an act of faith.

When the Magi reach Jerusalem, what strikes you is their candour and openness. Almost naïve, they seem to anticipate no difficulty in enquiring of Herod the king about the birth of a rival king. Only at the end of Matthew's Gospel do we have Jesus named as King of the Jews, and that is on the cross to which he is nailed.

Troubled, Herod seeks the help of the Jewish chief priests and scribes, who aligned to Herod, ironically produce the decisive clue that finally leads to Bethlehem. The wise men's human search needs the scriptures to lead them to Christ. Throughout their journeys, the Magi are patently guided by God. It is first a star in the east and then a text from the prophet Micah that led them to their goal.

These strange outsiders do not stumble on to the Messiah by accident. They search with purpose and are directed each step of the way by a divine hand. The Magi's stay in Bethlehem is marked with great joy, by the worship of the infant Jesus, and by the giving of gifts.

The sad reality is that the Jewish leaders, with their knowledge of the scriptures, did not follow their own advice to the Magi and come to Jesus. In fact, it is at Jesus' crucifixion that the chief priests and scribes mock Jesus with the words, 'If you are the King of the Jews, come down from the cross'. Without faith, human minds can be easily blinded. Bertrand Russell, philosopher, and atheist rejected all religion and God's existence.

After Russell's death, his daughter, Katherine Tait, told of how it was impossible for her to raise

the question of God's existence with her father. It was taboo. She said, 'I would have liked to convince my father that I had found what he had been seeking, the ineffable something he had longed for all his life; that the search for God was not in vain. But it was hopeless.' Contrasted with the joy of the Magi is a poignant passage in which Russell said, 'Nothing can penetrate the loneliness of the human heart except the highest intensity of the sort of love the religious teachers have preached.'

We are all groping our way towards God. Even our loneliness can be God's tug on the human heart. The joy of this Gospel is that the outsiders are not to remain outside. This is our feast. The Magi as representative of all non-Jews belong here in the company of those worshipping the infant Messiah. Herod's plot to have the Magi search out and identify his rival for him backfires when they are directed in a dream to go home a different way. If the Magi represent the presence of non-Jews who appropriately worship Jesus, Herod represents the imperial powers, imposing and conspiring but threatened and ultimately frustrated by King Jesus.

The central figure of this passage is Jesus who says and does nothing. But in Christ God has come to men. Jesus has come revealing the Father, answering that deep yearning in everyone. 'Arise your light has come,' says Isaiah. Paul spells it out: 'Pagans now share the same inheritance [as the Jews], they are parts of the same body, the same promise has been made to them, in Christ Jesus, through the Gospel.'

Evelyn Waugh's novel, *Helena*, is a story of the Emperor Constantine's mother (she found the true cross). At the end of her life in Bethlehem, musing on the wise men she prays out loud: 'Like me...you were late in coming...How laboriously you came, taking sights and calculating, where the shepherds had run barefoot. Yet you came and were not turned away. You found room before the manger. You are my especial patrons and patrons of all latecomers, of all who have a tedious journey to make to truth. Dear cousins, pray for me. For his sake who did not reject your curious gifts, pray for the learned, the oblique, the delicate. Let them not be quite forgotten at the throne of God when the simple come into their kingdom' (Denis McBride, *Seasons of the Word*, p 59).

Outsiders, seekers, latecomers, we are all welcome as we journey with the Magi toward the child of Bethlehem.

Third Homily

Every person is stamped in the depths of his/her being, right at the gut level, with 'return to maker', 'return to the Father.' All people are groping their way towards God and will be rewarded for their searching. But in Christ, God has come to us. Jesus has come revealing the Father, answering that deep yearning in everyone. 'That light, Jesus, was the life of men and women,' said St John.

There are so many counterfeits to the real knowledge of God that only Jesus can bring. A young couple, Paul and Carmelita, came to Millgrove for a seminar run by a group called the Inner Light Consciousness Movement. Paul, a Catholic who had drifted away and had come back through Carmelita talked about this movement in Christian terms — the Father, and the Eucharist. So, I asked: 'Who is this Father that you have met?' Paul's answer was: 'He is the power of the universe and each one of us is a molecule of his nature.' This is a Christian counterfeit, because it's nothing but Hinduism posing under Christian terms.

There's quite a difference between natural religion which Hinduism is and revealed religion — Christianity. According to Romans 1:18 the human person has the power, by the aid of human reason, to reach up to God through knowledge of things God had made. People's yearning (the yearning of all things stamped 'return to Maker') is a seeking to return to God. But to know God in this way is like gazing over a sea, covered in mist, to an island that remains unexplored. It's like being limited to one dimension, one face of a cube.

But revelation means God himself reveals his own inner nature — like taking us right on to that island and living there or taking us right into the heart of the cube. 'Only the Son who abides in the heart of the Father can make him known.' This knowledge is so essential because by possessing it we *know* what God wants each one of us to be. 'That light, Jesus, is the life of each one of us.'

If Epiphany means revelation, shedding light on where there is darkness or counterfeit, bringing to light the reason and purpose of our lives, then Epiphany is a missionary feast. That's how St Vincent Pallotti saw it. Epiphany is the revealing of Jesus to the Gentiles, the outsiders.

Paul Claudel wrote a play about a little blind girl who stood on her doorstep and called out to the people passing by: 'You people who can see, what have you done with the light?' How can people hear?

When have you revealed, shown Jesus, told him to others? I would suggest you answer the question that I put to Paul: 'Who is this Jesus that you have met? Where did you meet him? What did he tell you to do?' If this knowledge is not lived, shared, missionary, it's not really Christianity. 'You people who can see what you have done with the light?'

There is a three-fold process of sharing that light, of revealing, telling Jesus. It is:

Belonging

Believing

Behaving

Belonging: When you feel you belong you share; even a four-year-old can welcome people into the family. Everyone, every group needs four things for this sense of belonging:

- recognition
- acceptance
- independence
- security.

These four are essential for growth. The Jewish people were no exception. Unrecognized, forgotten, rejected in exile in Babylon — they were slaves dependent and insecure. But then release came and they were returning home — they had gained recognition, acceptance of their rightful claims for independence and some security — they belonged as a people.

Isaiah says: '*A light has shone on us this day*' and remarkably the prophet continues, '*nations come to your light*'. As we belong in the Christian community and share the light of Christ it must be shared with others.

Light is shared by believing: How can people hear if we never speak? Don't focus on the gifts of the wise men — but on the gift that Jesus is to them. When we who hold the riches of Christ share that treasure with others, a marvellous thing happens, we find that in giving, the appreciation of what we share grows and our riches are increased. When have you shared your belief with Jesus?

Baptism of the Lord

Isa. 42:1-4, 6-7

Acts 10: 34-38

Mt. 3:13-17

John's baptism is a baptism of repentance, where he calls us to face squarely the power of the demonic that surrounds and invades our lives. Matthew has John objecting when Jesus comes forward, in the midst of the crowd, for baptism. 'It shouldn't be me baptising you. You should baptise me!' Jesus replies: 'Let it be this way, for righteousness' sake. This is the way the Father wants. This is God's timing, my kairos moment, the time for me to make the decision to put myself at God, my Father's disposal.' Jesus left the stability and relative peace of the hidden life of Nazareth to be fully involved in the lives of people. It was the beginning of his public mission to save us. And as Jesus comes forward to the Jordan River the Father shouts in delight from heaven, 'This is my beloved Son'.

The Baptism is an Epiphany of the adult Jesus, a manifestation of who Jesus is and who we can become through him. As Son, Jesus did not shy away from being totally human. He took on our human sinful condition, even though he was without sin, and went down into the water with us. He fought to set us free from the inside, freely taking our weak humanity in himself down into the saving waters of the Jordan River and right through to the Cross. From the inside, Jesus freely embraced our shame and guilt. He brought all human history before God for purification and the dynamic in-break of divine life. Anyone else would loudly disapprove of the Son taking on human weakness and frailty. But not God. Jesus won his Father's approval: 'This is my Beloved; he always does what pleases me.'

For Jesus, the descent of the dove was a moment of seeing and hearing in which he recognised himself and was approved by the Father as Son and Suffering Servant. Mark's Gospel highlights this by taking the words of the servant in the first reading — 'my chosen one in whom is all my delight' — and changing it (in Greek) to 'You are my beloved Son', instead of 'my chosen one'.

The baptism is Jesus' profound experience of his God as Abba Father, into which he invites us to share as adopted sons and daughters of God. When you are secure in the love and standing with God, there is tremendous security and stability. Not only is Jesus God's beloved Son, but from that comes the charge on him to bring about the kind of world God wants. You see it in the Garden of Gethsemane after Jesus has literally poured out his life in obedience to the Father's desire for the salvation of humanity and the world, in his prayer, full of trust despite the agony, 'Abba Father not my will but your will be done'. Jesus' baptism symbolises God's concern for our world.

Jesus consciously took up his mission to save us. He descended into our condition where sin distorts vision to show us how to really live. It's good news to get our lives working right. And the Father approves – live the way my Son lives. Baptism is the means by which we get the Holy Spirit, which we need to get our lives going right.

Our own baptism, for all its ceremony, is not a 'churchy' thing. It is a life-pledge and therefore has a life-enactment. Going under the water and coming up again is a sign of new life emerging from death. Daily we confront our pledge and encounter Christ's power to die to the old, corrupted way of human living and receive a fresh infusion of divine grace. As you enter and leave the Church consciously sign yourself with baptismal water and ask: When was the last time I experienced Jesus as a powerful change agent in me or others? When did I last introduce Jesus as the remedy to people with problems?

I had two baptisms this morning and I wonder how does all this apply to the two babies or us as adults? In three ways:

First, our baptism is a moment of decision. We don't remember what happened at our baptism and we need to reflect on it again and again and choose our life in Christ.

Second, the Spirit empowered Jesus for his mission and is given to us for ours. God loves each one of us from the moment of conception and gifts us with God's very self. But it is Jesus who empowers us to bring that humanity to its fullness in God.

Third, our own baptism into the mystery that envelops Jesus and us, is God's stamp of approval on us — you are fantastic!

Consequently, we need to live on the level of God's approval, not on the level of comparison, or seeking the approval of others at any cost. We don't want to be a sociological church, basing our lives on surveys of what the majority think right, but a church that mirrors and lives by God's approval.

Second Homily

The Baptism of Jesus is an Epiphany, a manifestation of who Jesus is and who we can become through him. His baptism is the experience of God, of his spirit, of freedom, bursting out of the heart of human existence in a certain place and time, and in one person called Jesus, God became human.

There is a raw earthiness in this belief not found in other religions. Christianity has never relented from its insistence on the total humanity of the Word — made flesh. Baptism needs to be seen in the context of creation. God loves each one of us from the moment of conception and gifts us with God's very self. But it is Jesus who empowers us to bring that humanity to its fullness in God.

Baptism is that voice of the Lord over the waters, the voice of the Lord, full of power, like a thunder-clap over a river or sea that announces over Jesus: 'This is my Beloved Son' 'and over you, 'This is my beloved son or daughter.' We don't remember what happened at our baptism and we need to reflect on it again and again. But what happened at the River Jordan signified the Father's

stamp of approval on Jesus.

Our own baptism into the mystery that envelops Jesus and us, is likewise God's stamp of approval on us — you are fantastic! Consequently, we need to live on the level of God's approval, not on the level of comparison, or seeking the approval of others at any cost. We don't want to be a sociological church, basing our lives on surveys of what the majority think right, but a church that mirrors and lives by God's approval.

There was a marvellous film, a western, with James Stewart playing the part of a God-fearing farmer who lived outside Fire Creek, a decent, religious farming town. Three hired killers ride into town and begin to change the character of the place by exploiting the decent behaviour of the townspeople. One killer boasted: 'You can buy or fix anything in this town for \$5 — a broken window, a rape or a hanging.' No-one takes a stand against them, except a young stable boy with a serious disability who accidentally shoots one of the killers. James Stewart is called away to his wife's side during her difficult delivery. He returns to find the boy hanged in the stable.

In the early morning James Stewart walks through the town calling out to the townspeople by name: 'Where were you when the lynching was going on? How could you let it happen?' And he begins to fight evil with law — he takes on the sheriff's badge and wins.

The Son, Jesus, did not shy away from being totally human. More like the stable boy, he took on our sin and fought to set us free from the inside, taking our weak humanity on himself into the saving waters of the Jordan and right through to the Cross. From the inside Jesus felt our shame and guilt. He brought all human history before God for purification and the dynamic in-break of divine life. Anyone else would disapprove of the Son taking on human weakness and frailty. But not God, Jesus won his Father's approval. "This is my Beloved; he always does what pleases me."

For Jesus, the descent of the dove was a moment of seeing and hearing in which he recognised himself and was approved by the Father as Son and Suffering Servant. Jesus descended into our condition where sin distorts vision to show us how to really live. It's good news to get our lives working right. And the Father approves — live the way my Son lives. Baptism is how we get the Holy Spirit to get our lives going right.

Our own baptism, for all its ceremony, is not a 'churchy' thing. It is a life-pledge and therefore has a life-enactment. Going under the water and coming up again is a sign of new life emerging from death. Daily we confront our pledge and encounter Christ's power to die to the old, corrupted way of human living and receive a fresh infusion of divine grace. As you enter and leave the Church consciously sign yourself with baptismal water and ask: When was the last time I experienced Jesus as a powerful change agent? When did I last introduce Jesus as the remedy to people with problems?

SUNDAYS IN ORDINARY TIME

Year A

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isa. 49:3, 5-6

1 Cor. 1:1-3

Jn. 1:29-34

What was it about John the Baptist that made him such a significant figure in all four Gospels? Certainly, it was the coincidence of his ministry with the public ministry of Jesus, John's prophetic preparation for the coming of Christ the Messiah. But for me it was his fidelity, faithfulness to God that was not rigid, clinging to his own pastoral methods — his fiery preaching and baptism of repentance. His fidelity was in pointing beyond himself to Jesus. Twice, in a few short paragraphs he directs his own disciples to follow Jesus: 'Look, there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.'

Mention of the Lamb of God recalls the servant of the first reading, who like a lamb would suffer in bringing his people to God. The servant in Isaiah may have first referred to the group of faithful Jews released from exile in Babylon by Cyrus, who when returning to build the temple, find Jerusalem is a mess. In trying to restore Jerusalem and turn people back to God's ways, they meet opposition and suffering. Later, the servant comes to be seen as an individual who would not only restore and reconcile the Jewish people, but be a light for all the nations.

Using the title 'Lamb of God', John directs attention to Jesus as the one chosen by God to bring about universal reconciliation through his suffering. 'To take away the sin of the world' — what a task! Fidelity for John meant looking beyond his own agenda to God's plans for the world, in Jesus.

If John had insisted on his own way as best, he could have impeded God's plan for the salvation of all. Many a great work has been thwarted by human pettiness and rivalry. We want to build monuments to our way of doing things. 'We build statues out of snow,' said Sir Walter Scott, 'and weep to see them melt.' To freeze commitments for their own sake is to create idols that cannot withstand heat or change. So, look and look again at the Lamb of God: take in his word/message, and translate it into life.

John's disciples were saying that John's way was best, that John was first and superior to Jesus. He came first and Jesus submitted to John's baptism that proves he is best. John, however, cuts through their argument, stating that Jesus pre-existed him. 'He ranks before me because he existed before me.' And secondly: that Jesus' baptism is more powerful than his. John only baptises with water, but he had seen the spirit rest and remain on Jesus who would baptise with the abiding Holy Spirit which marked Jesus as the chosen one of God. Once John has prepared the way and done his job, he said I must decrease so that Jesus can increase. The very reason I came baptising with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.

Is this what fidelity means for us? That we point to Jesus as the light of the nations, or do we mirror the culture but fail to challenge it? The synod of the Church in Oceania challenges us to speak boldly about Jesus to everyone. 'A new proclamation of Christ must arise from an inner

renewal of the Church, with mission as its goal. Every aspect of the Church's mission must be born of a renewal which comes from contemplating the face of Christ' (paragraph 59). That means not separation from the world but being genuine stewards of the best in it. Bringing Jesus into the best part of the exploration of the times and raise up the questions of the age. The greatest crime is to aim low.

I think John Paul II mirrored fidelity — he was a suffering servant; he kept his eye on the heights but was willing to slog through soaked plains to get there. It's fidelity in work and action: his defence of family; his gathering at Assisi with all the world religious leaders to pray for peace; his intention to be in Toronto for world youth day; praying in the mosque at Damascus; inciting Christian leaders to help him work out the Petrine role in the Church. Constantly he is changing to meet a changing world and to bring Jesus as the answer.

A story: Satan saw God creating by his Word...people were happy. Time passed, jealous Satan managed to shut the mouth of God to prevent God's word being spoken...everything became dark and unhappy with evil, exploitation, and terror commonplace. Hearts and doors were shut. God pleaded to say one word. Satan thought one word can't do any harm...and God spoke...'Jesus!'

The word made flesh must not become word again but be found in this secular society in flesh and blood people, so that Jesus' face may be seen and known, and loved.

Second Homily

If the readings focus on the beginnings of Christ's mission, at the heart of that mission is the principle: 'God's grace is sufficient in weakness.' It operated in Christ's life and it operates in ours. There are no weaker images than servant or lamb, yet they are the means God chose to save us.

Jesus the servant, led mutely like a lamb to slaughter; Jesus the Paschal Lamb whose blood marked the lintels and doorways so that God would save his people, who on the cross was pierced through and, like the Paschal Lamb his legs were not broken, although the robbers on each side of him had their legs broken. It was through this weakness as servant and lamb that he bore, and bore away the sins of the world. Why has God chosen weak things to bring about his purposes? To show that it is his grace, his free gift, it is his doing. If we take over, we limit God. The classic case is that of Gideon who, preparing to go into battle with Midian with 32,000 men had his number reduced to 300 by the Lord, to show that it was the Lord who gave him victory.

We've all experienced moments when we didn't have just one difficult time, but two or three together. Kicked when we're down, we've felt 'God why are you doing this to us?' We might have heard the cry from others and have felt that way ourselves. 'Nobody can help me, and I can't help myself.' 'My problem is too great that I can't bear to live with it.' It's what Alcoholics Anonymous calls 'stinking thinking'. It's the inner confusion, self-pity, the mess inside that a person still clings to, will not let go of and seek help from others.

This point is critical and may be a grace: 'I can't put on anymore.' Often when every support is kicked away, when things are desperate, on the edge, it is then that a person puts, or is encouraged to put, his or her trust in a power greater than themselves. It is trusting in someone greater, not just ideas about God, but planting their feet firmly on God and taking him at his word. He promises not just negative things — taking away sin — but new life, life in abundance, a new freedom for real growth in God and in self.

Nicky Cruz was eight-years-old when his mother told him that she did not love him anymore. He went wild, became uncontrollable and started the biggest gang in New York City. He was headed for the electric chair. But God's grace broke through to the centre of his being, when someone told him that God loved him.

The trouble today is that we live in a secular society in which the sacred is downplayed. Heavy rock thumps into the brain, "there is no way, no God, end it, exit, they'll be sorry when you're gone". Unless we find God deep within we can't be truly human; life and responsibility become cheapened.

We know the story of St Augustine, who was unable to free himself from the libertine prison of his mind, and a de-facto relationship. Challenged by the renunciation of the desert monks, he walked out in despair into the garden. He heard children playing a game: 'Tolle, lege' (Take, read). He picked up the New Testament he had thrown down and opened it at Rom. 13:12: 'Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.' He experienced a light going on and a new resolve in himself.

In his own struggle with a thorn in the flesh, St Paul besought the Lord three times, and heard the Lord say: 'My grace is sufficient for your weakness' (2 Cor. 12:9). Paul concluded: 'Therefore, I will glory in my weakness that the strength of Christ will dwell in me.' Paul could continue, not in his own strength, but in Christ's strength; and the Lord did great things through him. I stayed at the place where the Blessed Mary MacKillop, Australia's first canonized saint, lies in North Sydney. Racked with arthritis, one of her prayers was: 'Lord give strength to my bones so that I can get up and do your work.'

Where do we need Christ's strength in our life? Have we been able to let him in and acknowledge him as Lord and Saviour in such situations?

Third Homily

When I was ordained, I chose the words *Pais Theou* for the back of my ordination vestment, and one of my classmates designed it beautifully. *Pais* in Greek can either mean *son* or *servant* and describes Jesus' identity: Jesus as *Son* of God or Jesus as Suffering *Servant* of Yahweh. The Prophet Isaiah described the Suffering Servant as someone who was led like a lamb to the slaughter, who

by his death justified many; 'ours were the sins he bore and by his stripes we are healed' (Isa. 53:5). John the Baptist pointed Jesus out to his own disciples with the words: 'Look, there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,' and encouraged them to follow Jesus.

On my chalice for my ordination, I have the lamb from the Book of the Apocalypse, the lamb standing yet slain, and on the other side *Caritas*, 'Love.'

What was I trying to express by all these ideas? Jesus, God's own Son, came among us as a servant, and with infinite love endured crucifixion for us to save us. But the Father vindicated Jesus' claim of being our Saviour by raising Jesus as victor over Satan, sin, and death. In Vincent Pallotti's words: 'Jesus, you have become a fool of love for me, how could I not become a fool of love for thee,' and that's what I wanted: to be a fool of love like Jesus.

We learn about the lamb in the reading for Holy Thursday when God instructed each Jewish household to kill a lamb and to smear its blood on the posts and lintel of their home, so that when the destroying angel that took the lives of the firstborn of each Egyptian family saw the blood of the lamb it would pass over that house. Jewish people called it the Passover lamb whose blood set them free from slavery in Egypt. This mystery is commemorated at each Passover which is also our Easter.

The day before Passover, during which thousands of lambs were slain and their blood poured on the altar was called the Preparation Day. In John's Gospel, the Lamb of God mentioned by John the Baptist at the beginning, is now mentioned near the end by the high priest. It was the Preparation Day when Jesus was nailed to the cross and died, his blood shed once and for all to save us; like the lamb not a bone of his was broken. At every Eucharist in which sacramentally we enact Christ's death and resurrection and intend to live it out in memory of him we hold up the host and proclaim in the Baptist's words, 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.'

Fr Joseph Donders wrote, 'don't misunderstand the lamb'. To use the Baptist's words: to describe a person as the lamb, could seem like a curse for many people, to be like the lamb slaughtered or sent into the wilderness loaded and charged with people's sins. God does not clamour for the blood of his Son. 'God makes it very clear he does not want a victim or a sacrifice. God does not want blood. God is only interested in one thing: our wellbeing, God wants us to live. It's that interest in human life, and nothing else that makes up the Spirit of Jesus, because it is the spirit of God' (Joseph G. Donders, *Praying and Preaching the Sunday Gospel*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1989, p 14).

Jesus wasn't just a lamb on which humankind, you and me, can unload our sins. We have the terrible possibility of doing just that, of looking to someone else to rid us of our responsibility. We blame others. 'We are greedy because others are greedy.' 'It's their fault not mine.' We drink ourselves senseless because society around us is frustrating. 'It's the fault of society, not me.' We

have a baby without marriage because we feel so lonely. 'The fault is the world's, not mine' (*ibid.* p 75). We have our lambs, our scapegoats for all we do.

You can be a scapegoat, or you can give yourself generously to God for others. St Vincent Pallotti identified strongly with the crucified Christ and with crucified others. He wrote: 'Since love never says enough, no-one can call him a fool who spends himself for others.'

Donders draws the distinction between scapegoat and lover with these words: 'As long as one man in this world cleans the toilet of another person, as the untouchables do, the world is no good. The man who said this is a man who took on the life of an untouchable and changed the face of India in his time, according to the method of Jesus, by giving himself non-violently in the interest of all — Mahatma Gandhi.' (*ibid.* p 15).

To be described as the lamb, we should be lambs like Jesus, and nothing else!

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isa. 8:23-9:3

I Cor. 1:10-13, 17

Mt. 4:12-23 or Mt. 4:12-17

John the Baptist is removed from the scene — in prison, awaiting death. Is this the reason for Jesus' move to Galilee? A darkened, threatening shadow may have fallen on Jesus and John's disciples. But that crisis is also opportunity — it signals the appearance of one who will fulfil all the promises predicted by Isaiah of the Servant of Yahweh who will dispel the darkness. In Jesus, God's light has dawned — Capernaum is the new centre of Jesus' public ministry.

This Gospel text comes immediately after Jesus' baptism and the temptations in the deserts. The battle lines are drawn between light and darkness, to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to call for a change of direction in human lives. Repent, turn around, and let in the light. Jesus proclaims the Kingdom of God is near.

In Christ, God's reign is ushered in, in his own person, for there *in* Christ, God reigns as God — Jesus has always done the Father's will and will do so, confronting and defeating darkness through his cross and resurrection. As people accept Jesus into their lives, light shines in their minds and hearts, the kingdom grows. The struggle is full on today! Before missionaries came to Papua New Guinea, the people said before we knew Christ, 'We were living in deepest darkness. Now we live in the light.'

When Mother Teresa brought her sisters to Gore Street, Fitzroy, she visited a poor man whom nobody knew existed. The room in which he was living was in a terrible state. There was no light in the room. The man hardly ever opened the blinds. He didn't have a friend in the world.

She started to clean and tidy the room. At first, he protested. 'Leave it alone, it's alright as it is.' But she went ahead anyway. Under a pile of rubbish, she found a beautiful oil lamp, but it was covered with dust. She cleaned it and polished it. Then she asked him: 'How come you never light the lamp?' 'Why should I light it?' he replied. 'No-one ever comes to see me. I never see anybody.' 'Will you promise to light it if one of my sisters comes to see you?' 'Yes,' he replied. 'If I hear a human voice, I'll light the lamp.' Two of Mother Teresa's sisters began to visit him on a regular basis. Things gradually improved for him. Then one day he said to one of the nuns, 'I'll be able to manage on my own from now on. But do me a favour. Tell that first sister who came to see me that the light she lit in my life is still burning.'

God lit not just a lamp, but a fire in St Vincent Pallotti's heart, whose feast day we celebrate. Vincent discovered God's very self as love in the dynamic sense of a burning love. That love he saw reflected in every person created in God's image; condemned men, people dying from plague, orphans, poor tradesmen and rough farmhands, young and older people, seminarians and sisters — and he worked to release that love and the implications of that love for service.

In 1834 with a group of lay people, religious and priests he reflected long on the creation of each

person in the image of infinite love. From those reflections grew the group conviction to work for their neighbours' salvation, their full human development.

In 1835 he called on all Catholics to be apostles; to take hold of the mission of Jesus entrusted to the Church to bring God's light and limitlessly accepting love, into the darkness of people's lives where there is sickness, despair or loneliness.

Jesus still calls apostles. Where is Christ walking by you today? He walked by the Sea of Galilee and saw two brothers Peter and Andrew, then James and John, all fishermen and transformed their lives from within, caught them into the vision that blazed out from him. Love was the hook that took the fishermen and made them fishers in a totally new way.

Vincent Pallotti called people to help as apostles. Love was to be the only motive. Without love and active faith, the darkness cannot be rolled back. With love the light spreads to all nations. Although Jesus was sent first to his own Jewish people — you sense Matthew's community had widened out to include Gentiles in that simple word 'their' — he went about teaching in 'their' synagogues and curing all diseases.

In what way do we as members of this parish radiate light and love? Who among us is called to continue Christ's mission together as priest, religious or lay person?

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mal. 3:1-4

Heb. 2:14-18

Lk. 2:22-40 or Lk. 2:22-32

Would you be able to say, 'how blessed are you' to someone mourning the death of a dear one? To people who struggle for justice or for purity of heart, who are being trodden on? What is this 'blessed' thing? How can we be happy when we feel so deflated, miserable, at the bottom of the ladder? G.K. Chesterton described St Francis, who gave away the good life and became a beggar after the example of the poor Christ, as *the jongleur de Dieu*, the juggler of God, someone standing on his head, seeing the world upside down, seeing things we highly regard from a different perspective. Isn't this what the Beatitudes do: they turn things upside down, see the world from the bottom up.

Understand what the Beatitudes are. They're not exhortations to us to be poor, gentle, to mourn so that if we achieve these attitudes and actions, we will be rewarded. That might be true for some Beatitudes better than for others, such as exhorting others to be peacemakers. But to exhort others to mourn or to be reviled and rejected, seems quite absurd.

Nietzsche, the God is dead philosopher, scoffed at the Beatitudes. His ideal was the super man, the powerful, ruthless, ambitious person who made it to the top, which the Nazis espoused in their ideology. All you are doing, Nietzsche said, is to place those at the bottom now in positions of power: the poor get the kingdom, the meek the land. Isn't this attitude true for ourselves to some extent? Doesn't being Number One mean success, wealth, achievement, looks, best performance? These things may be good, but they're not what Jesus values most.

The Beatitudes is not an exhortation. It is first and foremost a blessing promised by God to those who are already in the situation the Beatitudes describe. The meek, the mourning, the merciful hear Jesus' word as a word of encouragement and reassurance. In their predicament they are singled out by the blessing of God and are renewed in their hope for the future. When we are down, God reaches down to bless us.

Dr Tom Dooley enlisted in the navy as a doctor. One hot July afternoon, off the coast of Vietnam, his ship rescued one thousand refugees drifting helplessly in an open boat. Many were seriously ill. Dooley was the only doctor on board. He had to tackle single-handedly the job of giving medical aid to all these people. It was back-breaking work, but he discovered what a little medicine could do for sick people like these. 'Hours later,' he said, 'I stopped a moment to straighten my shoulders and made a second discovery — the biggest in my life. I was happy [treating these people] happier than I had ever been before.' When he got out of the navy he returned to the jungles of Asia and set up a small hospital to serve the poor and the sick (Mark Link, *Sunday Homilies, Year A*, St Paul's Bombay 1996, p 114).

The Beatitudes take us to the nobodies, to the underside of society, and we find happiness in

serving and being with them. The Beatitudes tell us that our God is a God who cares about the poor in spirit, the humble, those yearning for right to be done, the merciful, the single-minded, the peacemakers, and those persecuted for righteousness' sake. The Beatitudes are the values of the Kingdom of God.

In the Gospel, Jesus climbs the mountain, like Moses did to receive the Ten Commandments, but now to declare the Magna Carta of the Kingdom. In them we see the heart of God. They are the lifestyle of Jesus challenging us to move from asking God to take care of the things that are breaking our hearts, to praying about things that are breaking God's heart. In living them, we are prepared for the absurdity, the topsy-turvy values of the Beatitudes.

Pope Paul VI and Pope Francis asked religious priests, brothers, and sisters, and now lay people to live the Beatitudes: to live in solidarity with those on the underside of society. Not only to give charity like Mother Teresa's sisters in the slums, but also to share the life of the poor and marginalised and with them become catalysts to confront the powerful with the challenge of change. A Dominican said that in pursuing this option: 'We religious were evangelised. In the poor we experienced what Christ's Kingdom values really entailed — the two-fold aspect of the Beatitudes: meant not only to care for the poor, but to stand with them, espousing their concerns.' The Beatitudes are no longer passive attitudes, but dynamic actions of people enthusiastic for the Kingdom, like Jesus. No wonder Nietzsche was threatened.

Try living one Beatitude and see what difference it makes to your happiness and that of others.

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isa. 58:7-10

1 Cor. 2:1-5

Mt. 5:13-16

I was talking to someone who fervently desired his children to have faith but felt overwhelmed by the competitiveness of the knowledge age that the young are caught up in; knowledge means power and the way to the top. It takes priority for some before God, Jesus and the Church. Paul in the second reading, speaks to this person's situation. Paul tells us that he came from Athens to the Corinthian community in weakness; the only knowledge he claimed to have was about Jesus, and about him as the crucified Messiah. In his speeches there was no great show of oratory. He had tried that in Athens and his message had been ridiculed. He came to Corinth in fear and trembling, yet out of that weakness, came a demonstration of the power of the Spirit which was released on the motley group of slaves and well-off people in Corinth, to show that our faith should not depend on human philosophy but on the power of God.

It's repugnant to our time, but let's explore this weakness that Paul talks about. We want God to give us much, whereas the greatest honour that God can give a soul is to ask much of it. Therese of Lisieux regarded her weakness, her emotional breakdown as a child, and her dying of tuberculosis in her twenties as the springboard from which to offer herself as a victim of divine love. She called her sense of herself as creature, her nothingness, nothingness when you compare it with the all of God, and she wrote: 'In order that love be fully satisfied, it is necessary that it lower itself to nothingness and transform this nothingness into fire.' The only competition she entered into was to be a saint — her way of littleness. When she died aged twenty-four, the other sisters felt they could write little about Therese, yet she was the person through whom God worked great miracles after her death, and still does today.

If we open ourselves to receive from those who are weakest in our midst, they will transform us. And further: if we enter the weakest and most broken part of ourselves, we will find life — it's there we find the heart of Jesus, the heart of the paschal mystery.

In Australia, the Church is experiencing a decrease. In less developed countries, such as Bolivia, they have a different sense of the Church. On one occasion, some mothers, silently protesting, carrying photos of their disappeared husbands and sons were asked, 'Are you going to leave the Church?' They replied, 'How can we leave? We are the Church!' Their notion of the Church has permeated their ordinary daily lives. All they do is done as the Church. Do we have their sense of church? Perhaps it is because they live the reality of religion that Isaiah writes about: sharing bread with the hungry, sheltering the homeless poor, clothing the naked. Then your light will shine in the darkness. the Church is meant to present the human face of Christ in places where people are in desperate need.

Are we waiting for the leadership of the Church to do the shining? Pope Francis certainly is but he's also asking us to go out into the streets, to be a church of the poor for the poor. Pope Paul VI,

in his exhortation, (*Evangelisation in the Modern World*, par 75) said: 'Through their wordless witness Christians can stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live. Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Such a witness is already the silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one. Here we have the initial act of evangelisation.'

As disciples of Christ, our witness should lead others to wonder. It is the first act of spreading the Gospel. If we hide our light, we puzzle no-one, when we share it with others, another Christian is born. How many have we brought back to Jesus?

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sir. 15:15-20

1 Cor. 2:6-10

Mt. 5:17-37 or Mt. 5:20-22a, 27-28, 33-34a, 37

A mother was fearful before she got married about not having a perfect birth, and now married, here he was, her beloved son Joachim. She wrote, 'I instantly recognised his genetic abnormality. He was gazing intently into my eyes when I first saw him and immediately challenged me with a look that said, "I am here, and I am what you fear most".'

'I am what you fear most.' Was that the situation facing Jesus as the leper, breaking all social taboos, pushed forward to stand in front of Jesus and ask, 'If you want to, can you cure me?' Was his 'if you want,' a dare flung at Jesus by a person who knew rejection and hurt from people and from God? For leprosy was a social disease in Jesus' time, in the sense that the leper was put beyond human contact. He had to get right out of the family, find somewhere to live, wear ragged clothes and dishevelled hair, ring a bell and shout 'Unclean, unclean,' keeping his distance from people lest they become contaminated. He was unable to sit with others in the synagogue; even God, it seemed, rejected him. His was a living death.

The first thing Jesus did was to touch him, to make human contact. Jesus was not only filled with compassion. He was angry at this man's condition, and said, 'Of course I want to. Be cured.' Jesus' healing of the leper was not only of the man's physical condition, but a restoration of the man's deepest sense of dignity and his place in society. (He may have been a lawyer or a doctor.) In doing so, Jesus himself became unclean according to Mosaic Law. Jesus should have contracted the contagion, but he didn't; instead, the leper became clean.

Leprosy, Hansens Disease, is a condition of the skin which given the right medication could be cured within six months. If not treated the skin becomes insensitive to bruises, very hot water, and such like. That it still exists in our world says something about our insensitivity. In our indifference to others, we are lepers.

In the city of Homs, Syria, a bloody terrorist attack deliberately targeted young university students. A car bomb was set off close to the Catholic Church and aid centre killing fifteen people and wounding fifty. Fr Ziad, a Syrian Jesuit, was dismayed at the lack of any reaction on the part of the world media. 'After the attack on Paris all eyes were on Paris. But here? Not a word. Only silence,' he said. 'You know the money spent on video games every year (in America, \$10 billion) could pay for clean drinking water for every person on the planet. The money spent on arms each year (\$800 billion) is more than twice the debt of all developing countries. What is this insensitivity?' Sometimes it manifests in a lack of love of others.

Mark says that when Jesus touched the leper and the healed leper told everyone what Jesus had done, it was as if Jesus became a leper and had to go to the outskirts of the towns. Still, people came to him. And we need to come to him so that he can heal our insensitivity.

Fr Damian De Veuster, like Jesus, took a courageous step when he chose to go to the lepers who were jettisoned on Molokai, torn away from families, living in despair. His bishop told him, 'you can never come back'. He said, 'I will go to the lepers.' It was a death sentence in others' eyes, expressed in the life-size bronze statue of Fr Damian standing at the Hawaiian State Capital. It was the head of Damian, with his hat and glasses, placed on top of a body shaped as a coffin. I flew to Molokai in 1986 to see where Fr Damian worked and died. It was only when he contracted leprosy and spoke at Mass, 'My fellow lepers' that he touched the deepest reality of each leper; his solidarity with them. His disease was a symbolic act that immediately roused accusations from churchmen on the mainland and which led Robert Louis Stevenson to write his famous defence. In whose shoes does Jesus want me to walk in for a while? What do I fear the most?

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lev. 19:1-2, 17-18 1 Cor. 3:16-23

Mt. 5:38-48

When Abraham Lincoln was running for president of the United States there was a man called Stanton, who never lost an opportunity to vilify him. Yet when Lincoln won the election, he gave Stanton a post in his cabinet. Why? Because he considered him the best man for the job. And Lincoln was proved right. Stanton gave him loyal service. Asked why he didn't destroy his enemies, Lincoln replied, 'Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?' (Mark Link, *Youth 2000*, p 241). Jesus asks us to do the same.

You have heard, the saying, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.' It was enlightened for its time to prevent the wholesale wiping out of a tribe or family in retaliation for the death of a family member. 'But I say to you, offer the wicked man no resistance; turn the other cheek; let him take your cloak; walk the extra mile.' It's a hard ask, Lord. Not to pay back a hurt after we have been wrongly used. No wonder you have few who take your words to heart!

In the last century three non-whites did take Jesus' words to heart. They put the righteousness Jesus asked of his disciples into practice. They struggled on behalf of their people to love not only the neighbour, but their enemies as well. Following Jesus' teaching they refused to do anything which met evildoers on their own terms. 'Do not resist an evildoer,' Jesus said. Paul put it well when he wrote: 'Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good' (Rom. 12:21).

Ghandi, on behalf of the Indian people, translated Jesus' teaching into non-violent resistance, not to repay injustice or oppression with violence, but to resist it. He knew that evil has its own seduction, that we are tempted to respond badly when we are treated badly. Jesus teaches us to remain loving even when others treat us in an unloving way. Ghandi fasted to change the mentality of people. But he also provoked the unjust system of British rule in India. Both his fasting and his non-violent provocation were to awaken people to act peacefully.

Martin Luther King was born in Atlanta, the home of the Klu Klux Klan, where racial segregation was perfected to keep a pool of poor and pliant black Africans for cheap labour on the plantations. Rosa Parkes by her refusal to give up her seat in the bus to a white man, thrust Martin Luther King into leadership of the civil rights movement. He learned the methods of non-violent resistance from Ghandi. When his house was fire-bombed by the Klan, he wanted to carry a gun, but after some effort was dissuaded. He preached a community of love as Jesus taught. But non-violent resistance took its toll. King was assassinated at the age of 39. Doctors examining his heart found it to be the heart of a 65-year-old man. The stresses and strain, overcoming fear as he and his followers faced police dogs, water cannon and batons, and not resisting except with love was hard.

Nelson Mandela came out of prison in Robbins Island where he spent 27 years. He had every reason to feel bitter and to come out vowing to get revenge on those who unjustly deprived him of

his freedom. Instead, he came out smiling, and seeking reconciliation with the leaders of the regime that had put him in prison. He became the cornerstone of a new South Africa. If he had harboured bitterness, who knows what would have happened?

In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, he wrote: 'I knew that people expected me to harbour anger against whites. But I had none. In prison my anger toward whites decreased, but my hatred for the system grew. I wanted South Africa to see that I loved even my enemies while I hated the system that turned us against one another. I saw my mission as preaching reconciliation, of healing the old wounds and building a new South Africa.' He also told President Clinton, when asked whether he still hated his prison officers: 'If I still hated them, they would still have me in their power and in prison.'

These three men who took up Jesus' teaching, in the face of unjust oppression, moved their society towards greater and more humane treatment of one another. They taught us that hatred takes far more energy than any other emotion. It drives out everything and warps the soul.

An enemy can arouse hatred in us. When we discover our capacity to hate and harm, it is very humbling. At the same time, it can be a good thing. It puts us in touch with our poverty. Perhaps we discover that the enemy is not outside us but within us. The problem can be not with the other person but in ourselves.

Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Is. 49:14-15

1 Cor 4:1-5

Mt. 6:24-34

We live in an age of anxiety. We long for an earlier uncomplicated life. It seems all the securities are coming apart: Covid; media reports of horrific crimes; the plight of asylum seekers; disasters happening around us; marriage and family breakdown; toxic politics and the royal commission into our church beamed right into our living room. We can't help but wonder what does it all mean? Is our world coming apart? Some might ask: 'All this happening at this time, is God punishing us? Has God abandoned us?'

That's what the Jewish exiles in Babylon lamented, wondering the same thing. Had God abandoned them? The temple had been destroyed, the priesthood and the royalty eliminated or enslaved. All the symbols of their beliefs were suddenly obliterated.

The prophet Isaiah told them that the basis of their trust is God, whose love and care is even greater than that of a loving mother. Even if a mother at the most tender moment of feeding her baby might forget her child, turn her back on the son of her womb, God will never abandon us. It is this belief in God, even in the worst disasters, that enables us to trust and obey, that is, acknowledge God and live differently.

If we lost all trust, how could we live? If we were suddenly snatched from our home and work like Victor Frankl the famous Jewish logotherapy therapist, who was arrested and ended up in Auschwitz concentration camp, stripped of his name, address, profession, and clothed in prison garb with a number, how would we survive? As he shuffled out into the yard one day, numb, confused, worried, not knowing what the future held for him, his hands stuffed into his pockets, his fingers felt a small bit of rolled up paper. The person who had worn this prison jacket before him, had written 'Schema O Israel' — 'Remember O Israel, the Lord your God is the one God, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength,' (the Jewish belief of Deuteronomy 6:4). Frankl realised that even if they took everything away, he would still live under the overarching loving care of God. 'If we have a reason to live for then we can suffer anyhow, survive anything that may face us.'

To have a reason to live for, what is our heart set on? Jesus challenges us. Is our heart set on serving God or serving money? Trusting God or fretting over life's necessities? Seeking God's rule (the Kingdom of God) or worrying about tomorrow? Parents today at their wits' end trying to feed, clothe and educate their children might dismiss Jesus' words as irresponsible. But don't dismiss his words too easily; let them work their magic on you.

Jesus' words presume we believe in him. How are we going to abandon the pursuit of wealth or leave the future in God's hands, unless we have confidence that God keeps promises and is deeply involved in our life. Jesus is not condemning human resourcefulness or future planning. What he is

warning against is fretting or worrying about wealth or tomorrow, that they become our total concern at the expense of everything else.

Someone described our present-day obsession with status in these words: 'In rich countries today, consumption consists of people spending money they don't have, to buy goods they don't need to impress people they don't like.'

Jesus knows that worry affects us all. He himself was worried and filled with anxiety in Gethsemane as he faced death by crucifixion, as he struggled to do God's will, but he came to a point of acceptance, that he would drink the cup. He put his trust in his Father whom he knew loved him.

It would be good for us to face the things that worry us and write them down. Our most common worries are: money (45 per cent), other people (39 per cent), personal health, with fitness gyms everywhere (32 per cent), exams, getting the right qualifications (20 per cent), and job security (15 per cent). Although it is impossible to live a life beyond fear and anxiety, it is possible to reduce worry's power over us. How can this be done? Jesus tells us to concentrate on what is essential — on doing the will of God. Worry is banished when trust in God and the desire to please him are the dominant elements in our life. The other way to defeat it is to live one day at a time. St Augustine said, 'Entrust the past to God's mercy; the present to his love, and the future to his providence.'

THE SEASON OF LENT

Year A

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:12-18

2 Cor. 5:20-6:2

Mt. 6:1-6, 16-18

When things in our life are bad and we feel afraid, Lent presents us with three things that can really help: prayer, fasting and alms-giving. In prayer we are asking God to change things, but he doesn't do it automatically. God needs us to work with him. The prophet Joel called everyone to pray because there was a huge plague of locusts, so big that the swarm blocked out the sun. The locusts would eat up all the crops, everything, and leave dust and starvation in their wake. But it can be hard to pray, like riding a bike without a chain. We're pedalling furiously, but nothing's happening. St Augustine said that fasting and alms-giving give wings to prayer. How? They link us to life, because often there's a split in our prayer. It's up in our heads, it's not linked to life; it's not getting to the deeper layer of our heart. We were all praying for Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran awaiting the firing squad. There is no split in their prayer and life. We pray for clemency. The cry of Lent, 'Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return' has become very real for them.

Prayer needs fasting, but not as an endurance test or a boosting of the ego. Our weakness from lack of food puts us in need of God. God wants more than fasting from food. He wants fasting from doing wrong, and an inner fasting of the mind from self-pity, blaming others, nursing grievances.

Giving alms helps us to pray. If our prayer is genuine, then the Spirit of God, the God of tenderness and compassion takes hold of us and then our hearts become like Christ's, moved with pity for others. Alms-giving is the practical nature of our love for others. It can take on a variety of forms — caring for the bodily needs of others, which we call the corporal works of mercy; caring for the sick, the homeless, feeding the hungry. Alms-giving means more than handouts, it is about tackling the root causes of hunger and homelessness. It might mean a radical change in our lifestyle. Alms-giving means forgiving. Lent is a time of forgiveness from God, but also forgiveness of one another, letting go of past resentments, breaking down the barriers. Lent is a journey into the forgiving heart of God.

When you are signed on the forehead with ashes, the priest says: 'Repent and believe the Gospel.' Jesus is asking us to see differently, to look at God, the world and ourselves differently and then to do something to help. Jesus asks us to pray, to do without things, fasting maybe, and then give to others: all ways of taking us inside ourselves to be changed, and outside ourselves to love others. The test of Lent in the end is not what we have done for Lent, but what Lent has done for others through us.

At Lent we should try the key to our heart's door. It may have gathered rust. If so, this is the time to oil it, in order that the heart's door may open more easily when the Lord Jesus wants to enter at Easter-time. Lord, oil all the hinges of our heart's doors that they swing gently and easily to welcome your coming.

Second Homily

The forty days of Lent begin with Ash Wednesday. The ashes we wear with pride are the sign of the new start we are going to make towards Easter. They stand for a struggle in our deepest selves, we call it spiritual warfare, as we hear the words spoken by the priest or the parishioners as they put ashes on your forehead: 'Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.'

We are asked to strip down for action. We so easily get attached to things, 'I can't do without my cup of tea in the morning; my smokes; my telly,' to the sin that clings so easily, says the Letter to the Hebrews. We have turned our wants into needs, we call them compulsions.

Compulsions turn us in on ourselves. What does fasting do? It upsets the basic biological rhythms of need and satisfaction and jolts us joyously out of ourselves and out to others. We feel hungry and it should make us aware of the real hungers of others, poor families struggling with food and rent, light and gas bills. Fasting takes us inside of ourselves to be changed and outside of ourselves to love others.

In Isaiah 58, the people complain that God does not see and reward their fasting. But God is saying if fasting is to be of value, it must be accompanied by compassion and a concern for social justice. Turn away from sin. What areas of our lives have we yielded to the enemy? What are the compulsions, hidden or otherwise that we need to face and be free from, so that we can be free and faithful to the Gospel, to the Lord?

An old Indian chief told his grandchildren: 'There are two wolves fighting inside me — one is vicious, bad, angry, biting, jealous — the other is kind, cares for others, makes peace.' The grandchildren asked: 'Which wolf is going to win?' The old chief said: 'Whichever one I feed.' Lent means to open myself to Jesus more and more, to struggle against the bad wolf in me, trying really hard to live like Jesus.

The cross I wear is a light cross — it's not a burden, but a sign of liberation, of becoming free. I'm willing to share the crosses in my life with Jesus. There are two questions facing me in Lent: What am I going to do? What am I going to do without? To fill the vacuum created by fasting, the Church asks us to pray and give alms. The awful pandemic of Covid makes terribly real the call of Joel: 'Now is the time to sound the trumpet; call everyone to come back to the Lord with all your heart, praying. Save your people, Lord, you who are all tenderness and compassion.'

Lent is getting ready for the Messiah, a joyful looking forward to having Jesus with us at Easter. The real test of Lent is not what we have done for Lent, but what Lent has done for others through us. Don't allow Lent to slip away and suddenly discover it's Easter. Ask yourself: How can I make Lent matter?

First Sunday of Lent

Gen. 2:7-9; 3:1-7 Rom. 5:12-19 or Rom. 5:12, 17-19 Mt. 4:1-11

Lent leading up to Easter is to some extent unreal. Easter comes and then we settle back to where we were before. When you think about it, the Jews experienced Easter first — the Passover — before they had to race away into the uncertainties of the desert — standing with God in the midst of struggle. Jesus was driven into the desert by the Spirit after he was assured of his standing as Son of the Father. And Lent really comes after Easter for us, in the sense that we can't go back and become an unredeemed people waiting for our Saviour. We already are saved. We have the assurance of Christ's life in us already. But we must produce the fruits of that life in ourselves and that's where the struggle, the temptation, the spiritual warfare, that Lent stands for comes in.

The desert is the place of the test, just as life is for each one of us. Jesus' own Jewish people failed repeatedly in those forty years in the desert, summed up in chapters 6 and 8 in the Book of Deuteronomy. Satan uses those two chapters and Psalms 91 to test Jesus, and Jesus rebuts him by quoting from those same chapters. Jesus, in his forty days and nights, is the one who is faithful to God's word and covenant.

Testing, temptation is not a sin. Because we are tempted, and sorely tried in many areas of our lives, such as illness; a marriage break-up; loss of work. This doesn't mean we are in sin. It's only when we give in to evil, then there's sin.

Temptation has to do with who I am before God. Temptation attacks that unique relationship, the vocation that I have from and with God. The temptation to eat of the tree of good and evil expresses in symbol that at some point man and woman wanted to deny being a creature, and wanted to be like God, to have the ultimate say over their lives, independently of God. They wanted to taste good and evil and be unaffected. When they gave in, sin entered our world. Something went radically wrong — a dis-ease with self, God, others, even the cosmos. They found themselves not like gods, but naked, broken, cut off. To taste evil is against God's very design. He made us good, for goodness' sake. Jesus, the new Adam undid our sin. 'He did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself...becoming obedient even to death, death by crucifixion.'

If we want God to work in our lives, there's a fundamental condition or attitude we need, which is obedience or submission to the Father's design for our lives.

Temptation, when used in scripture, is not so much the inducement to give in to evil, as the crucible in which our personal freedom is refined, purified, tested, and gains its quality. From temptation, from the desert, from Lent, we come out with a new power of conviction. It's so easy to give in to sin, to be discouraged, to say 'I've had enough'. It's so easy to settle for an easier, more materialistic lifestyle than we dreamed of when younger and more idealistic. Like Gulliver held

down by small Lilliputian threads, small infidelities mount up and the binding goes deep. I'm no longer faithful to what God wants me to be.

Jesus was tempted. He knew his spiritual identity was rooted in his obedience as Son to his Father. He knew his authority in his ministry came from his submission to his Father. 'I do always what pleases my Father.' He was obedient to the Father's design for his life. It was precisely this area of identity and mission that Satan attacks: 'If you are Son of God, command these stones to become bread; If you are Son of God, make a big show — jump off the high temple wall; go the easy way...' Satan attacks each of us at that special point of the relationship we have with God.

Repulse Satan by God's word as Jesus did. 'It is written: you shall serve God alone.' God's word is a sword to ward off Satan because that word puts us forcefully in touch with God's mind for us. 'Begone Satan! You shall not test the Lord.'

Jesus also made submissions to the Father's design for his life in the temptation in the garden and on the cross. In Gethsemane he prayed, 'Father, not my will, but thine be done.' His sweat came like drops of blood so much did the effort cost him. On the cross the priests and scribes threw at him the very words God the Father had used to describe Jesus' identity: 'If you are the Beloved of God, come down from the cross and we will believe in you.' But Jesus remained on the cross for us and our salvation. He enables us to be ourselves before God. Submit to God's design working itself out in your life. 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him alone.'

Second Sunday of Lent

Gen. 12:1-4a

2 Tim. 1:8b-10

Mt. 17:1-9

In today's Gospel we see Jesus facing death and finding hope for me and you, represented in the person of the three disciples, Peter, James and John. They climbed the mountain with Jesus. It was a privileged moment, but there is an underlying anxiousness in Peter, James and John, brooding like a cloud over the mountain. Just six days ago, Jesus said he was going to suffer and die. It came as a shock then, expressed in deep unspoken concern.

What are you carrying at this moment? Is it concern about your health, or the health of another, about your marriage, your family, work, study, a shaky relationship with a friend? What are you carrying at this moment? It's good to pause and touch those concerns.

And then you climb again, climbing the mountain with Jesus, thinking, 'What's going to happen in the future?' Like Abraham you walk by faith not sure where you are going. At times the going is tough, there's very little talking. You ponder the words of the second reading: 'Bear with me the hardships for the sake of the Good News, relying on the power of God who has saved us...This grace had already been granted to us, but is now revealed in our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who abolished death and proclaimed life...' It takes all your strength to get to the top of the mountain.

You arrive, take time to get your breath back, and to settle. You watch Jesus as he quite naturally begins to pray. There's an intimacy in his prayer to God. In Luke's version the Transfiguration of Jesus takes place during a moment of prayer, and it is in this moment of prayer that the disciples are 'awakened' to see Jesus as they had never seen him before.

Jesus begins to change. You thought you knew Jesus before, but now, as if a fire is blazing inside him, his face, his hands, even his clothes become brilliant, dazzling white. This wasn't light from outside as happened to Moses on the mountain with God, a light on his face which gradually faded. No this was light from light. Jesus is facing a critical moment in his mission, praying before his Father as to the direction forward. His Father lets the divinity of Jesus shine out from within.

Again, it is Luke who tells us what Moses and Elijah were talking to Jesus about. It was of the Exodus; the passage Jesus must undergo through his passion and death to liberate us from the agony we face and bring us hope. Didn't Jesus say he would rise again?

Jesus has promises to keep, to bring to completion what God has promised through the Law and the prophets represented by Moses and Elijah. What promises do you have to keep?

Did Jesus show himself to Peter, James and John so radiantly transfigured as an encouragement to carry them through the dark times? Jesus revealed his glory to the disciples to strengthen them for the scandal of the cross. Surely the disciples must have held on to the memory of this mysterious event, a preview of Jesus' resurrected glory, when they didn't know what to make of their master's crucifixion. Jesus and the disciples could now face the worst having

seen the best.

The same three disciples were with Jesus in Gethsemane as the nightmare became reality. *Lord, let your mercy be on us as we place our hope in you.* When depression hits, the inability to pay the rent, being without work, concern for the family, being terminally ill, or persecuted for our religion, those our Project Compassion helps, *Lord, let your mercy be on us as we place our hope in you.* We need the hope that the Transfiguration offers.

And just as suddenly, a bright cloud descends. The Father's voice is heard. I glimpse who Jesus is, Beloved Son. Jesus is strengthened for what's ahead. And I am loved, too. I am embraced as beloved by my Father God. All my concerns fade. It's great to be here! The goal of my Lenten journey is ultimately to be changed, to be transfigured, to be aglow with charity.

But then those words, the Father's voice fills me with dread. 'This is my Beloved Son, listen to him.' Lord, I am afraid to go where you want me to go, where will you take me? God wants to change me, change me beyond my concerns. Jesus wants me to be transformed in my thinking (Romans 12:2), to move from anxiety to hope. What am I afraid of? Jesus comes close and touches me, and says, 'Do not be afraid'.

Finally, I look up and see only Jesus. The task before me is to find Jesus in the ordinary, not just in the peak moments of my life. He tells me to stand up and not to be afraid. He helps me to face the deaths in my life and to find hope. As with Abraham, God wants to bless each one of us so that we might be a blessing for others.

Third Sunday of Lent

Ex. 17:3-7

Rom. 5:1-2, 5-8

Jn. 4:5-42 or Jn. 4:5-15, 19b-26, 39a, 40-42

There are two kinds of thirst. Physical thirst that you might experience in the outback when the car radiator boils over, the tyre is flat and you're miles from anywhere. This thirst can kill you. But there's another type: a thirst for happiness, for meaning. The longing for God can be as relentless and painful as physical thirst. This thirst lies at the root of all human attempts to make sense of the world and find meaning in it. Sometimes we search in the wrong places to satisfy that thirst.

The Samaritan woman avoided the early morning gossip of the women at the well, the looks and the snide remarks. So, she came out into the blaze of the midday sun, a woman shamed, caught up in her past. And she encountered the thirst of Jesus. 'Could you give me a drink?' he asked. The disciples had all gone to get food. Jesus thirsts for those caught up in the new slaveries, to free them, to restore their dignity. His thirst is relentless. It breaks through conventions such as a Jew speaking to a hated Samaritan, and a woman at that. The disciples returning later made a similar remark: 'Why are you speaking to that woman?' His thirst at this moment is the same on the cross, 'I thirst', dying to set captives free.

The woman is suspicious of this stranger. The barriers are up against his apostolic attractiveness that seeks her soul, her conversion. He is equally direct, trying to find the way to bring her into the saving embrace of God.

The good news is that God quenches thirst. Jesus himself is the living water that springs up, wells up within us and satisfies our otherwise insatiable human need — the thirst for God. A member of our community said we are that woman, and how privileged we Gentiles are that Jesus came not only to save the Jews but us Gentiles as well. We must ask for that living water, fresh, cool, clear, bubbling up instead of the stale stored water in our own well. We can't bash the rock as Moses did to get this water, but we must ask: 'Lord, give me this living water.'

To understand the extent of Jesus' thirst, we need to admit our own sin, how we use, exploit ourselves and others, without even a twinge of remorse. Jesus' question, 'Go and call your husband,' opens up her past, her fears, that have kept her locked in. A definition of fear is false expectations appearing real. Until her meeting with Jesus her life had appeared real with all its false expectations.

Once released, she leaves behind her water jug, the symbol of her past, and thirsts that others might come to know Jesus. She becomes a missionary for Jesus: 'Come and see a man who has told me everything I ever did; I wonder if he is the Messiah.'

Jesus, despite the insistence of his disciples, forgets his hunger. His thirst is to do the will of his Father. The harvest, the white clothed Samaritans coming toward him reminds him of the harvest, that he desires to win for God.

One last point: It's not enough that we hear about Jesus from others, second-hand, hearsay. We need to encounter him ourselves. As the townspeople told the woman, 'Now we no longer believe because of what you told us. We have heard him ourselves and we know that he really is the Saviour of the world.'

Look at the progression of the woman's faith in Jesus; from hated stranger to a prophet who knows me intimately, then Messiah, until the public acclamation of Jesus as the Saviour of the world. Jesus is the one who can meet the deep yearnings in the human spirit, who can quench every thirst if we ask him. May we come to know Jesus who quenches our thirst and pours his Holy Spirit into our hearts.

Fourth Sunday of Lent

1 Sam. 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a

Eph. 5:8-14

Jn. 9:1-41 or Jn. 9:1, 6-9, 13-17, 34-38

In any debate, evident between the Pharisees and the blind man, our first task is not to enter a dispute to try to prove we are right, but to define clearly what we are arguing about. We need to judge, in the sense of today's Gospel, which means using all our faculties to bring our lives into the light, before Jesus.

When the blind man opened his eyes for the first time, he saw the face of Jesus. But as he used his mind in the controversy with the Pharisees he came to see with greater depth and clarity. This deeper seeing for St John is FAITH — seeing as God sees — beyond external appearances. Faith needs reason even as it goes beyond reason. Let's see how the blind man who now sees, uses his mind to lead to a deeper faith in Jesus. Be aware how the Pharisees are becoming increasingly blind. The blind man used his mind to arrive at the facts.

His neighbours ask: 'Is this the man who used to sit and beg?' So, they approach the man himself, who says: 'I am the man.' That is the first fact. The second fact: 'How do your eyes happen to be open?' The once-blind man tells how he came to see and who made it happen: 'Jesus made a paste of clay and spittle, put it on my eyes and then told me to wash at the pool of Siloam.' 'Where is he?' 'I don't know.' They brought him before the authorities: 'Someone has broken the rules.' Mixing clay with spittle was considered by the Pharisees as working on the Sabbath. 'How have you come to see?' 'Ask the Pharisees.' And the man tells the story again. Notice what's going on in this man. As he uses his mind to answer objections, he clings to the truth that he himself has experienced and there is a growing conviction in him.

Alexis Carrell, the famous French surgeon and physiologist, was treating a woman with lupus in its last stages. He was an agnostic. He told her, 'You are going to die soon'. She said: 'I am going to Lourdes.' He couldn't talk her out of it, so he said, 'I'm coming with you on the train, in case you die on the way.' She got to Lourdes and was cured. As a scientist he wrote up this case and sent it to the French Medical Academy — they brought Carrell before the board. They scoffed at him and said: 'This can't be so.' Carrell said: 'I know what my eyes have seen.' Through this battle he came to believe. This is exactly what happened with the blind man.

The second use of reason is interpretation of the facts. Some Pharisees attack the cause of the blind man seeing. 'This man who cured you, can't be from God. He breaks the Sabbath.' Jesus is already pre-judged. Others say: 'No sinner can work miracles like this.' So, they ask the blind man again who says: 'He is a prophet.' There's a growth in understanding from, 'Jesus the man who told me to wash,' to Jesus the prophet. But there's not the same growth in the Jews. Prejudice makes them blind. They deny the first facts: he wasn't born blind at all, and they call in the parents who gave birth to him. The parents admit he is their son and was born blind, but FEAR prevents them from saying it was Jesus who made him see. 'Ask him yourselves, he is old enough.' Do you stand

up for the truth and get kicked out or do you remain safe and silent? It's a dilemma facing us here — at work, at college, school, club and even sometimes in church.

The Pharisees can't deny the truth of the man's former blindness, so they attack the one who made him see: 'He is a sinner.' The man's only defence is the truth: 'I was blind, now I can see.' He made me see. Now he enters the attack with irony: 'Are you interested because you want to be this man's disciple?' To their rebuttal he adds a stronger one: 'If Moses were from God because of what he did — this man has done greater things and must therefore, even more so, be from God. He deserves to be followed more than Moses.'

And the fundamental prejudice emerges: 'Are you trying to teach us — you, ignorant and a sinner?' And they threw him out of the synagogue — from CE80 Christians were expelled from the synagogues. The protective umbrella of Rome was removed from the Christian sect within Judaism.

Right up to this point, reason has been at work; holding on to truth, but it is not yet faith. Faith comes when Jesus seeks out the man and reveals the mystery of his person. 'The one you are seeking, to believe in, you are looking at him, he is speaking to you.' He had seen Jesus before. His face was imprinted on his mind and memory, but this is a deeper seeing as he surrenders even the mind: 'Yes, Lord, I believe' and he worships Jesus.

It's interesting to look at this episode from the findings of Marius von Senden who, when safe cataract surgery was perfected, not many years ago, collected the accounts of new vision from people whose eyes were clouded from birth. They were excited about the beauty, light and colour of the world, about the uniqueness of each human face. But what surprised him was that they couldn't see distance or shape, couldn't see deeply and make out meaning. Sight is about something as much learned as given. Seeing is really an interaction between the eye and the mind. Seeing affects our lives. To see, to perceive, means to receive into oneself — to submit to the influence of things. The deeper our fear and distaste, the less we see.

Take away our blindness, our prejudice, Lord, and give us courage to really see and believe in Jesus for our lives' sake. Amen.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Ezek. 37:12-14

Rom. 8:8-11

Jn. 11:1-45 or Jn. 11:3-7, 17, 20-27, 33b-45

The death of Lazarus left a hole in the life of his two sisters, Martha and Mary, just as the death of a loved one does to us. Their first impulse was to send a message to Jesus their friend to come and help. There was no reply; their pleas seemed to go unheeded. Over four days they watched helplessly by their brother's death-bed. Their regret is mentioned three times in this Gospel: 'Why didn't you come sooner,' and 'Couldn't you have prevented this tragedy in the first place?' Their helpless and hopeless cry is echoed in that of the Jewish exiles in Babylon: 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off completely.' Out of the depths, the hole that death leaves in our lives, comes the cry: 'Lord, hear the voice of our pleading.'

In the readings today, death is all around us. Lazarus is dead; Jesus' life was in danger if he returned to Jerusalem. Thomas knows it, and with braggadocio says, 'Let's go and die with him.' Death surrounds us, the death of loved ones, the random yet deliberate shootings in our suburbs, road deaths, drugs and alcohol, the suicides of those sexually abused. But also, the deaths that we permit, one out of three births aborted; the new hunger from the wealthy using crops for bio-fuel; poker machines being increased. Our voices go unheard.

Jesus does not answer these questions. Instead, in the shortest verse of the entire Bible, he revealed one of the most profound characteristics we can ever learn about the heart of God: 'Jesus wept.' When Jesus experienced the sisters Mary and Martha weeping for their dead brother Lazarus, and their distraught neighbours, John wrote that he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. Our God is a tender God who is deeply moved, even grieved, by anything and everything that threatens our wellbeing. That's why the scriptures encourage us to bring to God every anguish, confusion, anger, perplexity, and anxiety.

There's something deeper here. The Greek word for Jesus 'sighing deeply,' *'embrimasthai'* which occurs twice, indicates that Jesus was angry. Angry at the hold death has over us, and he was angry at the lack of faith in the bystanders. He calls Martha to faith in him as Christ, the Son of God, the one who is to come. Jesus will contend with death on its own ground, especially through his death and resurrection, and break its hold over us. Lazarus being brought back to life was the sign of Jesus' power over death, that he is the source of life. But Lazarus would die. Jesus, however, is our resurrection and our life. He is our hope, not only at the end of our lives, but already here.

For a moment let's consider the disciples' growth of understanding of Jesus. An earlier tradition from Paul in Romans has the human Jesus doing his Father's work — freeing the oppressed, healing the sick, associating with the outcast. Jesus goes to his death; when raised from the dead is declared the Son of God *at his resurrection*; Matthew, Mark and Luke see Jesus being declared the Son of God *at his baptism*, but John traces *Jesus' divinity right back before the world was made, into the heart of God.*

For Paul, Jesus is declared God at the cross by the Spirit of God, the same spirit living in us that will give life to our own mortal bodies. But here in John we have Jesus the divine: 'I am the Resurrection and the Life'. Jesus has already conquered death and is himself the source of life, even now in this life. Human experience, however, tells us that God doesn't act exactly when, where, and how we think he should, but we are confident that he will act. We wait in hope even while we cry out of the hole we are in, *out of the depths*, to God. The alternative is to lose hope and spiral into despair which was the temptation for Ezekiel and the exiles: 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' However tempting, however human, however understandable, hopeless despair is not a Christian place to live.

However painful our circumstances, and however agonizing our honest questions, we believe that God in Christ will conquer and transform even that ultimate enemy, death. For the time being, we confidently 'cast every anxiety upon him, because he cares for us'.

HOLY WEEK

Year A

Passion Sunday, Palm Sunday

Isa. 50:4-7

Phil. 2:6-11

Mt. 26:14-27:66 or Mt. 27:11-54

The Passion of Christ continues in our day. Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered, Jesus warned his disciples, and indeed he was struck down. The Catholic Chaldean Archbishop, Paulos Faraj Rahho, was kidnapped, his driver and two young bodyguards murdered and held for ransom of \$3 million dollars, Jesus for a mere thirty silver coins. The Archbishop's own community in Mosul, Iraq, like the disciples of Jesus, are shattered, trying to find a meaning to this calamitous event. You don't read about it in the secular press. His death, like Jesus' death, was not noteworthy.

At a human level, feeling helpless rage, you want to strike out like Peter, but that is not Jesus' way. On the surface he goes to his death the passive victim of the human authorities who have become his enemies. At a deeper level, in his submission to violence and condemnation he actively fulfills a divine design to strike the decisive blow against the rule of Satan in the world and establish once and for all in its stead the rule of God. Jesus, the Shepherd, raised from the dead, will go ahead of them (in the way Palestinian shepherds do) to Galilee. There they will gather round him once more.

It needs the mystics such as John of the Cross to take us deeper into the meaning of Christ's sufferings. John wrote: 'I looked at your cross, O Christ, and I read there the song of your love'; or Paul (Gal. 2: 23) 'Christ loved me and sacrificed himself for me'; or John Paul II, 'The cross is like a touch of eternal love upon the most painful wounds of our earthly existence.' Matthew presents the death of Jesus as the fulfillment of the scriptures. Nothing involving Jesus was accidental. It formed a destined plan for each and every one of us. So true is this that Matthew was able to make of the Passion the end of the old era and the beginning of the era of the Church.

This is shown in Jesus remoulding the Passover meal, a meal of liberation, into the Eucharist, the gift of Jesus to us, his body broken and his blood shed for the forgiveness of sins, as he gives his life for the ransom of all of us; and as he establishes a new covenant for the forgiveness of sins. His death is a story of a gift of love given to the world, given to us.

The measure of that love is captured in all the synoptics and is perhaps the most poignant episode in the entire Gospel tradition — Jesus' anguished prayer in Gethsemane when he shrinks before the prospect of death and seeks the support of his disciples. It gives precious witness to the cost to Jesus of his sufferings and death and hence to the extremity of love and obedience that held him to his purpose. The account takes us into the heart of his relationship to his Father as it has him turning constantly for support from his three closest disciples. Jesus' prayer takes us into his acceptance of the cup, as he aligns his will with that of the Father. Tested in every way that we are, here, the compassionate shepherd is God with us in the deepest degree.

THE EASTER TRIDUUM

Year A

Holy Thursday

Ex. 12:1-8, 11-14

1 Cor. 11:23-26

Jn. 13:1-15

The hosannas were still ringing in the disciples' ears as they gathered at table to eat the Passover. It was a meal that expressed Israel's hopes and symbolized Israel's liberation from slavery. They expected that Jesus would declare himself as king. They were in key positions of power. Instead, he stripped off his outer garment and washed their feet like a slave. He invited to them to do as he had done. Wasn't this a return to servitude? Something they loathed with their whole being? No! This service was the measure of Jesus' love. 'He loved his own and loved them to the end,' in both senses: of loving them to the very last moment of his life, and with every ounce of his energy. It was an act that would reveal God's ways in the unconditional love of Jesus.

But they did not and could not understand. They were confused, let down, disappointed in him. And still he loved them, even Judas who was to betray him, and Peter who was so fragile at this moment, as were the rest of them. Peter did not want to have a part of it. To have a part with Jesus through washing, meant to be part of the self-giving love that would bring Jesus' life to an end. The washing relates us to the cost of being baptised. So do the words of Jesus: 'I have given you example that so you also should do.' Baptism is a summons to total self-gift in love, repeating the example given by Jesus; it is to lose oneself in loving self-gift unto death. The Coptic Christians in Egypt are the target of ISIS but the bishop said we are not unhappy, but we are persecuted.

In spite of all the rejection and disenchantment, the trial and the failure, Jesus made a mighty decision to stay faithful to his mission from his Father. He had to decide to put himself on the line literally — with his body and blood. Everything he ever said and did was brought to a head now: this was the hour. And Jesus said, Yes.

He got on his knees and demonstrated the parable of his kingdom: that in his upside-down world, the king was servant, and the one who ministered was master. It was his Gospel of love. And what he showed them on his knees, he continued to share with them at table. He gave them the most costly gift he could give: the gift of himself. It was at this moment that Jesus identified himself forever with bread and wine. He gave his followers more than food for thought: he gave them himself (ibid. Denis McBride, p 109).

In spite of the hurt, sorrow and misunderstanding, Jesus knew he had to pay the price for who he was. The price was himself, his own body and blood. That was the bill of the Last Supper and Jesus picked it up.

When we come to the table, we know there will be times when we are hurt and wounded; we know we cannot choose to act at the cost of our integrity; that it is worthwhile to pick up our bill of fellowship with him. And this night the Lord invites us again to copy what he has done for us. Wash the feet of each other. Give nourishment and hope to each other. Be bread for others; be life for

them. Let's do it!

Good Friday

Isa. 52:13-53:12 Heb. 4:14-16; 5:7-9 Jn. 18:1-19:42

As the Passover moon rose above Jerusalem, Jesus knew with some foreboding that his hour had come to die, to return to the Father. He loved his own to the end and would give them the utmost proof of his love. That's how Jesus loves us, to the very end, no matter what our past has been. He loves us, just as he loved Judas his betrayer, or the impulsive, boastful Peter, right to the end, hoping against hope for a different outcome, even as he dies on the cross.

Jesus is not naïve; he is quite determined in what he is doing. Yesterday, we heard that Jesus took off his outer garment, put on an apron like any slave, took a towel and basin, and washed his disciples' feet, to teach us love, total self-less love, inviting us to learn from him, to be a disciple willing to act in love for others. You call me master; if I have washed your feet, you must do the same.

We can so easily block out love, the light of Christ from our lives, amid violence and hate. Today we see the extent to which Jesus loves us — the terrifying torture of an innocent man who is God, who stood against hate, selfishness, bloody, possessive brutality with his only weapon, love and obedience to his Father; the lamb foretold whose blood redeems us, just as the Passover lamb, whose blood on doorpost and lintel signalled the escape of the Jews from slavery. His love is still the same, ready to save us.

In Japan, after the tsunami, rescuers searched among the wreckage to find survivors. They heard a baby cry. 'Here! Down here!' They found a baby in a basket, lovingly wrapped in a blanket, the mother had formed a shield with her own body to protect the baby and had died. When the rescuers managed to get the basket and the baby out, they found a mobile phone beside the child. They listened to the message intended for the child, passed it to one another, and wept. The young mother's voice said: 'If you live and can hear me, I want you to know that I love you.' When that child grew and listened to the words they would be indelibly imprinted on its memory. Such is a parent's love.

When we hear the Passion today, the Father's words are heard, made visible in his Word, Jesus, who gave his life for us, telling of the Father's infinite love and mercy for each one of us. Tremendous joy and thankfulness to God our Father who loves us, who redeems us by the sacrifice of Jesus that forgives us, telling us that God is with us to the very end.

We are his own, we are never alone. The true paschal lamb whose legs were not broken, who by his blood has brought us out of the slavery of sin, addiction, self-centeredness, into the light, to goodness, to living rightly, to church where together, today, we publicly adore the cross, the price Jesus paid for our salvation. He gave us the greatest proof of his love. The apostles, and we with them, would never forget that their failure and infidelity was met by forgiveness and love. We must

do the same, loving and forgiving, not only those close to us, but those that Jesus sends into our lives.

Mary and the Passion

Reflection for Good Friday

The neighbour came to Mary, rapped anxiously at her door and blurted out, 'They have arrested your Son and accused him of criminal activity.' Mary dropped the plate she was holding, before it smashed on the floor her heart went numb, but she had to get to Jerusalem in her mother's concern to protect her Son.

She had heard that Jesus, just like Joseph in the Old Testament, was betrayed by those closest to him for thirty pieces of silver to the authorities and chief priests through jealousy and hatred. But what had he done? He only did good, yes he broke the Sabbath but only to do works of healing, exorcism, setting people free with gentleness and love.

She gets to Jerusalem, arriving dusty and weary, but carried on by a mother's concern and worry, searching for Jesus. She was caught up in the crowd, jostling and pushing along the Via Dolorosa, amid cries of 'Crucify him, Crucify him', and she saw a man carrying a beam, struggling and bent over with the weight of it. As he came closer, Mary saw to her horror it was her only begotten Son. Her heart broke when she saw him as she choked back her tears.

He was wearing the seamless robe she had woven for him, but it was soaked in blood from the wounds of the scouring all over his body with a crown of thorns pushed into his scalp. She had heard that Pilate saw him as innocent, but still had him brutally scourged; the soldiers had their rough way with him, mocking him as king of the Jews, and had pushed a roughly cut crown of thorns into his scalp; and that the chief priests and scribes urged the people to cry, 'Crucify him'.

He dared to say that the vineyard, Jerusalem, the Temple and all it stood for, would be taken from them because they did not bear fruit for God; that he himself would be the cornerstone of the new temple — in the person of Jesus where all could encounter God. And that Pilate had weakly given in to the crowd. And the madness of the Father's love to save us, his people, even knowing they killed his prophets and he said, 'I will send my Son, they will respect my Son.' But they did not, but Mary did.

The women of Jerusalem, who knew Jesus' care and love for them and their children, were wailing in grief after Jesus. His heart went out to these women and their children who would soon be embroiled in a war with the Romans which their own menfolk had brought about. Mary joined them in her sorrow. The prophecy of Simeon that a sword would pierce her own heart was literally being realized. Mary knew, in her grief, even beyond her mother's agony that evil and God were in deadly combat in the very person of her Son. Then he spoke to the women, 'Weep not for me.' And Mary wept knowing that this was her Son and God's Son rising above his pain to compassionate others. Jesus took Mary's grief to a new level — the suffering mercy of God. She walked behind that

cross, carried now by Simon of Cyrene, desiring to carry that cross, desiring to help Jesus up after every stumble and fall, truly his disciple taking up her cross and following him.

The crowd went outside the walls to Mount Calvary where Jesus was to be nailed between two thieves, one on his right and one on his left. He was roughly stripped naked and stretched on the cross and nailed, his nerves shrieking with agony as the nails were driven in, and again shrieking with unbelievable pain as the cross thudded with a jolt and was put in place. Yet Jesus bore it, the twitching of his body as he pulled himself up by those nails in order to breathe or to overcome cramps.

Mary, standing under the cross, knew the torment and the contest going on against evil. She united her will to that of Jesus — ‘You can make it Jesus; you can make it to the end.’ The intent of Mary’s life was inextricably joined with that of her Son. Her intention was to offer herself with that of her Son — to offer herself with that of Jesus in his redemptive work, right through to the cross and beyond. Pallotti wrote that Mary herself ‘burning with love, desired to give her life with her Son for the salvation of the human race — in her love would hold him to the cross, even as she heard uncomprehendingly the chief priests and the scribes calling to her Son, ‘Come down from the cross and we will believe in you.’

Mary joined with her Son, urging him silently to keep going, doing your Father’s will. For three hours she agonized with him to win the fight and overcome Satan and evil.

She heard divine words from his cracked lips, ‘Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing!’ And to the thief crucified with him, ‘This day you will be with me in paradise.’ It was how he always lived.

Mary had lost her Son in the temple for three days when he was twelve. Now, in a deeper way she lost him, as in love he gave over his relationship to Mary to another, to each one of us, represented in the Beloved disciple. ‘Mother, behold your son, son and daughter behold your mother.’ And Jesus took her into a new relationship that he now gave to us. ‘Father into your hands I commend my spirit. It is finished.’ But not for Mary.

It was getting late and the bodies were taken down from the cross. Joseph of Arimathea and the women and Nicodemus were there with spices. Mary asked to hold him before he was put in the shroud and into the tomb. She held him, widened her lap and took him with great love — a pieta — held his head close to her own, his head bloodied, scarred and spat on. She felt like dying as she held his naked body as she did when he was a baby, and thinking of those hands that healed and set people free, those feet that walked the dusty roads of Palestine in service to many.

Mary had to let him go as they took Jesus from her lap into the shroud and then quickly into the tomb before Passover began. They had no time to anoint him with oil, clean his body, or put spices around his body.

It was her faith in God and the sheer courage that enabled Mary to face life, gather Jesus’

dispirited disciples, the eleven, and men and women into the Cenacle, and with them began to pray unceasingly for the Holy Spirit, and wait, as Mary and women do, awaiting birth, awaiting God's next move, not knowing what's ahead, but going on in faith — waiting for Jesus' Easter rising as we all do. And when the Spirit came, waiting for the birth of the Church.

Easter Vigil

**Gen. 1:1-2:2 or Gen. 1:1, 26-31a and Ps. 104:1-2, 5-6, 10+12, 13-14, 24+35 (30)
or Ps. 33:4-5, 6-7, 12-13, 20-22 (5b)Mt. 28:1-10**

When you fear the worst and it turns out the best, beyond your wildest dreams, your mind, emotions, your jangling nerves are in a whirl, as you try to make sense of what you've been through. Three-year-old Chloe Campbell's mother, Tammy, was living a nightmare after her child was snatched from her bed. 'I'm unable to eat or sleep — it's like a whole part of me is lost and I'm not going to get it back until she's home.' Then the news breaks, the good news she is alive, she has been found not dead but found alive.

Life is starting over again! But it's not the same! It's something new, wonderful. Tammy now sees Chloe in a new way as a life, lost and found, a gift restored. I see the Resurrection of Jesus in the same way, something totally unexpected, utterly breathtakingly new, that has turned the whole world right-side up again.

The women hurrying in the early morning to the tomb were worried, wondering who will roll the stone away for us. They found not death but life — Jesus is alive! It's the stone-moving power of the Resurrection. Jesus isn't resuscitated, brought back to life; he has broken death's power over him and us.

Through our baptism into the death-resurrection event of Jesus we are taken into the life of God. Through what Jesus has done we become children of God. A little seven-year-old who had never been to church but saw a baptism, ran to her mother: 'Mummy, mummy, the priest took the child and put her into the water, once, twice, three times. And you know what mummy, that child is a child of God.' And so indeed will we be when we are baptised in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit into the life of the Trinity!

God is our Father, the one who made us, who we totally depend on to breathe, think, laugh, and play. He is our loving, merciful Father who watches over us always, ready to welcome us back. His door is ever open. He knows us and loves us and wants us to grow to be the person he made us to be.

Jesus is our brother. He gave his life for us. Try to imagine, it's incredible! Think of the love he has for you and me! St Paul met the risen crucified Christ on the road to Damascus and was changed from a killer into a great apostle. He constantly had before his eyes the transforming power of Christ's love. He loved me, Paul said, and sacrificed himself for me.

It's the stone-moving power of the Resurrection of Jesus who can change hearts, transform lives. That power is the Holy Spirit who has been poured into our hearts as we open ourselves to God's love. Be led by the Spirit who lovingly speaks to our heart, calling us through the Father and Jesus into the closest friendship with God's family. You have been brought into God's family.

You are a member of the Catholic community; we are your brothers and sisters who want to grow with you each Sunday, the day of the Lord's Resurrection. Life is starting over. We are beginning a great journey. Jesus comes to meet us, to greet us and tell us not to be afraid. He goes before us. His commission is to follow him if we want true happiness, to be disciples, and to obey his teachings, and to know that he is with us always, to the end of time.

During Lent we searched our hearts to find the stones that block us from the resurrection life. Now Jesus has rolled back these stones so that we can enter into a life of freedom and hope and joy. Let this be a time of celebration! Jesus has triumphed over every obstacle. He wants the joy and the stone-moving power of his resurrection to be available to us always. Only Jesus can turn our mess into a message, our trials into a triumph, our tests into testimony, and a victim into a victor. A blessed and holy Easter to you all.

Second Homily

This is a wonderful night. You, our elect, have done something wonderful for God. You have prepared over weeks and months for this night. I want to ask you: 'Is your heart open tonight to receive the greatest gift God could give you? To become in Christ, God's adopted sons and daughters. To truly be brothers and sisters of Jesus?'

Do you remember the musical, *Les Miserables*? Jean Valjean after twenty years of harsh prison life knew himself as only a number. Robbing Monsignor Myriel, the bishop who took him in, fed him and when arrested, gave him the candlesticks he stole, the bishop called him brother. It was a decisive moment. Jean Valjean wrestled with the realisation, 'He called me brother, he gave me back my life.'

That's what Jesus does tonight, he calls you brother and sister and gives you back your life. He died for you because he loves you. Look up to Jesus. He is your older brother who is also your Redeemer. Love him and follow him. the Church calls you neophytes, living lights. Because when you say yes to Jesus, in the beauty of your lives you will shine like candles into the dark corners of our live and challenge us to reveal Jesus.

Keith Green, a Jew who became a Christian, sang of the impact of the risen Christ on him: 'Like wakin' up from the longest dream, or so it seemed, until your love broke through. All my life I've been searchin' for that crazy missin' part, until your love came and rolled away the stone that blocked my heart. With the power of the wind...until your love broke through.'

That was the experience of the women, who had seen where they had put the body of Jesus and hurried in the early morning to care for his dead body. Desire, love had drawn them to minister, to wash the body of their beloved Master-Suffering Servant who was hastily entombed. They had a problem on their mind, 'Who will roll away the huge stone from the entrance of the tomb?' That small detail says a lot about Easter. Easter is about rolling back the stone of the tomb

and opening the door of our life to Jesus.

Tonight, with the women, we are caught up into a mystery that makes sense of our life. The doubts, the darkness, the deadness will give place to light and love, because Christ is risen, goes on ahead of us into life.

There's a story of a family who went on holidays, made a reservation in a big hotel with all the amenities. They opened the door and found a small room, that was stuffy with a poor view. They complained to the management. The manager asked if they had opened the door inside the room. They went back and tried and found it opened into a spacious room with a magnificent view, awesome décor, fresh air, and gallons of light flooding the room. They had missed it. It was only a door away, a door they didn't bother to open.

We can live like that. Our life is a small room compared to the magnificent life God has in store for us. But many people don't bother to open the door. God rolled back the stone, but we have to open the door.

Don't let Easter be a spiritual daytrip for you. Make it the renewal of your journey with Christ in his church. He is the Lord of life who calls us brother and sister and gives us back our life. Show your love by coming to church and grow into the family.

Easter Sunday

Acts 10:34a, 37-43

Col. 3:1-4 or 1 Cor. 5:6b-8, Sequence: Victimae Paschali Laudes

Jn. 20:1-9 or Mt. 28:1-10 or (at afternoon or evening Mass) Lk. 24:13-35

The women came looking for the body and found an empty tomb. The three women who kept vigil with the dying Christ were the first to experience the risen Lord. They stood by and saw him totally emptied on the cross, till there was nothing there anymore, but the total will of the Father. God could now work his wonders through Christ, the first born from the dead. Women who bear the first stirrings of human life were destined to bear the first tidings of eternal life.

As night gave in to dawn, God's power was manifest in deliverance from death; the forces of evil were covered and bound. Violence and fear gave way to a new conviction that Christ is risen. It's the faith of the first disciples: 'He is risen as he said he would.' Christ's resurrection is an eschatological event that makes possible a radical style of new life. Closed worlds are broken open, and old perceptions of what is plausible and possible are shattered. The future becomes a promise of sharing in the Resurrection. God is pushing back the stone. Jesus is radiantly alive for us.

During Lent we searched our hearts to find the stones that block us from resurrection life. We all experience at some time, loss, depression, isolation that lie heavily on us. Beethoven is a great example for us. He faced the encroachment of total deafness, but persevered despite many setbacks, until the triumph of the *Ninth Symphony* which he conducted without hearing a sound until a member of the chorus turned him around to witness the rapturous applause of the standing ovation that greeted his performance.

It was a resurrection moment. Such moments are met in our lives. The empty tomb is where Christ broke the death barrier not only for himself, but for us. He has rolled back the stones that block us so that we can enter into a life of freedom and hope and joy.

SEASON OF EASTER

Year A

Second Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:42-47

1 Pet. 1:3-9

Jn. 20:19-31

The Resurrection is dynamite, and Christ has lit the fuse. The news that Christ had risen, burst into the apostles' lives like a mighty explosion. It was totally outside their human experience, unable to be grasped by the mind alone. It's interesting that women were the first to hear the Good News, because their hearts were given over to the Lord. Men have to make the journey from the mind to the heart before they are convinced.

Behind all the resurrection stories, in spite of differences there is one clear conviction: Christ has appeared to them, and he is alive. Given that fact, the apostles and early Christians gathered to remember Jesus' words and deeds. They searched the Old Testament to find predictions of who Jesus really was, since God had vindicated his claim to be Saviour and Son, by raising him from the dead.

All this did not come easily. You get the struggle to comprehend in the attitude of Thomas. He saw the change in the other apostles, but he stood outside unwilling and unable to accept. All the convincing of the other apostles was fruitless. Like a young fellow I know whose friends had received the Holy Spirit on a discipleship camp and were changed. He was on drugs, had lost his license, and was out of work. He refused to believe 'all this crap'. He went to New Zealand and wrote to me later that he had met a Christian group and had received the Holy Spirit. He now understood what his other friends were trying to tell him. It was the appearance of Jesus adapted to Thomas' own doubt that enabled him to believe.

Thomas has fascinated people. He has often been seen as the doubter. Since our faith is shaken by doubt time and again, we can easily recognize ourselves in Thomas. We feel in tune with him. He is truly our twin, and he represents what we ourselves feel. When we look at the way John interprets Thomas' behaviour, we see that Thomas is not satisfied with the reports of the other apostles. He was not present when Jesus appeared to the others and breathed the Spirit upon them. Thomas is not a doubter but one who seeks experience: 'Unless I can touch the scars in his hand and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.' He wants to see, feel, and touch, for himself. Only then is he prepared to believe. John invites us to go to the school of Thomas and to learn faith in the Resurrection as he did. Our faith needs experience.

Why does Thomas place such emphasis on the wounds of Jesus, on the marks of the nails on his hands and in his open side? Can he only believe in the Resurrection if he touches the wounds of Jesus, needing proof that the Risen One and the Crucified One are the same? The agonizing death of Jesus on the cross had shaken Thomas' faith in the Messiah so deeply that he required tangible proof to enable him to believe in the Resurrection.

Eight days later after Easter Saturday night Jesus appears. The eighth day is the Day of

Resurrection, the Lord's Day. The early Christians came together on this day for the Eucharist. The Eucharist is where we also touch the body of Christ. Jesus invited Thomas to touch him, and Thomas makes a profound confession of faith — 'My Lord and my God' — the strongest profession of faith in the New Testament. It is a personal experience, with the word 'my'. No-one can make this profession of faith for you; it has to be your own. But that individual experience, like Paul's, who met the risen Christ as a blinding light and a voice which said, Saul, why do you persecute me? needed the Christian community in the person of Ananias who prayed for him to give him a totally new sight. His experience was confirmed by Peter and the other apostles. It's not a matter of blind, unthinking faith, but a willingness to be open to the Lord in the circumstances of our lives, supported by a believing community.

But Jesus goes further and blesses those who do not have the experience of Jesus and yet continue to believe. The transforming power of the Risen Lord may not be felt personally but in the effect of their service to others and in the way that Jesus brings about growth in community. Mother Teresa is a good example. When she responded to Jesus' call to serve the poorest of the poor, she experienced the Dark Night living only by faith, but sisters came to support her, and her work grew.

Doubting, in the sense of asking questions is a normal part of growing as a disciple. Don't let doubt separate you from Jesus. Read more about your faith. Keep praying, go to Mass. Take a passage, such as today's Gospel, sit with it and apply it to your life. It's only when doubts with spiritual issues become stubbornness, and that becomes a habitual response to anything spiritual, can doubts become an obstacle to having a relationship with Christ. It's okay to have doubts. Jesus knows and accepts that. Use your doubts to ask questions that allow your faith to grow stronger.

Third Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:14, 22-33

1 Pet. 1:17-21

Lk. 24:13-35

A man was talking to his doctor about how bad his relationship was with his wife. The doctor asked, 'When was the last time that you told your wife that you loved her?' The man could not remember. 'When did you last buy her some flowers or chocolates?' asked the doctor. 'It was a long time ago,' said the man. 'Why don't you buy her something? Get a bottle of wine and celebrate with her.' The man thought it over and decided to do what the doctor suggested. He came home with flowers, a box of chocolates and a bottle of wine but since his hands were full, he rang the doorbell. His wife opened the door and burst into tears. He asked her what was wrong. She said, 'I've had a terrible day. Nothing has gone right. I had an accident with the car. Two of the children came home sick from school. I burnt the dinner, and now you come home drunk.'

We've all had terrible days. The two disciples in the Gospel certainly did. We all know that they walked out on Jesus, leaving him stone dead. The reasons were clear; we know them in our own lives. Friends, once faith-filled, who no longer walk with us. Disappointed hopes, yearning for a freedom that came to nothing. They saw their charismatic leader tortured and crucified; plus the fear that they might share the same fate. On top of that the strange stories from the women that he was alive; even the leading disciples believed them. It was all over for them, and they had to get far away from it all. They left Jerusalem for Emmaus.

But what made them come back in the darkness, back to the mess, the turmoil, the danger? It was because of an enthusiastic faith. 'Were not our hearts burning within us as we walked along, and he explained the scriptures to us. We've got to get back and tell somebody.' Jesus made sense of their situation, gave them God's purpose for their lives in him.

Appreciate your wife, your mother, those special single women today. Thank her for the love that she pours out silently, constantly on the family. Being a mother is a God-given role and task. But behind a mother's love, in her own life as a person, there can be much unfinished business which can become a pressure point in her life. Today, all of us are called to fashion our own vocation, not just to be passively acted upon or driven from outside.

Maggie Scarfe wrestled with the issue of serious depression among women, after one of her friends, who seemed to be on top of everything, attempted suicide, because she could not cope with the pressures on her. In her book *Unfinished Business*, Maggie Scarfe makes two interesting points.

One is that, whereas magazine articles oriented to men stress adventure, travel, the overcoming of obstacles (the preoccupations were with mastery and triumph), the magazines written for women had a very different orientation. Female oriented fiction and non-fiction described a '*huge concern*' about disruption, or the threat of disruption of crucial emotional bonds. But the melody

running through all the sorts of writing for women, was the *deadly seriousness* of such losses, and *the difficulties* encountered in trying to overcome them.

But if you as mothers or single women can switch from the seriousness of losses in your life and from the difficulties in overcoming them, to the way God sees you and loves you, as is heard in the Gospel today, you can gain a new orientation.

The second point was that depression occurred in the decades of a woman's life, adolescence, their twenties, thirties, and mid-life concerns. The depression concerned the individual's place in her own existence; where she was, in terms of her life stage, and the inability to cope with the ongoing inner and outer transitions that she had to make.

Our becoming a person is first of all God's work. From this perspective all the teenage girl's worries about her character, relationships, separation from parents, changing body image, the transition from girl to sexual woman; the struggle in the woman in her twenties between 'loving' tasks and 'work' ones; the career costs involved in the search for intimacy and commitment; the woman in her thirties sense of being 'cheated' of the dreams of girlhood that might never be satisfied; the loss of the nurturing mothering role which she conceived as her identity, which happens to a woman in mid-life, as her children leave home.

These worries are real, but they are also God's concerns. God has overcome them in the love of Jesus. Jesus gave himself up that we might find ourselves in him. We are saved by an incarnate God, a God who, in Christ, took on our weak, inadequate, faulty nature and brought it to glorious completion. In all these transitions, Jesus walks beside us and bestows peace so that our hearts are untroubled and unafraid.

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:1, 4a, 36-41 **1 Pet. 2:20b-25** **Jn. 10:1-10**

Pope Francis said, 'Every vocation is an exodus from self...it leads us on a journey of adoration ...and service to him in our brothers and sisters.'

Don't let this go in one ear and out the other. Every vocation is an exodus from self? When life challenges us, when God calls, often it turns our self-directed plans upside down. The ego has to go. It did that to me. There is an exodus away from your self. I wrestled with a vocation to the priesthood for two years before I decided to join the Pallottines. It led me on a journey of adoration, praying at home each Thursday night for an hour when the family had gone to bed, asking the Lord to show me the way, wanting a sign. But then I realised the way forward was in the decisions I had to make. And God honoured my decision; he was there in it. I did not feel worthy to be a priest, but I took the step and never looked back. You can bounce up and down on the diving board only for so long but then you must take the plunge. The decision was tested by my going out to serve him in my brothers and sisters. Let's be honest, our vocation is not our doing but God's. That decision took me through the ups and downs that are part of every human life.

Finding our vocation, whatever it is, and striving for holiness in it, is exciting. It breaks the boredom that so many of us experience and gives us an enthusiastic grasp on life. I found that. Wherever I was appointed, I gave it my very best. After priesthood I was trained in youth work and conducted retreats, camps for ages eight up to young adults, and leadership training from 1967-81; Riverton parish from 1981-86; pastoral counselling in New York 1986-89; formation of Pallottine students, lay missionary training and family camps as well as writing on spirituality 1989-2001; here in the parish 2001-19. I dedicated my life to God right where I was. Times were tough but I had a rich and fulfilling life. In the service of others, the power and salvation of Jesus can leap into others' lives because our lives are given to God. We see it in the scene where Mary greeted Elizabeth.

We see the tender and tough love of Jesus in today's Gospel; his authority that draws its power from love. To be called to be a shepherd in the old days, and still today, is a vocation. There was an intimate relationship between the shepherd and his sheep. The sheep knew the shepherd's voice and followed when he called each one by name. He was not there for the money, but for his sheep. Like David, many a shepherd had to fight off wolves and bears. He was responsible for the life of the sheep, even risking his own life protecting the sheep from robbers. And yet the shepherd had no voice or place in society. He was marginalised. He bore the smell of the sheep, but had a shepherd's heart.

And that's the difference between the shepherd and a hireling. The hireling runs away when it gets too hard. The shepherd answers with his life. The hireling is hired. His motive isn't the sheep but the hire. He counts the cost. The sheep, on the other hand, hear the shepherd's voice because they know he cares. His calling power comes from laying down his life again and again for them.

'Are you happy in what you are doing?' The question put to us this Sunday is, 'Whose voice do we listen to?' The many competing voices in our lives do not necessarily lead to happiness. Faced with many contemporary wolves and hirelings, we've got to find life in the Good Shepherd. In him we can freely enter and find enrichment for our spirit, and live life to the full. Jesus invites us to listen to his call. Following him does not destroy us; on the contrary, it leads us to our authentic self and true happiness.

The more we can let God work through us, be at one with God and in solidarity with people, the more effectively can we serve. Many of you only see me once a week. Do you know what I do at other times? Being a shepherd, a pastor is a great joy, the joy of bringing Jesus to the bedside of the sick and the dying, intimate moments of listening to people's lives; working with children and young people, preparing others for marriage, baptism and eucharist, offering Mass every day, the joyful burden of preaching. From early to late, all this fills my day. I invite you to listen to Jesus who calls you to the living out of marriage, the single life, but also to priesthood and religious life.

Second Homily

Pope Paul VI said that every life is a vocation. I don't know about you, but it took me two years to respond to Christ's call to be a priest. I was like a person on a high diving board bouncing up and down before taking the plunge. All kind of things go through your mind up there. How risky is it? Can I make the love of Christ the central and wholly-absorbing aim of my life without becoming developmentally impaired? Can this be done without the interpersonal love and dedication represented by a wife and family? What about all the small threads that tie me to home or job? I did not feel worthy of being a Pallottine priest, I just wanted to serve. So, I bounced up there depressed at times and realising that this depression was a prelude to making a decision, until I worked it out, helped by others.

What goes through your mind up there? The vocation posters show priests magnificently robed around the altar. Of course, the ceremonies ought to be well done, and reverent. But that's only part of the picture. The Vatican Council took the priest from his privileged position and wanted him to be in the midst of the people as brother and friend, minister of the word and shepherd. He is not to be 'above' but 'among' the people of God, in service to them and with them, in a common passion to bring about the reign of God. Not dominant, but able to work collaboratively with highly qualified men and women who have important roles in parish and life.

Nuns are shepherds. They may not be in schools, but you will find them leading committees against human trafficking, caring for people with AIDS, on dangerous missions, speaking out fearlessly in society and in church. I marvel at how much better women are at some things than I am, putting their finger right on the pulse in issues of importance. Richard Rohr said that the biggest religious group in the United States are Roman Catholics. The second biggest group is former Roman Catholics. And he asked, 'What does that say about our shepherding?'

Some delay to answer a call to priesthood or religious life because they don't like the way the Church is. They know that structures are changing with the decrease and ageing of the clergy. But you can't wait until structures have changed before you make up your mind. It takes courage to live in the meantime, and to work at giving the Church a human face, while not having all the answers. It's more comfortable to get with the strength instead of with a smaller group, but I have found that being on the margins gives you a clearer vision of essentials. If God draws you, you will make a difference wherever you go. You can make your mark without being a tattooist.

The word ministry means service, to minister to others. To shepherd brings in the notion of pastor. Vincent Pallotti wants all who share his spirituality to have a spirit of service for the sake of the kingdom, a freely given availability. Not to seek honours, dignities, ambition, but rather holiness; he wants a sense of service that gives rise to authentic charity and apostolic zeal. To follow Jesus requires a heart burning with love so that the person is prepared for simple and selfless service. The tree lives not by its fruits but by its roots. So put down deep roots in Christ so that you can soar.

We all want to achieve something with our lives. But after thirty, success is unimportant. It is suffering that breaks us open to our real self. When you're younger there are important milestones you want to achieve, like getting your license. But you don't get a car license to put it away and never drive anymore. Your vocation has its basis in baptism. But don't sit on your baptismal certificate. You are called to live and practice what Jesus teaches.

It was because the first Christians lived like Jesus, that others wanted to join them. The power of Jesus' Spirit on their lives was like a mighty wind. They were changed, joy and happiness shone on their faces. People were running to find out what happened to them and to ask: How can we get this Spirit of Jesus? Peter told them: 'Be baptised, change the way you live and receive the Holy Spirit.' Jesus comes to help us, to give us his Spirit. He describes himself as the Good Shepherd. He wants to get close to you and me and lead us. Jesus is talking about intimate leadership. He knows what can make us happy. Enter into a relationship with Jesus and he will give you life in its fullness.

That's what I found. As a Pallottine I have had a rich and varied life, in youth work, retreat work, leadership training, counselling, parish work, writing and exploring spirituality. A shepherd is one who goes ahead to find rich pasture that feeds others. To have worked through various spiritualities to know what is authentic, to see, before promoting it, whether it draws the person closer to God, to holiness. Being holy doesn't mean missing out on fun, but living life to the full, living in a way that leads to lasting happiness.

We need to listen to his voice. A vocation has to be prayed about. There are many different voices, a lot of soft options trying to catch us. In *The Age* yesterday: drug dealers targeting habitual night-clubbers so they could become large scale pill pushers of ecstasy and cocaine; the swear word to impress your friends. Instead, setting boundaries in relationships, closing the door on

intimate sexual relationships to safeguard the relationship in the future. There's nothing scintillating about sliding.

Jesus laid down his life for us. He wants to teach us how to lay down our own lives, to stick at doing good for self and others. There's radiance, a deep joy and peace that comes from living right. Following him does not destroy but leads us to our authentic self and true happiness. 'A shepherd I'll be to you, I know your name, and I know the heart of your story.'

Birthday of St Vincent Pallotti

Acts 2:1-4

Acts 9:36-41

Jn. 14:23-26, 12-13

Years ago, I saw the film *No Country for Old Men* which had received rave reviews and a four-star rating. I came away from the film thinking, 'We have lost the sense of the sacred', the sacredness of ordinary human life. There was an absence of values, a sense of the dehumanising of our society. Today, we are confronted with an aggressive secular society that discounts the contribution of religious people to the public discourse. We've severed the connection with our Christian roots. You can see it in the anti-life legislation that our government has pushed through. We live in a time of moral dislocation aimed at changing the Judaeo-Christian ethic.

Vincent Pallotti, whose birthday we celebrate, lived in a time of social and religious dislocation. He was born on 21 April 1795 in the old quarter of Rome. His parents were Peter Paul and Maria Maddalena Pallotti. Two years before Vincent was born, Louis XVI was guillotined in Paris and the Reign of Terror began. It spread throughout France and beyond. At the age of three and then thirteen, two popes had been taken prisoner by Napoleon's armies. Rome was occupied. The spirit of the French Revolution was breaking down the guilds and church support for the ordinary people.

Two years before his death in 1850, Pallotti was hunted during the 1848 revolution in Rome during which thirty-two priests were shot and in Garibaldi's triumph at repulsing the Austrian troops, ninety priests were tortured and murdered in the gardens of San Callista. In wars or revolution, it's not just electricity and gas that get disconnected. People's lives get disconnected.

Vincent wanted to connect with people and to connect people with each other; to bring God and Jesus into the heart of their lives. From an early age Vincent schooled himself to reverence the image of God in every person, even those who were out to kill him. This was not a matter of projecting Jesus onto people so as to be able to love them. Rather, Vincent loved them and worked hard to help them release the deep-down, God-given dignity that was within them.

On one occasion, when one of his companions, Paul de Geslin, was going to throw away scrap paper, he recycled it and bought some small biscuits, and went with him on his round of the hospitals. They met a patient who was cursing God and everyone who approached him. As the man opened his mouth to curse, Vincent popped a biscuit into his mouth and talked to the man about his life and about God, as he was chewing. About to swear again, Vincent popped another biscuit into his mouth until he won him over for Jesus. He said to Paul: 'See, everything can be used for the apostolate.'

Vincent brought that same peace to prisoners condemned to death whom other priests were unable to reach. At another time Vincent was called in to calm a riot between the people in the Trastevere and the military. Vincent had a heart for the poor and worked in the military hospital

and barracks. He knew them all and was able to bring about a resolution to the conflict. There are many stories of Vincent risking his life to bring people to Jesus, or of just giving what he had to help the poor.

Vincent taught others and lived it himself: 'Seek God in all things. Seek God always and you will always find him.' It's often when you're at your wit's end, that's where you'll find him. I found that myself. At a difficult time in my life, I met Jesus not outside of myself in a picture or a crucifix, but within me. Vincent had said that we are created in the image of the Son. That's our dignity. Through Jesus we have the way to the Father.

When Jesus' disciples were at their wit's end, Jesus told them to trust. He said, 'I go to prepare a place for you.' Now that place is not only heaven when we die. It is also the place Jesus will make within us, while still alive, for his Spirit. When that happens, then we will do great things. Necessity brings out creativity in people. In every apostolic activity in Rome, Vincent was involved. He was motivated by the God of infinite love, the God he knew, in whose image he was created. If God in love was pouring himself out for us, Vincent had to do the same. If we are apostles, we must reach out, help people, connect with them, across the back fence, in the supermarket, playing bowls or at the footy.

In Vincent's time, only the pope, bishops and priests were regarded as apostles. The rest of the Church was passive. Pallotti argued that the mission of Jesus is so vast and complex that the clergy can't do it alone. Everyone is needed for this mission; everyone, can be apostles. In 1835, Pallotti gave a place to lay people and sisters; creating the Union of Catholic Apostolate, giving them a share in the apostolic endeavours they took part in. Love had to be the motive. We are familiar today, since Vatican II, with various ministries in and outside the Church exercised by the whole church. Pallotti in his time, 160 years before Vatican II, pioneered the way. He wanted a church without spectators. The work must go on.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 6:1-7

1 Pet. 2:4-9

Jn. 14:1-12

It was after Judas had left, the cross looming very close, that Jesus left his bequest to his disciples: to love as he had loved us. This is the sign of Christians, the benchmark of disciples of Jesus. Love is not a harmless, sweet, sensual feeling of goodness. Love here is cross-shaped. It makes demands.

We have all experienced betrayal in some way. Betrayal by others, our plans and ideas, broken promises, betrayal of love. Here it is Jesus' intimate companion who betrays him, one of the Twelve Apostles who is instrumental in bringing about Jesus' death, the death of the Son of God made man in Jesus. Such betrayal cuts deep and takes time to get over. It is not something that we quickly forgive but agonise over, and then come to some resolution.

But what is this love that Jesus speaks of? How does it help us get over our hurts? It is a love that shows itself in deeds, in actions which helps us be true to the person we are, who God wants us to be. Jesus' love is a concrete expression of God's covenant— love which is true to his people when they fall away from him. Jesus reaches out to all to bring them back to God; he is faithful to his charge right to the end. Faithful love means struggle as well as sanctuary; commitment takes guts, where love is tougher than all the rest. He can never give upon us. He holds a memory of us in his heart. No matter what we do, Jesus loves us. Jesus' love freely chosen will be faithful in the face of suffering and will ultimately lead to resurrection. It is in this context that Jesus speaks of glory five times in this short passage.

How does Jesus' love heal our hurts? By our being faithful to Jesus' plan for us, and by service of others who may be worse off than we are. Love is an energising force, but often we are afraid of God's love. Jesus doesn't just want to forgive us and get us to forgive others, he wants to energise us, make us like him, divinised, so that he can work through us, our eyes, hands, heart, words, by looking, listening, and serving.

Peer Gynt, in Ibsen's play of that name, is a character who takes as his motto, not 'To thy own self be true' but 'to thy own self be enough'. He takes advantage of women and others; he allows his own brute nature to dominate, is never faithful to commitments and lives as he pleases. He never attains his God-given destiny.

Ibsen uses three symbols to portray Peer Gynt as he nears the end of his life. The first symbol is the onion, an image of his inner self. Peeling off layer after layer to see the core, he realises there is no inner core in him. His cry of 'Angst' expresses existential anxiety. Ours is an age of anxiety, of young and old committing suicide because they have no inner core of values, no inner connectedness with God. I see young people after school with walkmans or bluetooths hanging off their ear and wonder, when do they get time to listen, to reflect on life or on what they've learnt at

school? Where is that inner sacred space where they can listen to the stirring of their hearts, to God speaking to them?

The second symbol in *Peer Gynt* is an old-fashioned camera with plates that ought to receive the imprint, the negative of the person photographed. The photographer tells *Peer Gynt* that he leaves no impression at all, his is a blank plate.

The last symbol is the Button Maker whose task is to melt each person down to a button that expresses their essential character and what they lived for, such as justice, love, fidelity. The Button Maker finds nothing in *Peer Gynt*. He can only melt him down to be waste material.

Peer Gynt is enough for himself, and he loses himself. He lives for no-one and stands for nothing. A wonderful example of someone striving to attain his destiny is told of Michelangelo standing before his completed statue of Moses, striking it, saying 'Speak', as he strove to realise himself in his craft.

It's only when we reach beyond ourselves to attain our full identity that Jesus' words make sense. Jesus tells us to love one another, as he loves us. His love is outgoing. It is not self-centred. It is love for others. It is a chain reaction of love, energising others, serving them, forgiving them as Jesus taught us to, precisely because we live in him, and God is at work in us.

Second Homily

I have been deeply moved by the experience of death: that of four police officers, Lynette Taylor, Kevin King and two new recruits, Glen Humphries and Josh Prestney, doing their duty on 23 April 2020, pulling over Richard Pusey for speeding, and suddenly crushed to death by a refrigerated truck driven by Mohinda Singh Bagwa. Six days later, on 29 April, I received news from the parish of the sudden death of Eliza Lai, who was only 45 years of age. All vibrant people selfless and giving, as distinct from both drivers, and Pusey selfishly and callously concerned for his car and his comfort ahead of human life.

The subsequent grief and anxiety of their families gave me an understanding of the plight of the disciples at their wit's end, knowing that their beloved Master was soon to die and leave them. Jesus told them not to let their hearts be troubled but to trust in him: 'I go to prepare a place for you, but after I have gone, I will return to take you with me.' (14:3). They may have thought that there was a kind of bridge they could go back and forward over and be with Jesus.

There was no bridge, but there was a way to their Father's house and they surely knew the way.

But Thomas said, we don't know the way because we don't know where you are going. Jesus replied, I am the way to the Father, not just a guide or a technique to get there, but I myself in my relationship to my Father am the way. Phillip then asks Jesus, 'Show us the Father and we shall be satisfied.' (14:8). Jesus tells Phillip: 'To see me is to see the Father; the Father and I are one.'

A human example for me was the solemn promise of one of our parishioners, Brian Gleeson, to his wife Shelagh before he died: 'After I am home in the arms of God, I will still be present to you...Whenever you are in need call me, and I will come to you to be your avenue to God.'

The death of Jesus opened a way into the wide embrace of the Father. The resurrection of Jesus, in union with his Father, opened the way for God to make his home in his disciples, not just in heaven but here. 'All those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them and we will come to them and make our home in them' (14:23).

A father asked his son: 'What does Bible mean?'

His son replied: 'B-I-B-L-E means:

Basic

Information

Before

Leaving

Earth.'

The basic information Jesus leaves us at the very moment of betrayal is to love as he loves us, to do what he has done and to be faithful right to the end. Faithful love means struggle as well as sanctuary, not a place of rest but of strength for what lies ahead.

How can we love like Jesus? We realise that we cannot love like Jesus unless we are empowered by the same Spirit that empowered him. Christ's glorification comes first. It is only through Jesus' death, resurrection, and the gift of the Spirit that the disciples and we ourselves are able to emulate the love that Jesus embodied and demonstrated so perfectly.

In the reading from Acts, we see love at work in the early church, not just in harmonious prayer and sharing in common, but in the struggle for equal treatment. In Jerusalem there was the original Jewish Christian community led by the Apostles, but there was also a large group of Christian Jews who came from different areas, and who mainly spoke Greek; they were called Hellenists. It was an issue mainly of language, that in the distribution of food the Hellenist widows were missing out. A meeting was called by the Apostles and seven deacons were chosen by the laying on of hands. It may seem that they were given a lesser role under the Apostles of simply serving out food. But the word deacon is not mentioned after this event, and we know that Stephen and Phillip were actively evangelizing, performing miracles just as the Apostles were doing.

In the second reading, Peter speaks to all baptized Christians: 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people...'

Cardinal Suenens was asked what he considered an important fruit of the Second Vatican

Council. He said it was the reclaiming of the notion of the People of God and the co-responsibility of every member of the Church.

We are all called in our respective vocations to live love and to evangelise wherever we are. We get a great boost from Christ's promise, 'those who believe in me will do the works I do and even greater works'. We especially rejoice in his words: 'I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask for anything in my name, I will do it' (14.12-14).

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 8:5-8, 14-17 1 Pet. 3:15-18

Jn. 14:15-21

We often get a flu injection to ward off more serious infections in winter, and now we get vaccines to counter strains of Covid. Jesus wants to give us an injection of the Holy Spirit who becomes an influence, a defender in us. The Holy Spirit enables us to meet difficulties the way Jesus would; to take on his example of self-sacrificing and generous love.

Jesus' mission was to reveal the Father: 'The one who sees me, sees the Father.' The mission of the Holy Spirit, sent after and because of Jesus' death, is to reveal Jesus, not just to us, but *in* us. Jesus is now interiorised in those who believe in him, who are baptised into his death and resurrection as we are. Jesus is in us, found in countless places, in a myriad of faces. Jesus calls the Holy Spirit *another advocate*; Jesus is the first advocate standing up for us, but when he goes, he gives us another advocate, a true Spirit, the befriending Holy Spirit who, if we receive him will be with us always and in us. We are not orphaned. He is with us.

With the tough budget just delivered, many families are at their wits' end trying to meet debts that don't go down but increase if they are behind in their payments. People talk about the rich Catholic Church, but from my experience the presbyteries are the places where people come for help. Alcoholism, drug abuse, and domestic violence plague many homes, and many young people feel orphaned, alone, and unable to trust. We can feel alone in a struggling marriage; carrying burdens or pain alone which makes us cry out, 'Who knows and who cares?'

But we're not orphans, having to face life alone after the departure of Jesus. When the going gets tough, we are not thrown back on our own resources. I've found many are stressed because they are relying on their own resources. Jesus promises us the Holy Spirit, the advocate, who like a defence lawyer will fight our case and be with us and in us forever. With the Holy Spirit's help we can face the future with a power greater than ourselves. That was important news for the early Christians who heard stories about Jesus, but never knew him. John's passage reassured them that Jesus' power would still help them face trials. The same Jesus' attitude in us makes people ask the reason for our hope.

One condition is to keep Christ's command of love. Maybe there's still room for some soul-searching here. The measure in which we love others will be the measure in which we love Jesus. We have been baptised into the name, into the purposes of Jesus. We are to continue the message and mission of Jesus, by being Jesus, by bringing him to life through our life and witness. The Holy Spirit does not keep difficulties away but helps us to meet them, helps us respond and act as Jesus would. It was persecution that led Philip to flee to Samaria — the Spirit was at work in his mission and ministry. Peter tells how Christians are to meet hardship and to have the reason for their hope ready for those who ask.

As Christ's Body today, we should stand with others who feel orphaned by life's issues. How can we reach out to another person who lives in a pain-filled situation?

Dorothy Pryse was listening to a Christian radio station as she drove to the grocery store early one morning. A person was talking about kindness. Then he said: 'I wonder how many of you are listening to me on your car radio and thinking how you can be kind while driving?' Dorothy began thinking about what he was saying. A few blocks away, she saw a woman waiting in her car to come out of her driveway. Traffic was heavy; Dorothy knew this woman would have a hard time getting out. She slowed down to let her out. The woman smiled and waved at her. When she got to the shop, she saw a parking space. As she started pulling in, another car on the other side started pulling in. Dorothy backed out and found another spot. As they both got out of their cars the driver of the other car said: 'I can't believe what you did. Anyone else would have made me back out.'

Dorothy explained what she had heard on the radio about showing love. The two women began talking. Dorothy discovered the woman had just moved into the area, didn't know anyone, and was looking for a church. 'I invited her to come to my church,' Dorothy said, 'and a strong friendship has blossomed from our chance meeting.'

Re-read John's advice this week. Observe Jesus' commandments, and you'll realise Jesus will defend you. If you feel orphaned, you'll find Jesus with you when you do what he did: pray, read the Scriptures, worship with others, and reach out to faith-filled people for help. You'll also find him close by and reassuring you when you serve and sacrifice for other people as he did. The more you do that, the more you'll build self-confidence that will help you weather tough times. Call on the Holy Spirit.

The Ascension of the Lord

Acts 1:1-11

Eph. 1:17-23

Mt. 28:16-20

A rich but very selfish man died and went to heaven to claim his mansion above. Peter met him in his heaven mobile and proceed to drive him along the spacious avenue of heaven. The man pointed in expectation to a mansion. 'That's mine!' he shouted, but Peter sadly shook his head. He shook his head a few times. Peter drove on and the rich man became worried as they passed narrow streets and out to the bush. Peter suddenly stopped outside a broken-down shack barely holding together and said, 'This is yours!' The man was furious: 'There must be some mistake!' Peter replied: 'There's no mistake. It was the best we could do with what you sent up.'

The point of today's feast of the Ascension is that our life is going somewhere. We have a destination, a destiny unique to each one of us. How we end up depends on how we have used the raw materials of our ordinary, everyday life; how we have responded to daily circumstances to become who we are truly meant to be. Cardinal Newman once reflected: 'God has entrusted a task to us that he has entrusted to no other. We have our mission; we are sent here for a purpose. We may not know it in this life, but we will be told it in the next.'

In Jesus the man, we see how we are to live to get to God. We see a human person who has truly achieved his mission. Jesus is the one who goes before us, like a person on a reconnaissance mission, going ahead, blazing a trail, making it safe for us to follow. In the spiritual life as you try meditation or other spiritual practices (and there are many counterfeits around) you want to know that these practices are safe, not destructive, and will deliver what they promise. You look for a guide, someone in whom you see the effects of spirituality on his or her life. Jesus is that person. Not only does he point the way, he is the way to God. Jesus, trusting in his Father's way for him, gains access for us to God. He pioneered a new way to live — with absolute integrity in himself and in his dealings with others, refusing to compromise with evil in any form, even as it claimed his life.

He is the way to God. He told his disciples he was going to the Father and his way entailed the cross. Jesus challenges us to greatness, to live truly and morally. He not only speaks the truth — his truth is not a theory, but a person, a life lived. His way leads to life in him. Jesus is the true, life-giving way. He doesn't just point but says, 'Come, I'll take you there.' St Therese of Lisieux, dying of TB at the end of her heroic life, put it simply: 'The way to heaven is heaven. The way to heaven is Jesus.'

Jesus us tells us not only to trust God, but to trust him — he has proved his love for us by word and deed. His way leads to God and to our happiness. Not only do we see in Jesus how to live, but we also see in Jesus, God's loving regard for us. Jesus gives us immediate access to God. To see Jesus is to see what God is like.

Philip asked Jesus to show him the Father. Jesus responded by presenting himself as the mirror

of God. God has made himself known in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the body-language of God — he is the face of God, the heart of God, the word of God. His words are God's voice speaking to us; his deeds are God's power flowing through him to us. Jesus is both divine love offered and perfect human response. And he invites us into intimate relationship with his Father. There is room for everyone — in my Father's house there are many mansions. Jesus enables us to enter into the mysterious community life of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

A simple practice: Read the Gospels with an eye on Jesus and see God in action. In the words of Jesus, hear God speaking; in the concerns of Jesus, see God's concerns; in the gestures of Jesus, see the gestures of God. The next step is to make Jesus' concerns, words and gestures your own. Vincent Pallotti tells us how — keep your eyes on Jesus contemplating him.

As the love of Jesus grows in you, your confidence in imitating him in your thinking, speaking, and acting will increase. Do this every day. Jesus will live in you and act through you. Didn't he promise that the one who believes in him will do the works Jesus does and even greater 'because I am going to the Father and whatever you ask in my name, I will do so that the Father will be glorified in the Son' (John 14:12-13).

Second Homily

We experience Christ's death and resurrection, the central mystery of our faith — his obedience to the Father, growing to a greatness in the bursting forth of the Spirit at Pentecost. We are right here at the heart of this mystery.

The Ascension means that the risen Jesus, appearing to his disciples still bearing the scars in his hands, feet and side, has ascended to the Father — in his and our human nature. His wounds plead for us. What that means is that our body with all its scars is not discarded at death. The scars and pains in our body and what caused them, is our self, working out our salvation. Many a mother I've seen with a limp, the result of a difficult delivery. After death, this life is not all there is. There is an after-life. We have a destiny, a destination. Jesus has taken our humanity to the Father. He is the firstborn of many brothers and sisters. He's like the thin edge of the wedge that has gained access to God. Somehow in Christ we have made it to God.

Our life has a purpose, a dignity. Even though Jesus is seen no more, we can have a living relationship with the most wonderful person who ever lived, who was goodness, absolute and total goodness which sought to put no barriers up, available, honest in his every dealing, pure in love, forgiving, no matter the cost, unflinchingly true to his Father.

St Paul had a living relationship with Christ. Still, he could say, 'To God each of us must give an account of our lives,' of what we have done in this life, in our whole-body person (Romans 14:12). Kids are aware of what mum and dad might expect, and it regulates their behaviour somewhat in the face of peer pressure, especially when they get back home and have to face parents.

Jesus, our most loveable, gracious Lord is with us all the time. He shared our life and gave his life for us, to open up a new way of living, a way out of confusion and darkness. He teaches us right from wrong. This living relationship with Jesus is the starting point of morality.

Jesus' Ascension says something about our mission. Christ is physically absent, gone from our view. But what about now? How is Christ seen in his humanity? We make Christ present. Formed by scripture and sacrament, and shaped by the Holy Spirit, in receiving Jesus, we become Jesus, and in turn we make Jesus present. We are to be his witnesses.

I visited a hospital recently and I experienced that wonderful sense from Catholic and Christian people — 'Thank God the priest is here.'

I'm sure doctors receive that trust and expression of relief. I know mothers do in time of hurt. But I believe that that should be the feeling each one of us gets — 'Thank God you're here' — even to hold a hand, make a meal, help in a crisis at work, school or home.

Thank God you Christians and Catholics are here, you bring faith, hope, joy, service — whatever your special gift is, which lets Jesus be glimpsed as he was on the roads of Galilee. It's not just a case of giving a good example, but of consciously being present as witnesses, making Jesus' saving humanity present in this time and place.

One last point. The Ascension demands a profound respect for life, a reverence for the body and that of others, especially mothers and the support mothers need during difficult pregnancies. Pope John Paul II called us to be people of life and love. We are called to show the world a new way of looking at every human life. We are called to welcome and support vulnerable parents and their children, and to care for the sick and disabled.

Do not be afraid to love, to welcome the vulnerable into your heart and your home, to make room for those who are different: for they teach us love and compassion. They teach us to be human. You might say, 'I can't be bothered.' Be bothered to read. Be bothered to act. Look at how many bills have been passed by anti-Christian groups. Soon they will impose their morality on us. 'I'm old, abortion legislation doesn't affect me.' No, but euthanasia will.

Third Homily

'Let us love one another, for love is from God...God is love' comes from John's first letter. It picks up our response to the God who is love, and is the right context for any consideration of abortion. The Church's message about abortion, while considered hard-line and uncompassionate by some, is ultimately about love. But it's not one-sided. It is about love for the unborn child, most certainly. It is also about love for the pregnant woman faced with difficult decisions, for whom the Church offers a range of services and support. And beyond this, the Church offers Christ's healing compassion to women who have had abortions, letting them know that, like all of us, they are not beyond the rich mercy of the God who is love and who 'sent his only Son into the world so that we

might live through him' (1 John 4:9).

But it's the first reading and the Gospel which sheds more light on the theme of Respect Life — namely, the rights of doctors and other health professionals in relation to abortion. The State Government has passed legislation that legalizes abortion. There were many reasons for opposing this legislation — it legalises killing of the unborn; it offered nothing to improve support for woman who are pregnant; it did nothing to help decrease the huge number of abortions, a number which most Australians consider too high. Instead, it makes abortion available effectively on demand up to twenty-four weeks of pregnancy, and readily available with two doctors' opinions from twenty-five weeks right up to birth.

Our focus is on that aspect of the legislation which obliges doctors who have a conscientious objection to abortion to refer women to doctors who have no such objection. Likewise, nurses and doctors could be obliged to participate in abortions in 'emergency' situations, even if their conscience dictates otherwise. The presumption of the legislation is that, if health professionals obey God's command as discerned in their consciences, they will be providing something less than optimal loving care for their patients. Yet Jesus announces that living his commands is the way to love one another: 'I am giving you these commands,' Jesus says, 'so that you may love one another.'

The state legislation is an attack on the consciences of our health professionals. They are being put in a situation where they may need to choose between obeying the law of the land and obeying the law of God they discern in their consciences.

St Peter in the first reading faced a similar choice. We see him visiting Cornelius, a Gentile, a non-Jew. It was against Jewish religious law to associate with Gentiles because they were considered unclean. But God had shown Peter in a vision that he should not consider anyone unclean; in Christ, all were now able to be part of God's people. So Peter broke his previous religious law to follow God's clear command.

Later in the reading, we find that God shows no partiality, has no favourites, but regards equally anyone who 'fears God and does what is right'. Fearing God is not being scared of God. Rather it is about putting God above anything else in our lives, placing God's concerns over any other concern, having absolute respect for God. It is about letting one's conscience be informed by God, and then being true to one's consciences, whatever the law of the land may say.

Vatican II spoke profoundly of the majesty of the human conscience in these terms: 'Deep within their conscience individuals discover a law which they do not make for themselves but which they are bound to obey, whose voice ever summoning them to love and do what is good and avoid what is evil, rings in their heart when necessary, with the command — do this, keep away from that. For inscribed in their hearts by God, human beings have a law whose observance is their dignity and in accordance with which they are to be judged. Conscience is the most intimate centre and sanctuary of the person, in which he or she is alone with God whose voice

echoes within them (G.S.16).'

This legislation seeks to invade that most intimate centre and sanctuary of the human person and to over-ride the voice of God echoing in the depths of our hearts. It is unprecedented in the way in which it tries to force health professionals to be implicated in abortion even if their conscience tells them that it is wrong.

The Church has a long history of saints who have been willing to go to any lengths to follow God's voice echoing in their consciences. Thomas More, Franz Jaegerstaetter, Maximilian Kolbe. They chose to follow their consciences rather than an unjust law. Support our health professionals and their rights to conscience by making known our dissatisfaction with this law and do what we can to support the efforts of various groups, including Catholic hospitals, to challenge this legislation. These are concrete ways of obeying the command to love one another in the name of God who is love.

Feast of Mary, Queen of Apostles

Jdt. 13: 22-26 Acts 1:12-14; 2:1-4 Jn. 19:25-27

Mary is an icon of the Holy Spirit's working in us. She lived her life under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Gabriel tells her: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Most High will overshadow you' (Luke 1:35). It's a spousal theme and recalls the tent or tabernacle in the desert, now realized in Mary in whom the Word becomes flesh (John 1:18).

The Holy Spirit turned Mary's life around, but not without her consent. We see the process in her that has to go on in us; the Holy Spirit has to be ploughed into our flesh, into our emotions, attitudes, and behaviour. As mother, her mission is embodied in her very self, in her Son, Jesus, whom she bears. It was a process of learning to yield to the Spirit and to be courageous, to ponder in silence and to act; to let go and to faithfully follow her Son, led by the Holy Spirit.

This same process of the Holy Spirit working in us was promised to the Apostles (Acts 1:8).

'You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you' — and then our mission will begin — 'You will be my witnesses'. Acts 1:14 describes how they entered into prayer — that hidden time we know little of — until the outpouring of the Spirit. It needed Mary to prepare them for the Spirit, in prayer together, to draw the Spirit down on them.

But how is Mary, Queen of Apostles, more powerful than the Apostles? Her life seemed so ordinary, in the background, hidden. Vincent Pallotti spelled out two key principles: intention and merit. Intention gives meaning to what you do. It defines your identity. To act with the intention of uniting your prayers and actions to the apostolate (to Jesus' mission) makes you an apostle. If you have the intention of relating your life to apostolate in whatever you are doing, then this shapes your identity as an apostle. If you widen your lens to do all for the salvation of others, then you share in Christ's redemptive apostolate.

The intent of Mary's life was inextricably joined with that of her Son, visiting Elizabeth, experiencing life as a refugee, the mother of a political prisoner. Her intention, however, was to offer herself with her Son in his redemptive work, right through to the cross and beyond. 'Mary burning with love, desired to give her life with her Son for the salvation of the human race,' writes Vincent Pallotti. There is no merit without action, yet God looks not for the magnificence of works but for holiness. Mary's holiness was a lived, open receptivity to God's plan of redemption.

Mary, without preaching, not only has the merit common to the Apostles, but is Queen of Apostles — a title with which the Church salutes her. Why? Because with all her power she cooperated in spreading the faith, without preaching but doing what she could in the ordinary circumstances of her life. She did what she had to do, with such perfection that she surpassed the Apostles in merit, so that God who sees the dispositions in the hearts of his creatures has raised her to the dignity of Queen of Apostles.

We have in Mary a great model and intercessor who can pray with us for the coming of the Holy Spirit this Pentecost. She desires that we open ourselves to the mighty power of the Holy Spirit and in our own way, in the circumstances of our lives, join in the redemptive work of her Son.

Pentecost Sunday

Gen. 11:1-9 or Ex. 19:3-8a, 16-20b or Ezek. 37:1-14 or Joel 3:1-5 Rom. 8:22-27 Jn. 7:37-39

Luke is no less astounded than the people who rushed to find out what was happening to the Apostles gathered round Mary in the upper room. Words fail him, so he uses Jewish images. This is the Feast of the Week of Weeks — $7 \times 7 = 49 + 1 = 50$ — Pentecost means fifty. It's the fullness of the gift of the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus after his death and resurrection.

Pentecost is one full day from Easter. The Jews celebrated Pentecost as the Harvest; later as the giving of the Law on Sinai with fire, clouds of smoke and much quaking. Look at the fire on the heads of the Apostles and the women. It's described in Acts — fire coming on this fragile community; speaking tongues that are understood by all people ranging from every part of the known world, countries right around the Mediterranean, Egypt, Iraq, Asia Minor, India, Africa, Italy, to name a few.

The Pentecost is not just the birthday of the Church; it is the birth of being in the Church, of daring to live the life of Christ into which we are born by baptism and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost sweeps up the dead bones of that little Jerusalem community so that it comes alive, stands up and goes forward to the ends of the earth with the good news of the risen Christ. The Holy Spirit takes the group of dispirited followers and fires them with new energy, new enthusiasm and a new authority. The Pentecost is not only an initiation into a new covenant with God. The presence of the Spirit causes us to open our lives to others; to answer the call of Jesus to extend that covenant to our families, our neighbourhoods and civic communities, to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger and the outcast. Not to compartmentalise our lives but to make them one.

Something is in the air that takes this community beyond complacency and despair, something that will keep blowing through every community of believers. The Holy Spirit is not the gift to proud achievers, then or now, but to those who pray, who wait obediently on the promise of the Father, announced by Jesus, and who have discovered the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus in their own frailty and aridity.

We need the fire of Pentecost to take us beyond complacency; beyond the feeling of 'can't be bothered'. We've lost the vision. Pentecost takes us beyond the babble of 'church speak' and closing of ranks for self-protection; the same with the dishonest spiel of politicians, pushing their agenda in the coded language of political subterfuge; the media speaking with hysteria, cheap sensationalism, and costly untruths. We can all so easily rebuild Babel!

The Spirit works in two ways: on a personal level and then spurring us to action on a social level. The flame on the heads of the men and women is light, understanding, enlightenment, conversion. Jesus in the Gospel says, 'When the Spirit comes, sent in my name, he will teach you and remind you of all I have said to you.'

That reminding is a whipping away of the veil over the disciples' minds and wills, leading them to understand all that Jesus taught them. Jerome said, they went from the leaf to the root of comprehension. Jesus' words came on fire within them. Were not our hearts burning as he spoke to us on the way? Augustine called Pentecost the eyes of the Church. Even after three years the disciples still 'didn't get' all that Jesus was trying to tell them. The Spirit takes us beyond superficial enthusiasm to conversion, going beyond the false self to the true self made in God's image. We need to do this personally, but also in small groups that wrestle with issues, pray, grow, and affirm each other.

We need the Holy Spirit to fire us and enthuse us in our own attempts to work at forgiveness, love and understanding, and to make a difference in loving and acting as Jesus did and still does in us.

Second Homily

It's a dangerous prayer we say or sing today: 'Come Holy Spirit, fill us with fire, the fire of your love.' Do we have any idea of the power we invoke? If not, in Annie Dillard's words: 'We're like children in church playing on the floor with their chemistry sets mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It's madness to wear straw or velvet hats. We should be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue flak jackets and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.' Perhaps we ought not to pray this prayer if we don't want our hearts to be changed.

How open is our heart? When the Spirit finds hearts that are open, ever so little, where we truly love the Lord and keep the commandments, she penetrates mind, heart, behaviours, like a searing flame, like a blowtorch. We can sing and praise God, certainly! The Apostles did that up to the fiftieth day; they were in the temple daily, and retold their stories in the upper room, but without the Spirit in them nothing happened — Jerusalem didn't notice them, the hungry and the exploited remained away as they always did.

It was only when the Spirit fell, that they and everything else began to change. They caught fire, divine fire; they went off to heal, to preach, to prophesy and to change the world. This is what they did after having been changed. What about us? Are we living the way the Apostles did before Pentecost? We pray and sing while our conduct is no different from anyone else's — we remain sinful, overly lusty, and insofar as Jesus' plans are concerned, totally reactionary. We praise the Father, we love the Son, but are we really willing to receive the Spirit to change our lives and to purify our apostolic work in that fire? God knows we need life in that Spirit desperately in every aspect of our lives.

The gift of the Spirit is to make possible the transformation of our lives! The Spirit gives a new horizon, a dimension to our lives — to rise above the misdeeds of the body and recognise and respect ourselves and others as sons and daughters of God and live as sons and daughters of God.

For that to happen each of us must make room for the Spirit who wants to dwell in us if only we would yield our own spirit to her.

The greatest charism each has to offer to the work of the Church is the utterly unique shape of our own life, finally matured through suffering, setbacks and personal triumphs and now in complete harmony with the Spirit given at baptism.

What needs to be confirmed at Pentecost is the diversity of spiritualities, not just the Spirit gifts, important though they be to communities, but people who have always been able to reach across the boundaries of denomination, culture or race to join with others in whom they see the same determination to burn through structures of oppression, hurt or hypocrisy in the name of peace, love and justice.

As a child in Scotland I still remember, despite religious misunderstandings between church people, the minister and our parish priest, both small men but great friends, who would walk the streets enjoying each other's company. That worked wonders among the people. The challenge of Pentecost is for persons formed by different ways of spiritual renewal to see one another as truly one in the Spirit, one in the Lord.

When Luke wrote his history of the Church some forty or so years after it had begun, he reminded a church exhausted by its debates, that they had known irrepressible joy together when the Spirit came upon them. A spirit for mission. Outsiders seeing this joy could only respond by ridicule, 'they're drunk' or by a cry from the heart, 'What must we do to change, to get the Spirit we see in you?' Peter's reply, like Jesus' was: 'Reform your lives, be baptised in the name of Jesus that your sins may be forgiven; and then you will receive the Holy Spirit,' and we might add 'with fire'.

In 2006, we celebrated the 400th anniversary of Pedro De Quieros, Portuguese navigator and explorer who in 1606 named Australia, 'The Great Southland of the Holy Spirit' on Pentecost Sunday, 14 May 1606. It remains a challenge for all the Christian churches to win back for Christ this wonderful land and its people. In 2020 they joined with Indigenous Elders for a week of prayer and fasting to overcome the pandemic sweeping our world. It is through prayer and apostolic action that we bear our best witness to Christ.

Third Homily

In relay races at the Olympics, you realise how critically important is the passing of the baton. One mistake and the whole team is out, the hoped-for prize lost. Christ at the Ascension has passed the baton of his mission to us. Are we up to the task? If we're honest we feel inadequate; it takes us a long time to get motivated. Are we ready for the battle of good against evil which begins, wrote Morris West, with a voice raised in the crowd which once heard, proves contagious and the tattered banners are raised once more against the ancient adversary? 'Our life,' wrote Charles Schultz, the author of *Peanuts*, 'is like a ten-speed bicycle; most of us have gears we never

use.'

What does Pentecost mean for you and me today? We don't experience the Spirit as a mighty wind and tongues of fire. I wonder what we would do if it happened. Often the Spirit works in us quietly; but imagine the power if we prayed and witnessed as a loving community. The Spirit comes to tell us, 'Don't die with the music in you, don't die full of unrealised courageous intentions.'

The Spirit awakens faith, and it's faith that gives us the heart to dare something with our lives, even when illness limits our capacity to do great things. The one Spirit comes to each one of us differently to equip us with gifts for ministry, like the rain which adapts itself to the variety of trees and plants to bring them growth according to their capacity. That capacity is a heart open to receive it. But often before that, the Spirit comes quietly and gently through the gift of tears to heal the hurts within us. It comes publicly in the form of the royal commission to make the Church as an institution face its shame and sin, and yet continue its mission of proclaiming Christ but with deep compassion.

Compassion for the young woman at the back of the Church weeping because of a relationship coming apart. Compassion for the con man, covering up his failures by constant binge drinking, who came to his senses nearly two years ago. He knew he would be dead if he continued his destructive lifestyle. Helped by his girlfriend, he joined Alcoholic Anonymous. He had been sober for more than a year, keeping the disciplines of AA, a devotional life, meetings, giving testimonies to others, and especially taking a moral inventory of his life and handing over his life to a higher power. It was at this point that he came to me. He had been struggling by sheer willpower to surrender and climb higher but found the rungs on the ladder falling away under his feet. He had felt the presence of God up to this moment, but now could not trust God. We, too, may have experienced healing, but we can also cling in defensive fashion to supports we can't let go, like the healing of a broken arm but we're afraid to remove the plaster cast.

He had hit rock bottom. I told him that if we cry out to God for help, in the awareness of our sinfulness, God in his Mercy would reach down to lift us up to Himself. Mercy (*miser cordia*) means that God has a heart for our misery. That's the work of the Spirit who shines light on the depths of our being to get us to acknowledge our emptiness without God. Christian spiritual growth is greater than willpower; it is wholly dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit who leads us to Jesus. The will comes in as we persevere in living the Christian life. The Spirit coming could be the growing sense of dissatisfaction with our own ordinariness. We are not happy living on the surface, knowing the potential in us for good has not yet been exercised, and yearning for a life where faith makes demands on us.

The famous Benedictine Bede Griffiths, before his conversion, had returned to the Church from agnosticism and was preparing for the Anglican ministry. He started fasting but was troubled deep inside. He felt an overwhelming need to repent but didn't know what repentance meant. He

started working in the slums around Bettnal Green, in London, but it was getting too much for him. He decided to pray through the night. There was a struggle between this irrational urge to repent and pray and his reason and common sense. He felt he was isolating himself from everyone.

'Something had arisen in the depths of my own nature which my reason was powerless to control. I was called to surrender the citadel of myself.' He prayed through to daybreak, utterly exhausted. As he got up to leave the room a voice said, 'You must go on retreat'. He didn't know what that meant but found that a retreat was being given by the Cowley Fathers. Influenced by the simple yet powerful preaching he faced his proud superiority and went to confession for the first time in his life. Tears of a kind he had never known before poured from his eyes. He saw that he had to surrender the citadel of his own mind, proud and dismissive of others. The mirror that reflected his own image was broken and God brought him to his knees. He was no longer the centre of his life (Bede Griffiths, *The Golden String: An Autobiography*, Templegate Publishers, 1954).

True experience of God leads to the consciousness of sin, of our creaturehood before the Creator. In the Spirit's light I discover my wrinkles in the mirror and the closer I am to the mirror, the more I discover the truth. Letting God see us as we are, is a source of profound peace.

What does Pentecost mean for me and you? Harness the power of the Holy Spirit. Develop a quality prayer life, making time for the Spirit. Repent of sin which is the barrier to the Spirit. Be conscious of the presence and action of the Spirit in your life. Through confession ensure that anything hindering your spiritual growth and effectiveness is removed from your life, and anything that grieves or quenches the Holy Spirit is dealt with, so the Spirit is free to move in your life. Discover your gift, ask God for wisdom, and use your gift for the building up and growth of God's church.

FEASTS OF THE LORD

IN

ORDINARY TIME

Year A

The Most Holy Trinity

Ex. 34:4b-6, 8-9

2 Cor. 13:11-13

Jn. 3:16-18

We are all familiar with the story of St Augustine walking along the seashore, pondering the theology of the Trinity which he was trying to write. He saw a little boy make a hole in the sand and was running back and forth with his little bucket, taking water from the ocean and pouring it into the hole. Augustine asked him what he was doing. The boy said I am going to pour the ocean into this hole. Augustine laughed. 'That's impossible,' he said. 'No more impossible,' said the boy, 'than you trying to get the vast mystery of the Trinity on to paper.'

We all have a hole in the soul that we try to fill with all sorts of things. We are fulfilled for a while, but no matter how many things we acquire, at a deeper level they don't satisfy. 'Everybody's got a hungry heart,' sings Bruce Springsteen. 'Everybody wants a place to rest...wants to have a home...nobody likes to be alone.'

Gerald May, the well-known psychologist, wrote: 'After twenty years of listening to the yearnings of people's hearts, I am convinced that all human beings have an inborn desire for God. It's a longing for love, to be loved and to move closer to the source of love. This yearning is the essence of the human spirit; it is the origin of our highest hopes and most noble dreams.'

Only the Trinity can fill the vast heart of man or woman. We have a capacity for the infinite, and the actualization of that capacity in a response to God makes us more deeply ourselves. That infinite is God, a triune relational God. The teaching of three persons in one God implies that relationships are found at the level of ultimate reality. The persons of the Trinity, sharing one nature, are distinct solely by their relationship to one another as Father, Son and Spirit, and to us as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.

An unbelieving father asked his son who had just come home from Sunday School: 'What did you learn today?' The boy answered: 'I learned there are three persons in God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — and they are all equal.'

The father retorted: 'That's ridiculous! I am your father; you are my son. We are not equal. I existed a long time before you.' To this came the answer: 'Oh no, you didn't; you did not begin to be a father until I began to be a son.' Begetting is relational as any parent knows. The relationship between a father and son on earth is contemporaneous, but the relationship between God the Father and God the Son is eternal (Bishop Fulton Sheen).

If God has created the universe, and if we are made in the image of such a relational triune God, then relationships are constitutive of transcendent reality. Even scientists are seeing the inter-relating web of life from the atom to the universe and have noted how atoms change their behaviour when observed.

The primary focus of the Jewish people, in the first reading, was God experienced more in God's

word and mighty deeds, a God of tenderness and compassion, rich in kindness and faithfulness. For Christians the primary focus is God, not so much in the word, but in a person who revealed God's love by his life, death and resurrection, and in whom we have come to believe. The Father took the initiative; God loved the world so much that he gave his beloved Son, not to condemn the world, but in Christ to reconcile the world to himself. In Jesus not only do we meet God, but in Jesus God meets us in infinite unselfish love. The Spirit is that bond of love between Father and Son whom we meet in day-to-day existence.

Let me tell you a story about the experience of being left out: 'Fernando Silva ran the children's hospital in Managua. On Christmas Eve, he worked late into the night. Firecrackers were exploding and fireworks lit up the sky when Fernando decided it was time to leave. They were expecting him home to celebrate the holiday. He took one last look around, checking to see that everything was in order, when he heard soft footsteps behind him. He turned to find one of the sick children walking after him. In the half-light he recognized the lonely, doomed child. Fernando recognized that face lined with death and those eyes asking for forgiveness, or perhaps permission. Fernando walked over to him, and the boy gave him his hand. 'Tell someone...' the child whispered, 'tell someone I'm here.' (Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, quoted in the *St V. de P. National Annual Report 2008*)

That whisper is an existential cry to belong, for someone to hear me and to forgive the guilt that it's my fault that I am left out of the party. Does that whisper, 'Tell someone I'm here' echo in my own heart or in the heart of another? Christ heard that whisper as he hung on the cross in his endeavour to bring us into the heart of God. God wants to bring us into the community of the Trinity through our human community.

Second Homily

In trying to describe the Trinity as family, we often start from our own human experience of family and apply it to God, God is *like* a family. But God *is* family, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God is family to the ultimate degree. One God three persons, not three gods but one God in a Trinity of persons; a close intimate union of life and love where each is responsive to the other in love and find their identity in the love relationships between them. This is life in the Trinity, even before we learn from the revelation of God in his action outwards as the Father creating, the Son redeeming or the Spirit sanctifying.

If God is family, one father in our group began to realise what the words of John 3:16 meant, 'For God loved the world so much that he gave his only begotten Son...sent not to condemn the world but so that through him the world might be saved.' The word 'gave' meant the Father sacrificed his Son for us, so that we might not be lost. It was a word that touched the tenderness and compassion in this father's heart if he had to send his own son to die for us, and it let him see the tremendous love of the Trinity.

Leonard Foley, the Franciscan scripture scholar, said: 'Let's be clear on one very important fact: The life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus was the fruit of God's love. Jesus was not *punished* by his Father in place of sinful humanity; he did not have to *appease* an angry Father or pay for our reunion with God (Jesus did not have to pay the price). There was no turning up of the 'pain dial' for Jesus on the cross until the Father was *satisfied*. That is not only un-divine. It is sadism.' What kind of a Father is that? But if done for love of us, it gives us an inkling of the Father's love for us.

We have human examples of God's love in the Scriptures, such as Abraham asked to offer his son Isaac to God, especially at that moment when Isaac carrying the wood asked, 'Father where is the lamb for the sacrifice?' The word 'Father' tore at Abraham's heart. God spared Abraham's son and a ram was found caught in the briars, to be offered instead. But God did not spare his own Son, St Paul writes, but gave him up for us all (Romans 8:32).

Or David's son, Absalom, who rebelled against his father and sent David fleeing for his life. When the news of Absalom's death reached David, the cries of his weeping, 'Absalom, Absalom, would that I had died in your stead' could be heard round the citadel. Victory was turned into mourning. David's army stole into the city that day as men steal in when they are ashamed when they flee from battle. (2 Sam. 18:33-19:3)

When you turn to the Son and try to grasp the mind of Christ and his total trust in his Father, someone disgruntled with life, sneeringly said, 'God loved the world so much that he gave his Son, and asked, How much?' Jesus opened wide his arms on the cross and said, 'This much.' Jesus could give no more — he underwent the most horrific death to undo the mess of our lives and he did it through love. As he breathed out his last breath, he breathed the Holy Spirit on the Church, on the world, to those willing to receive it. All of this was done to reveal to us the divine love-life of God, all three involved in the rescue mission to save us.

There was an interesting story in the *Far East Magazine* (Joseph Joyce, 10 June 2014), about a Muslim lady from a noble family, Bilquis Sheikh. She wasn't religious but God began to talk to her in her dreams. Once she had a dream of John the Baptist and she asked him to lead her to Jesus. Another time her grandson got an earache, and she took him to a Christian hospital. She had to stay the night. Later, the doctor in charge of the hospital, a Catholic nun, dropped by to see how she was. She saw the bible that Bilquis had, and asked why she a Muslim should be reading the Holy Book of the Christians? Bilquis told of her search for God. The nun replied: 'Why don't you pray to the God you are searching for? Ask him to show you his way. Talk to him as if he were your friend...talk to him as if he were your father.' Bilquis had a loving relationship with her father and so for her this was a wonderful suggestion.

What was interesting was that God as Father was a new concept she had discovered, but soon she found herself filled with confidence and love. From then on, she lived and moved in the

presence of God, her Father. Whenever she had a decision or a choice to make, she let the sense of God's glory guide her. If she felt God was there, she could go ahead, but if his glory faded, she knew she was not on the right path. Despite opposition she became a Christian. From no knowledge of God, she grew into a loving relationship with God who revealed himself to her through dreams.

Third Homily

Saying the Trinity is a mystery doesn't excuse us from trying to understand it. A mystery is not something we grasp with our mind so much as a reality that embraces us as we believe and enter into it, like a lift which we enter that can take us to the heights or the depths of the mystery.

A child can relate to God as Father, to Jesus as Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Even people who are dying, barely struggling into consciousness, understand the prayer inviting them to go home to God, 'Go forth, Christian soul, from this world in the name of God the Father who created you, in the name of Jesus Christ, Son of the living God who suffered for you, in the name of the Holy Spirit who was poured out upon you, go forth, faithful Christian.'

In the New Testament we came to know about the Trinity from God's action outward in the care of the whole world as Creator, Saviour and Sanctifier. We call it the economy of salvation. God, the wholly other, in his loving concern for us, takes the initiative to send Jesus (God with us) whom Jesus calls Abba, Father. 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved' (John 3:16-17).

Belief in God's love unfolds from the Father as the source of mission. God is active in Jesus for the world. It's not so much our doing. God loved us first (1 John 4:19). God in Christ reconciled the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:18). In Jesus not only do we meet God, but in Jesus, God meets us in infinite, unselfish love. The Spirit is that bond of love between Father and Son whom we meet in our day-to-day existence. The total unselfish love of God made visible in Jesus prompts others through the Holy Spirit to give of themselves for others, as nurses and doctors have done throughout the Covid pandemic.

What concerned Augustine wasn't only the action of the Trinity outwards, but also the relationship of the Trinity in itself, such as that spoken of the Son in the Creed: 'Begotten, not made, one in being, equal to the Father.'

An unbelieving father asked his son what he had learnt at Sunday school. The boy replied: 'I learnt there are three persons in God — Father, Son and Spirit — and they are all equal.'

'That's ridiculous!' the father said. 'I am your father; you are my son. We are not equal. I existed a long time before you.'

To this came the answer: 'Oh no, you didn't! You didn't begin to be a father until I began to be a son.'

Begetting is relational, as every parent knows. The relationship between a father and a son on earth is contemporaneous; but the relationship of God the Father and God the Son is eternal (Bishop Fulton Sheen).

In trying to explain the Trinity in itself, Augustine used the three-fold analogy of the human mind, intellect and will, and said, we can conceive ideas that are distinct from us, held in our mind. When spoken they go forth from us as word or written word. The will is an appetite for love which the mind conceives. The Father contemplating his image, his Son, his Word, can say in the ecstasy of the first real paternity: 'You are my Son, this day, the endless day of eternity, I have begotten you' (Acts 13:33). And the mutual love that binds them together is the Holy Spirit who is present with the Father and the Word in creation, in Christ's sacrifice to save us, and in the Spirit's continual sanctifying presence in the world, leading us to courageous faith and witness.

Just a comment about the word 'consubstantial' that we say in the Creed, 'of one substance with the Father'; or as we used to say, 'one in being with'. The word comes from the Greek *homoousios* (one nature) coined by Athanasius to counter the heresy of Arius, an Alexandrian priest who taught that Jesus was not God, not of the same substance as God but only the highest of created beings, a middle power, a demi-urge between humanity and God. It wiped out the incarnation, God's enfleshment in Christ and his action to save us. It denies that the Son is of one essence, nature or substance with God; he is not consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father, and therefore not like him, or equal in dignity, or co-eternal, or within the sphere of the deity. The heresy of Arianism was denounced by the Council of Nicea in 325.

The Body and Blood of Christ

Deut. 8:2-3, 14b-16a 1 Cor. 10:16-17 Jn. 6:51-58

In the Gospel, Jesus offers his disciples the greatest proof of his love. He invites them to eat his flesh and drink his blood; it seems to them that he is asking them to eat him alive. This is not Jesus' meaning; in giving himself he wants to be taken in and received totally — body and blood, his whole person taken in his brokenness. He cannot deny what he stands for and what his gift demands of them.

The Council of Trent spoke of the Eucharist as an unbloody sacrifice. You don't often see the figure of Jesus on the cross in Protestant churches. Is the Eucharist as sacrifice too confronting? How do we understand what Jesus is saying? We need to see the Eucharist against the background of the Passover meal which celebrates the national feast of liberation of the Israelites from slavery then in Egypt, but now from anything that seeks to enslave them. Passover celebrates the Lord's words to sacrifice the lamb and splash its blood on the door posts and lintel to protect the Israelites from the destroying angel who took all Egypt's first-born males, human and animal. This event opened the gates for the Israelites to flee to freedom. In eating the flesh of the lamb they were to stand ready, loins girt, staff in hand, ready to run.

The Eucharist celebrates for us the night when Jesus wanted to give his disciples the greatest proof of his love and took bread and broke it, and said, 'This is my Body broken for you to set you free from the tyranny of sin. This is the new covenant in my Blood poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sin. Do this in memory of me.'

The disciples did not register the full meaning of Jesus' words until the terrible reality of Good Friday struck them with a shattering blow; they could only be restored by the resurrection of Jesus. For the Jew even today, Passover is happening when they celebrate the meal and retell the story against the background of their present history. When the priest says the words of consecration, Jesus' death and resurrection is happening for us in our present situation. But how does it happen? We say that sacraments are signs that not only point to something, but which make it happen. How?

The church has never said that the Eucharistic bread and wine are only symbols, nor has it watered down the words of Jesus: 'This is my Body, This is my Blood.' Using the analogy of a mobile phone sending a message by means of a satellite that triggers a device far away, the priest at the altar says the words of Jesus; the intention of Jesus in heaven is always to offer himself, (ever before the Father interceding for us); and the Holy Spirit is invoked over the gifts of bread and wine as the priest prays. The Second Eucharistic Prayer says, 'Make holy these gifts by sending down your Spirit upon them, so that they may become for us the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Then the priest prays the words of Jesus, 'At the time he was betrayed, he took bread saying, Take this all of you and eat of it, This is my Body...This is the chalice of my Blood.'

The bread and wine may look and taste the same, but now they have been transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. The Church calls it trans-substantiation — the deepest reality has passed into a new reality. So, we have the intention of Jesus, the invoking of the Holy Spirit and the words of Jesus said by the priest that makes happen the unbloody sacrifice of Jesus on the altar.

But this isn't all. The Body and Blood of Jesus is to be taken in by us. Again, the Holy Spirit is invoked over us, 'Humbly we pray that, partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ we may be gathered into one by the Holy Spirit,' so that we do in memory of Jesus what he has done for us.

Communion is the time to embrace the Father's will, (we say the Our Father) a time to be at peace with one another, and then approaching the Eucharistic ministers to receive Jesus broken for us (the Lamb of God) we enthrone Jesus as Lord in our hearts as we make of our hands a throne to receive him and then we eat and drink in faith. It is a sacramental meal in which Jesus is truly received and who now wants to act in us for others.

Second Homily

This feast of the Body and Blood of Christ situates us between the two poles of creation and humanity. Adam's sin was not only personal, but cosmic. The earth rebelled, with briars and thorns that had to be subdued by the sweat of his brow. Eve brought life in the pain of childbirth. Christ's death was personal and cosmic, leading to a new creation in the Resurrection. In Romans 8:22 Paul writes, 'The whole of creation is groaning in one great act of giving birth, not only the earth but all of us...' all of humanity. When we say the 'Body and Blood of Christ' we connect our lives with creation, with God's loving, ongoing fashioning of all things.

The manna mentioned throughout the readings was a communal meal provided by God with thanks, but the Jews had to collect it. There could be no hoarding or panic buying, there was only enough for the day in dependence on God. The early Christians spoke of Eucharist in ecological terms — grain gathered from the four corners of the earth, from hills and valleys, becomes the Bread of the Eucharist who is Christ, that we in turn can become the pure bread of Christ for our brothers and sisters.

When we say the 'Body and Blood of Christ' we are inserted into the mystery of the Incarnation, the action of God saving all peoples, accomplished through the death and resurrection of Christ. Every time we celebrate the Eucharist we are entering into Jesus' experience of death and its meaning for him and for us, his sacrifice which reveals the Father's liberating love. In the Eucharist, Christ is really present.

But his being there only makes sense in the larger context of *what* he is there for. Jesus is not there as a passive object to be looked at and admired. Jesus comes to be with us in the closest possible way so that he can enlist our help. We are to become what we receive so that Christ can come to our world. Our receiving the Body given for us and the Blood poured out for us must lead

to our giving of ourselves for others. The whole purpose of what Jesus came to do and give his life for, is his Father's reign, revealed in his teaching and healing, and feeding the crowds. Mother Teresa said that Christ comes to us under two forms, bread and the poor.

At the start of chapter 6 of John's Gospel, when the disciples wanted to send the people away to go and buy food for themselves, Jesus said, 'No, you feed them yourselves.' Jesus saw the need of the people, the hunger in their hearts and lives. At the end of chapter 6, Christ, the bread from heaven, total gift from God, does not back off from his offer, even as he is rejected. He is really here, himself, flesh and blood. Here is Jesus in the form of bread and wine. He wants us to take him in, become like him, live in him that he might live in us.

During the World War II in the mountain village of Le Chambon, south-west France, when Jews were fleeing the Nazi terror, this village of Huguenots led by their pastor Andre Trocme made their village 'a place of refuge'. They did not send refugees away but took them into their homes, shared what food they had, gave them clothes, forged papers for them to escape. They trusted in God that they would have enough, and they saved four thousand Jews. At the same time in Europe, other decent and kindly folk seeing the plight of the Jews, said in effect, 'It is not our problem. Send them away! They can go to farms and villages elsewhere' (William J Bausch, *The Word in and out of Season*, Twenty Third Publications, Bayard, Mystic, CT, 2000, p 128-9).

Jesus' service of people and transformation of creation has to be carried on by us. Gathering at Eucharist we must include vulnerable people, not send them away. To understand God's care of the universe and humanity, Jesus gives us five Eucharistic words: receive, give thanks, break, and share. These words give us a spirituality for living:

Receive: life, love, food, everything comes to us as a gift. We, in well-off countries, use up materials as if it is our right with no thought for others, and with no gratitude for these gifts. The real sin of humanity is its non-eucharistic life in a non-eucharistic world.

Give thanks: Eucharist means to give thanks, and thanks is often lacking.

Break: When Jesus links the idea of breaking to the Eucharist, he is referring to individualism, pride, self-serving ambition; all the things that prevent us from letting go of ourselves so as to truly be in communion with others. What is wrong with our society can be explained by the group photo. When we look at a group photo, we always look first to see how we turned out and only afterward whether it is a good picture of the group. Breaking the Eucharistic bread has a whole lot to do with looking first how the group turned out.

Sharing: It's from the attitudes of receiving, giving thanks, and being broken open that sharing follows. A convert said: 'I became a Catholic because of the Eucharist. I don't understand it, but I always feel its reality and power. Nothing is more precious to me.'

In the Eucharist we relive the mystery of Jesus' gift of his life for us. The Eucharist gives us the power to care for the earth, and for others. Does the Eucharist give you that power?

Third Homily

Andrew Chan, leader of the Bali Nine, faced being shot by a firing squad after three unsuccessful pleas for clemency. Becoming a Christian was keeping him strong. But what caused him grief was the effect of his life on his parents, and his inability to speak about it to them. 'It's like stabbing your mother and father in the heart,' he said in an interview.

Many of you here are facing death, either physically or emotionally. We need some ritual to face death and to let go. A meal when the family occasionally sit around the table, is more than eating. If prepared well and done with some leisure rather than the haste we all experience, this simple ritual can take us deeper, give us a sense of togetherness and of our own identity as part of the family.

It was at a meal, the Passover, which Jesus transformed, that he revealed the very core of himself through the death that was facing him. Would he remain true to what the Father was asking of him, to fulfil his task and be the Saviour of us all? This was his loving gift to us, just like the washing of his disciples' feet, held in memory that made this moment present again and again to countless generations.

I often wonder what was in the heart of Jesus at that final meal when he took bread and wine to become his total self, Body and Blood, and gave it to us before he suffered. So simple a gift, rich in meaning and given to us in love in the face of betrayal, incomprehension and hateful opposition.

Bread broken and given. We throw away something broken as useless. But this bread must be broken in order to be shared; broken to bring us to a new freedom, as we let go and let his life-giving bread free us. When we gather around the table, we face his death and our own. Yet Christ has died once and for all. He is risen and is with the Father.

When we consecrate the bread and wine, Christ is present sacramentally, in his total self-gift, his sacrifice, in the form of a meal that unites us and touches the core of our own dying and rising. He is here so that we can offer ourselves with him to the Father.

As Christians took the bread-become the Body of Christ and the wine become the Covenant in his Blood poured out and in which he stands, they knew that they must be broken and shared for others. When I take the bread in my hands and say those transforming words, 'This is my Body given for you,' my encounter with Christ confronts me, my whole life, my part in this society; how am I living my life for others, in spite of my past, my failings.

However, it is not just a 'Jesus and me' moment. When I act (as priest) in the person of Christ, Head and Shepherd, Christ comes not for me but for my people for whom I am servant. When I take the cup and pray, 'This is the cup of my Blood poured out for all,' Jesus stands in the Blood of the Covenant, in his own blood poured out in expiation for me and for all. Look at Jesus in John's Gospel — there is no backing down, despite the disapproval. This is not empty symbolism — Jesus

is present to me, challenging me to be present to him.

In eating and drinking I want to participate in Christ's dying and rising. The Eucharist is not meant to remain on the altar, but to be taken in worthily, to let Jesus change me into himself, so that he can come into the world of my relationships and concerns.

Fr Andrew Hamilton baptised a refugee in detention who was being sent back to his obvious death. Yousef wanted to be baptised so that he could face death that awaited him. The ritual, the sacramental presence of Christ, strengthened him. Fr Andrew was challenged and troubled by Yousef's courage. On one hand he brought him into the Christian community; on the other hand, Andrew was part of an Australian community that was sending Yousef to his death with little compassion. The sacraments are not empty ritual. They blaze forth for those with eyes to see. Such was the Eucharist for the early Christians and for those suffering today. The Eucharist was to take them and us through death into life.

We can isolate the consecration from the rest of the Mass. Jesus is present in four ways:

in the community gathered around him

in the Word proclaimed

in the priest and in the other ministers

in the Eucharist.

The Mass is a whole. We need to gather and hear the Word, in order that we can fully participate in the offering of Christ to the Father and ourselves with him. How can people connect with the offering when they have only heard half of the readings, or have not opened themselves in preparation and solidarity with everyone in prayer?

Fourth Homily

What do I think of when celebrating each day the reality of this Feast, the Body and Blood of Christ? At consecration when I take the bread in my hands and say those transforming words, 'This is my Body given for you', I am fully aware that this is my body touching Jesus' Body; intimately aware of my whole life, how I am living it for others, in spite of my past, my failings.

He comes not for me but for my people for whom I am in service. And yet he comes to me, places his life in my hands. When I take the cup and pray, 'This is the cup of my Blood poured out for all', am I poured out for others as Jesus is for me? This is not symbolism but Jesus really present to me, challenging me to be present to him. I can only tell him, I believe, and try to penetrate this mystery, speaking in tongues in the Spirit in order to respond in ways beyond my understanding.

What was in the heart of Jesus on the night of that Last Supper when he took bread and wine to become his total self before he suffered? So simple a gift, rich in meaning and given to us in love

in the face of danger, betrayal, incomprehension, and hateful opposition.

Jesus, in John's Gospel, is offering his total self. He does not back down in the face of the listeners' disbelief. In fact, he asks his disciples if they also want to go away, after the crowds move away from Jesus. Even if all refuse, Jesus will still be true to himself, to be living bread for the life of the world. The Eucharist is the sacrifice of Jesus for us.

My ordination chalice is very precious. Mum and dad paid for it, I designed it. But they did something else, something special — mum gave her wedding ring and dad a gold medallion he had won in a top US soccer team — to be the gold on the outside and inside of the chalice. It wasn't just my chalice. Every time I offer Mass, mum and dad's sacrifice and love is mingled with Jesus' sacrifice and love. But not only mum and dad's — when I preside at Mass, all of us are taken by Christ into community and deeper communion. At each Mass we touch the Body of Christ and Christ touches us in our growing, loving, reaching out.

When together we join with the priest in 'This my Body, this is My Blood', we bring ourselves and our relationships into this moment. I know when I touch and hold the Body of Christ and say, 'This My Body', I face my own issues: my body, health, worry, sexuality and my relationship with the others in my life who make up the Body of Christ for me. It's a moment of truth, of soul searching, of asking for healing, for a change in me and in others, of asking forgiveness for myself and others in the different circumstances of my life.

A group of pilgrims were leaving Mass in a great cathedral. They had received the Body of Christ, had shared communion. As they went out, talking to one another, quite excited, they didn't notice a blind man feeling his way down the stairs with his cane. He didn't see them but heard their excited conversation. They didn't see him but, in their rush to get on the bus, one of them stood on the blind man's cane. They went on their way leaving the blind man on the steps trying to straighten his cane, the only way he could manoeuvre the flight down. Were they in communion? Were they truly the Body of Christ? The Eucharist is meant to make us a community, the living Body of Christ, not only at Mass but in the living of it outwards.

A young Italian woman was dying. She asked the priest to come and anoint her, pray for her, and prepare her for death. They talked about lots of things and about her funeral. Then she made an unusual request — Could she be buried with a fork in her hand? The priest asked, Why? She explained: 'When I was younger, after the main course, mum would call out, "Hang on to your fork"; I grew excited knowing that something delicious and wonderful was still to come. At my death, I know it's not the end. When people file past my open casket I want them to ask, "Why the fork?" Could you tell them it's because the best is yet to come!'

When you come to the table at Communion to share in the supper of the Lord, 'Hang on to your fork', something wonderful is still to come. When I die it won't be with my chalice, that belongs to you, the Body of Christ.

Feast of the Sacred Heart

Deut. 7:6-11

Jn. 4:7-16

Mt. 11:25-30

The heart of Jesus resonates with all the yearnings of the human heart. In the heart of God all the loves of the world are contained there. But the reality of the Sacred Heart is so much more. We are talking about divine love in a human heart. In the mystery of the Sacred Heart, we are talking about the heart of God who wanted to be so intimately related to us that he came in Jesus to divinize our human hearts, to make our hearts like his.

The heart of Christianity is Christ's heart who took all the hurts of our unloving into his life through death to resurrection to set our hearts aright. This heart where divested divinity and human vulnerability (not sin) meet has now become divinized. The yearnings for authentic self-realisation; to love and be loved in all its depth is no longer just human potential but actuality in Jesus. The human heart of Jesus (which means the loving totality of the man Jesus — one in person with the Son of God) pulsating with love for the Father and for us, is the source of our divinization.

The Covid pandemic which has caused many millions of deaths has caused many to cry out to really live. Jesus responds with certainty, because he has achieved it for us: 'Behold this heart which has loved you so much...Come to me all who labour and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest, learn from me.' His way is so direct, yet we easily divert from it.

God in Jesus tells us: I have plans for you, the plans of my heart to a thousand generations. Are we willing to spend time with him, to listen and learn from him? His love is to be brought to perfection in us. Once we respond, the battle begins — it's so easy to be mediocre, better to remain asleep, not to know we have the key to the kingdom, that the treasure is in our hand, but we never took time to look at it. If I go to confession every few months or so, I don't feel any relief. But if I go week after week, then I see my mediocrity and the struggle is on. The tennis player at the top of his seeding knows when his performance is off.

God can never give up on us. He holds the memory of us in his heart. God showed what love is by sending his Son, who gave his life for us so that we could live. Real love is not our love for God, but God's love for us. God's love makes us loveable. When we don't feel good about ourselves, let God's love in. Instead of pulling yourself down, say, 'God loved me first, I am loveable.' Then go and help other people, because of that love.

Love, especially God's love, is an energising force, but we're afraid of love. Love is an assimilating force — couples look alike over time. Jesus doesn't just want to forgive us, he wants to energise us, make us like him, divinized, so that he can work through us — our eyes, hands, feet, words.

St Margaret Mary who told us about the heart of Jesus was an apostle of God's love. It was a time when Jansenism was rife in the Church of France, Ireland and around the world. It took

Augustine's phrase, we are a *massa damnata*, a doomed race that could only be saved by a perfect act of love. It held that God would never forgive us if we did wrong, this was a harsh God whom people feared, and people in authority judged each other harshly.

When Margaret Mary opened herself to God's love, she wasn't promised a rose garden. From the ages of eleven to fifteen she was bed-ridden with rheumatic fever. When her father died, relatives took over the house, and she and her mother were treated like servants. She fought to join the Visitation Order at Paray Le Monial. On 27 December 1673, after two-and-a-half years of prayer and service to the sick, Jesus revealed his Sacred Heart to her. The persecution started in the convent when Jesus asked her to tell the sisters that they were not living the life Jesus wanted. With trepidation she got the courage to tell them: For who gave her, working in the kitchen or caring for the sick, the right to tell them?

The Lord asked her to keep nine Fridays, going to Mass and Communion the first Friday of every month and to keep one hour of prayer every Thursday night with Jesus suffering in Gethsemane. Fr Claude de la Colombiere came to the convent as confessor and was convinced of the genuineness of Margaret Mary's revelations. He challenged the sisters who eventually took as their mission to spread the devotion to the Sacred Heart. Near the end of her life, Margaret Mary said she was like a broom which the Lord had used and put behind the door when he was finished.

Are we willing to learn the plans of the Heart of Jesus for our life; to make time to be with him, so that in his good time he can use us? He wants people who are humble of heart, teachable, whose ego doesn't get in the way. Then love can grow in us through looking, listening, serving, in very simple ways.

SUNDAYS IN ORDINARY TIME

Year A

Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deut. 11:18, 26-28, 32

Rom. 3:21-25, 28

Mt 7:21-27

An American naval officer longed for the day when he could command his own ship. His hope was realized: a great destroyer was commissioned, and he was named its captain. After great celebrations he took it out on its maiden voyage. Everything was going like a dream until the third night brought a fierce storm. The great destroyer was lashed by gale force winds, but the captain was able to maintain his course. What disturbed him was not the storm but a light that seemed to be converging on the bow of his destroyer. He ordered the signalman: 'Send out a signal and have that ship alter its course 20 degrees to the south.'

The message came back, 'You alter your course 20 degrees to the north'. Disturbed by the message the captain told the signalman to send this message, 'This is Captain Cunningham and I order you to alter your course 20 degrees to the south.' The reply came back, 'This is Third Class Seaman Jones, you alter your course 20 degrees to the north.' Furious, the captain sent another signal, 'You had better alter your course. I am a destroyer.' The message came back, 'You had better alter your course. I am a lighthouse.'

The readings today are about making the right choices, not acting out of ego, otherwise we are sunk. The Book of Deuteronomy sets two choices for our lives: a blessing or a curse. A blessing if we keep the Torah. Some Jews took literally the words of Deuteronomy: 'Fasten God's word on your hand and on your forehead.' They made little leather pouches containing the word of God, called phylacteries, and tied them with leather thongs on arm and forehead touching them as they went out and returned, always having the word of God before them.

A man was arrested in Russia for being a Christian. He knew he would be sent to labour camp. They searched him and found a ball of paper in his mouth. The ball was from pages of Matthew's sermon on the Mount. The man knew he could survive if he could read and be strengthened by Christ's words. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew presents us with a series of contrasts regarding the decision for or against God; the two ways — the narrow door and the wide path which attracts the crowd; true and false prophets who lead people astray, known by their fruits. This leads Matthew to focus on the relationship between word and action.

There have been charismatic leaders like Jim Jones of Jonestown or David Garesh of Wacko, Texas, who may have started off well but who led their people to self-destruction.

Matthew focuses on the leadership within the Church, those who pray 'Lord, Lord,' who have gifts of prophecy, who cast out demons and work miracles, yet at the end of their lives receive the terrible judgment from Jesus: 'I do not know you; away from me, you evil men.'

This is quite disturbing. In the second reading Paul writes that we can't presume we are saved because we are a Jew or a Catholic. It is not enough to read the Law or the Scriptures; we have to

imitate the obedience of Jesus. We have all sinned. We are all in need of being acquitted, made right with God, by the sacrifice of atonement that Christ won for us by his death. Paul has in mind the Jewish Day of Atonement when once a year the high priest representing God, sprinkled the Holy of Holies with the Blood of the sacrificed animal and then the people, wiping away their sins. We are made righteous, not by our faith in Christ, but by Christ's faithful obedience to his Father.

This image of Jesus sacrificing himself for us sinners to make us righteous seems to contradict the image of Jesus before us. Here he is not all love and mercy but one to whom we are accountable, who comes to judge us at the end of our lives. Jesus not only wants to acquit us of sin, but to reinstate us to our divine sonship and daughtership. He expressed it in the story of the prodigal son.

We know from experience that a really good, living Catholic who has rock-like stability causes us to judge ourselves and challenges us to be better. Judgment and grace are both dimensions of God's movement towards us. Jesus claims us for a life of obedience and relentlessly will not let us presume on divine generosity: wanting acceptance without changing; forgiveness without repentance, and grace without discipleship. The touchstone of real discipleship for Jesus is whether we have done the will of his Father. Our sure foundation is the Word of Jesus that we hear and take into ourselves and act on. Otherwise, we're building on a shaky foundation. What are the foundations — the basic beliefs, values and habits — that you are building in your life?

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Hos 6:3-6

Rom 4:18-25

Mt 9:9-13

We hear the story so often it goes over our heads. It's a story of exclusion and inclusion. Do we understand what Jesus did and asks us to do? Tax collectors were social outcasts; they collected Roman taxes backed up by soldiers, took their cut and were shunned by decent, honest people; they were banned from synagogue services. They were excluded, hated sinners. The Pharisees operated from a principle of exclusion — exclusion safeguards identity; the boundaries let us feel we belong. But it also sets us above and out of the reach of others who might confuse and corrupt us.

What did Jesus do? His principle was inclusion. He called Matthew to be one of his twelve apostles. I discovered in Rome a church dedicated to St Louis of France. Inside there is a painting by Caravaggio, titled *The calling of Matthew*. What struck me was the gesture of Jesus in calling Matthew. He points at Matthew, but the gesture of finger and hand is that of Michelangelo's creation of Adam. It was a sheer moment of grace. The transformation that Jesus brought about in Matthew is a new creation.

Matthew was lifted beyond his sinful state, but not out of it. It takes a great deal for a person to leave the security of his job, whatever it is. But Matthew, called by Jesus, is now associated with Jesus in a way that enabled him to call his former associates to come and see the one who changed his life. And what better way than that of Jesus, celebrating together at a hearty meal.

What did Jesus do? Perhaps a modern example will help. Redfern in Sydney has the biggest Aboriginal community in Australia. Fr Ted Kennedy, who died in 2005, arrived in the parish of St Joseph, Redfern, in 1971. He saw the poverty and the issues that were happening there and knew he had to do something. A hundred Aborigines regularly crammed into his presbytery, the underprivileged, the drunks and druggies, people he loved and who loved him. He never called the police once. Tom Stephens who worked with him said Aboriginal people moved from being absolutely peripheral to the view of what it was to be an Australian.

Jesus lived this way — the principle of inclusion. If there are few boundaries, you might not stand for anything and find yourself compromised. It calls for strength of character. What scandalized the Pharisees was Jesus eating not just with one tax collector but with a whole crowd of them. Self-righteous Pharisees were indignant that he would keep company with known sinners.

Jesus not only defends his association with them, but he also proclaims that his very mission is to sinners rather than the righteous. Jesus wanted mercy — eating with the outcasts was an actualization of God's mercy, God's loving kindness stooping down to be with us and save us. He didn't just tolerate them, he welcomed them. In his presence they felt accepted and loved, as they

were. It's not surprising that many heeded his message and changed their lives.

Matthew is an example of this. He didn't wait for sinners to repent before becoming their friend. No, he befriended them in their sinfulness. This is what scandalized the religious authorities: that he associated with sinners and rejoiced in their company while they were still sinners. Jesus was showing them a new life. But he couldn't do this without associating with them and being sympathetic towards them.

In acting as he did, Jesus revealed the mercy of God towards sinners. He did not show a lack of moral principles by sitting at table and consorting with sinners. Rather, his humanity was rich and deep enough to make contact, even in them, with that indestructible core of goodness which is found in all, and upon which the future has to be built. He put them in touch with that in themselves. His goodness evoked goodness in them.

From the position of the margins Fr Ted, like Jesus, was a scathing critic of perceived privilege and insularity among the Catholic clergy. To some he was a troublesome priest, but more than a thousand people came to his funeral. There have been many people like Jesus and Fr Ted, who are leaven in the society preventing it from self-destruction — not by words only but by quiet action that challenges privilege. If we are sinners — and which of us isn't? — then Christ loves us not less, but more. It is in and through our sins that we experience the goodness and mercy of God. I have experienced, in spite of my sinfulness, that God shows his love to me in ministering to people. We're not advocating sinning; but it's nice to know that this is how Jesus receives sinners.

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ex. 19:2-6a

Rom. 5:6-11

Mt. 9:36-10:8

We could almost miss the words in the first reading from Exodus, of God's choice and commissioning of a small ethnic group for mission, '...if you obey my words and hold fast my covenant...I will count you a kingdom of priests, a consecrated nation.' The Israelites were to be to the nations what their own priests were to them, mediators of God's Word. They were to be a prophetic people, who tell God's designs for humanity right up to the time of Jesus.

Likewise, the call of the Apostles was a prophetic gesture. Jesus was moved by what he saw, the crowds harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus saw in the crowds an Israel devoid of true leadership. The twelve disciples stood for the twelve tribes, a new Israel, who would be the nucleus of a new leadership, open and responsive to God's saving word and work in Jesus (Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden*, 2004, p 85).

That's the beginning of Jesus' mission, let's scroll forward to the end, the accomplishment of Jesus' mission. It is the Ascension, the Apostles gazing upwards as Jesus is taken up. A group of angels come to escort him to the throne of his Father. One of the angels asks Jesus: 'Who is going

to continue your mission?' Jesus pointed below to the twelve apostles. The angel is aghast and blurts out in disbelief, 'What!' Jesus simply replies, 'I have no other plans!'

Now let's get back to reality and see what the angels might have seen at the beginning. There were two sets of brothers, fishermen, one who collected taxes for the Roman occupying force, and a former Zealot, opposed to Roman rule, who have to sink their differences for the sake of the mission, the fiery sons of Zebedee, doubting Thomas, Philip and others we don't know much about. Jesus was deeply moved by what he saw, a crowd of people, men, women and children who were like sheep without a shepherd; he also saw the potential in this leaderless and needy group. Before sending the twelve out in mission, he asks them to pray to the Father to make their ministry effective.

What made the difference? It was Jesus' summons and sharing his mission with his apostles. He was with them, instructing them, an apprenticeship of three years trying to get past their pre-conceived ideas to embrace God's mind and plan for his people. And for this, he showed by example. Christ gave his life for the life of all. His healing of the sick, exorcism, raising people to life, and aid to the poor made those who were ministered to, aware that God's care and compassionate reign was among them. They were to be faithful to Jesus' summons; most of the disciples failed, Judas betrayed him; but Jesus risen showed them compassion inviting them back into relationship with himself if they chose.

This mission he entrusted to us. Many nurses, doctors, hospital staff have literally given their lives in answering Christ's call to care for the sick. But fear has closed services for the poor in some countries who face starvation and death in their struggle to return to their own villages. With the present dislocation, people are out of work, lining up in queues for food, for financial assistance, places to live, and many have a growing anxiety. I realise we are all summoned by Jesus to respond to the needs of people right where we are. And different groups, church groups, restaurants, Sikhs, respond to the need.

There are great and generous people who are looking beyond their immediate local situation to the global situation; so many cries for help, financially and personally. Yet with the possibility of scams and false causes there is a constant need for discernment and relying on proven church agencies to guide us and direct funds and assistance through local churches to the neediest. The Propagation of the Faith Mission Appeal, Caritas Australia, and Aid to the Church in Need are present in many down-to-earth expressions of the Christian response to help the needy. They are on the ground, finding ways into the lives of struggling peoples even as the barriers are going back up in some countries. It's our chance to witness to the ends of the earth. But it doesn't stop with our donation.

Jesus' summons is being taken up today by people like Ruth Townley a young Australian, who worked in North Uganda with young people including child soldiers, who had been brutalized and

helped them to renew their humanity. Lay missionaries and religious sisters and lay people, backed by their church communities are found in difficult missions around the world. Each person is of unique value, regardless of their physical or mental state. We need the compassionate eyes, hands, and feet of Jesus to respond to where he calls us.

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jer. 20:10-13

Rom. 5:12-15

Mt. 10:26-33

The film *A Hidden Life*, tells the story of Bavarian farmer Franz Jagerstatter who refused to take the oath of allegiance to Hitler and was guillotined on 9 August 1943 in a Brandenburg prison. He was a Catholic and refused to collude with Nazism. His local parish priest and bishop tried to dissuade him. His neighbours and clergy queried why he wanted to be so different, and what difference he thought his stance would make. Even after his death, his wife and three daughters grieving him, were ostracized in the village, and struggled to run the farm without him.

He wrote to his wife: 'Do you believe all would go well for me if I were to tell a lie in order to prolong my life? I want to save my life, but not through lies. I am writing with my hands in chains [but] this is still much better than if my will were in chains.' Hans knew what mattered in life and it was not self-preservation (Joanna Muirhead, *A Man for all seasons*, The Tablet, 4 January 2020, p. 6).

This must have been what Jeremiah was facing: 'Terror on every side! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!' But God was his hero who stood by him and who would vindicate him in the end, not, however, in his lifetime.

A prophet from our recent past was Martin Luther King. He spoke up against injustice to his own people, the African-American poor in the slums of the big cities. He organized non-violent protest marches to bring the issue to the attention of the American authorities and white Americans.

His last civil rights march was in Memphis, Tennessee on 28 March 1968, in support of poorly paid African-American sanitation workers, two of whom, sheltering from the rain, were crushed to death in a faulty garbage compacting truck. The march, contrary to King's intention, ended in violence; a video clip showed King's fear as he ducked from rapid gunfire. His co-leaders said that King went to his flat, spent the night in prayer and came out a changed person.

He returned to Memphis on 3 April 1968, despite bomb threats on his life from some 'sick white brothers', to attempt a successful new march later that week. He arrived in time to give his speech in the Mason Temple of the Church of God in Christ.

It was King's prophetic *Mountaintop Address* in which he said: 'We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I have been to the mountaintop...Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we as a people, will get to the promised land. And so, I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.' King was assassinated the next day,

Thursday, 4 April 1968.

The disciples were chosen by Jesus to carry on his mission. As a consequence, they would be threatened and opposed at every turn, just as Jesus was. It is a future that awaits his followers today as Pope Paul VI, in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, points out: 'For the Church it is not only a question of preaching the Gospel...but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, humankind's criteria of judgment, determining values...models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation' (par 19). It is not easy to be really active and faithful to Jesus' teaching.

Jesus tells the Apostles: '...they will hand you over to councils, flog you...drag you before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak...the Spirit of your Father will be speaking through you.' They needed courage.

Jesus repeatedly says, 'Do not be afraid'. It is a question of one's worth as Jesus points out. 'If not one sparrow falls to the ground without your Father noticing it, you are worth much more than hundreds of sparrows.' Our worth is the lived experience of Jesus' and the Father's choice of us. If we have little sense of our worth, we easily buckle under when persecution comes.

Jesus invites us to speak from the house-tops, to find our voice to speak to the culture today; to critique the past and look to the future so as to be present in the now. We need to be able to tell our own story so that we can be involved with society in line with people's history even though we push beyond history, while cherishing our links with our own people. For example, Paul Crittendon considering John Howard's legacy wrote, 'Australia in the '50s was considerably richer, more diverse, and more problematic than Mr Howard's neo-conservatism would allow. Half a century on, while he continued to pursue his dream, Australia became more belligerent in outlook and meaner in spirit' (Paul Crittenden, *Changing Orders*, Brindle and Schlesinger, 2008, p 74). People are speaking out today in increasing numbers: those sexually abused; women in the home or at work; people with handicaps; Indigenous; asylum seekers; of diverse sexual orientation, all needing Christians to support their cries for justice and proper treatment. If we fail to act in Jesus' name, we will have to answer to our Father in heaven.

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

2 Kgs. 4:8-11, 14-16a

Rom. 6:3-4, 8-11

Mt. 10:37-42

Jesus knew what he was about as he launched his mission to bring about the reign of God his Father, choosing twelve adult men to accompany him. There was excitement, joy, exhilaration, and freedom as they prepared to leave all and learn from the Master. But Jesus knew, having been on the road before he called them, what it was to be an itinerant preacher, walking the dusty roads of Galilee, going hungry and sleeping hard, having to find food, dealing with demands from every side of needy, clamouring people, and to always be under the critical eye of the religious authorities into whose domain they were entering. They were twelve grown men who if hunger, fatigue and failure hit, would soon lose their morale and break up as a group.

It needed strong leadership and clear guidelines from the start. Jesus demands a personal response, a renewed commitment in faith to his person and to the Father who sent him, a commitment that is clear and uncompromising. Paul is an example of such commitment: 'I am ready for anything anywhere: full stomach or empty stomach, poverty or plenty. There is nothing I cannot master with the help of one who gives me strength' (Phil 4:12).

It is Jesus who gives us strength to keep going when things get tough. But Paul also promises a reward for his community in Philippi, not for himself but for those who shared in his ministry: 'In return, my God will fulfil all your needs in Christ Jesus, as lavishly as only God can' (Phil. 4:12-14, 19-20). The reward is not for personal gain but to further the reign of God.

All Christians are called to a ministry of evangelization, which means both the content of the Good News and the ministry of those called to spread it. The content of the revelation is Jesus, the incarnate Word of God; we are only the vehicle. If we are true to the task Jesus has entrusted us with, then people will see us as significant, and want somehow to share in that work, as the woman saw in the prophet Elisha. 'She said to her husband: "Look I am sure the man who is constantly passing our way must be a holy man of God. Let us build him a small room on the roof for him and his servant so that he can rest there".'

The theme of the readings is welcome and reward, and the reward for this couple was the child they desired. Jesus applied this even further: 'Anyone who welcomes a prophet will have a prophet's reward.' My brother and sister supported me in my priestly ministry and, I believe, shared quietly but powerfully in what I was doing. St Vincent Pallotti used Matthew 10:41 to bolster his argument that lay people can be called apostles and wrote in his 1835 Appeal: 'Both the prophet or apostolic preacher and the charitable person who receives him obtain the same reward.' They are apostles!

Paul's defence in 2 Cor. 11:21-33 indicated what he had to undergo in preaching the Gospel: labours; imprisonments; floggings; beaten with rods; stoning; wrecked at sea; frequent journeys;

danger from bandits, Gentiles, his own people; sleepless nights; hunger and thirst; cold; naked and above all this, his anxiety for all the Churches he founded. No wonder he appreciated the welcome he received from various people in his missionary journeys such as Lydia, Aquila and Priscilla.

Jesus encouraged his disciples when they go into a town and are made welcome, to stay in that place and let their peace come upon that house. Luke 10:38 recounts the welcome Jesus received in his ministry from one house in Bethany which he often passed by in his apostolic endeavours, the warm smile and welcoming eyes of Martha and Mary, with their brother Lazarus, in the background. It was a place where Jesus could draw aside from the hot sun and the dust of the journey, taste fresh bread from the oven and a cup of cold water, simple gifts he remembered with gratitude. He stepped out of noise and conflict into the womb-like intimacy of this house and once again knew the comfort of love, hospitality, and untied sandals (D. Lee and J Honner, *Wisdom and Other Demons*, 1993).

What is the reward? I am sure the welcome, warmth and love of women like Martha and Mary would resonate with many a busy priest. Conversely, we have the task to welcome, create life in others, one person at a time, sharing our time, our presence. And there is a reward. 'Every person has the capacity to bring us into a new room within ourselves which has never been opened before. Every person comes to us with a key to a locked room which we will never find without them. Each one of us is capable of being actualized by every person who enters into our life in a unique way because each one has the capacity to unfold to us that we are an image of God' (Edward J Farrell, *The Father is Very Fond of Me*, Dimension Books, New Jersey, 1975, p. 60).

Today I long to be like Jesus. Present. Loving. Accepting. Opening my arms to embrace fully and equally the people in my life.

Aboriginal Sunday, second Homily

2 Kgs. 4:8-11, 14-16a

Rom. 6:3-4, 8-11

Mt. 10:37-42

We celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday — the flag of the First Australian nation has black for the people, red for the red dust and yellow for the blazing sun. Aboriginal people have a deep and strong relationship to the land, care for the environment, and a unique spirituality. A few years ago, we as a community made a commitment that is on the plaque fixed to the standing stone at the front of St Christopher's Church. It reads: 'We acknowledge the traditional custodians of this place, the Wurundjeri people who have walked and cared for this land for thousands of years. We also give thanks for their descendants who maintain their spiritual connection and traditions.'

Coming from another country into this part of Melbourne, few of you would have little contact with Indigenous Australians, even though 80 per cent of Aboriginal people live in capital cities. In calling them the First Australians, we do not treat them as antiques to be put on the shelf. They are our brothers and sisters who walk with us today and seek greater solidarity with the rest of us. Another word for solidarity is friendship, the willingness to give ourselves for the good of our neighbour; to listen and learn what is of value to them.

I am a Pallottine. Our Irish and German Pallottines, worked in solidarity and friendship with Aborigines from 1901 at Beagle Bay. From there they developed a growing number of missions in the Kimberleys, Geraldton, Tardun, Albany and Rossmoyne until 2006. From 1959, Pallottine lay missionaries volunteered to work on these missions from two to twenty years and found the cultural and lived experience with Aborigines very enriching. Our Pallottine Scholarship Fund set up in 2001 has given study grants to an average of 17 Aborigines each year who have graduated as doctors, dentists, lawyers, teachers and social workers, mainly for their own people.

Paul Keating in his memorable speech at Redfern, Sydney, in 1992, spoke of the effects of colonisation by the British from 1778: 'We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases, the alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers and practiced discrimination and exclusion.'

On 27 May 1967, Australians voted to change the Constitution so that like all other Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would be counted as part of the population and the Commonwealth would be able to make laws for them.

Pope John Paul II, at Alice Springs on 29 November 1986 spoke to Aboriginal people and missionaries: 'For thousands of years you have lived in this land and fashioned a culture that endures to this day. And during all this time, the Spirit of God has been with you. Your 'Dreaming', which influences your lives so strongly that, no matter what happens, you remain forever people of your culture, is your only way of touching the mystery of God's Spirit in you and in creation. You

must keep your striving for God and hold on to it in your lives."

Later in the speech he said: 'The Church in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.'

These and other symbolic events have been important in moving us forward with First Australians. They propelled Aboriginal issues to centre stage. But the gap still remains between Aboriginal disadvantage and the fruits of Australian life enjoyed by the majority. If we developed friendship with Aboriginal people, we would become aware first-hand of the issues that concern us all. We could start by seeking out Aboriginal agencies, such as the Catholic Aboriginal Ministry in Thornbury and learn of the situation from their perspective. Holy Saviour parish has a program on a day like today that we could join or learn from.

Finally, the message stick was held up during the proclamation of the Gospel. Traditionally, message sticks were passed between different clans and language groups to establish information and transmit messages. They were often used to invite neighbouring groups to corroborees and ball games. They were like letters with messages notched in the wood and carried by messengers hundreds of miles to the other clans. It was a symbol of friendship.

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Zech. 9:9-10

Rom. 8:9, 11-13

Mt. 11:25-30

When everything that Jesus worked for in his years of ministry and preaching seemed to be falling apart with resistance and opposition growing and John was in prison, the Gospel for today finds Jesus in a moment of intimacy with his Father. He still found it in his heart to praise and bless the Lord of heaven and earth for revealing to mere children the mysteries of God and God's plan for humanity. This was the source of Jesus' strength and his assurance.

Thanks to Jesus, we also can find new hope when things seem to be falling apart in our lives. A fundamental Christian belief is that we could never have known God as Father were it not for Jesus the Son revealing him. It is an experiential knowledge of the Father through Jesus that we find ourselves as sons and daughters of God the Father, the ultimate hope of all our longings.

The Pharisees held that to be righteous before God they would have to know and practice perfectly the 631 laws of the Mosaic Covenant. This burden they imposed on all Jews. Without grasping the inner meaning of the law that went beyond strict external observance, religion lost its joy, freedom and lightness that Jesus revealed.

Robert Louis Stephenson was surprised and wrote, 'I went to church today and did not feel depressed.' Peter at the first Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:10) when some members of the Church wanted to impose circumcision and all the Mosaic laws on the Gentile members, said: 'Why are

you...placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?’

Pope Francis, like Jesus, has lifted the negative view of the Church, not by doing away with law but first bringing love and mercy into all his words and actions. He listens to the concrete situation of the person, hears the problems and then seeks how he can respond, without first laying down moral laws. Jesus invites all who are heavily burdened to come to him, to shoulder his yoke and learn from him, who is gentle and humble of heart. Jesus’ yoke was twofold, to love God and one’s neighbour. To love enemies, to forgive, to give to the poor is easy only because Jesus is with us shouldering the yoke with us.

The words Jesus uses, ‘My yoke is easy,’ means in Greek, it is well-fitting. In Palestine, yokes for oxen were made of wood. The ox was brought in, and the measurements were taken. After the yoke was roughened out the ox was brought back to have the yoke tried on. It had to fit well. Thus, it was tailor-made to fit the neck of the ox lest it gall the neck. Did Jesus ever make such yokes in his father’s shop? In any case he knew that the best yokes fit well. Thus, he tells us: ‘My yoke, the life I give you to live, is not a burden to gall you, but it is tailor-made. I have taken measure of your size and strength and know what you are able to carry. Whatever we do with love is light. Love does not feel the burden.’

We can mistake Jesus’ words, ‘I am gentle and humble of heart’ for weakness. The word gentle (*praus*) occurs only here and in Matthew 21:5 which takes up the prophecy of Zecharia 9:9: ‘Your king comes to you, humble (without display), astride a colt who will subdue nations and bring peace,’ a prophecy fulfilled by Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem whereby through his death he brought about universal salvation. Peter focused not on law but on the person of Jesus: ‘We believe we are saved in the same way the Gentiles are: through the grace of the Lord Jesus’ (Acts 15:11).

Finally, Paul in the second reading tells us we can carry our burdens not by our own efforts but by the power of the Spirit. He says: ‘Unless you possessed the Spirit of Christ you would not belong to him, and if the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, then he who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your own mortal bodies through his Spirit living in you.’

The conclusion he draws is — don’t be pulled down by an aimless sort of life but raise your sights higher and aim to be the person God calls you to be. Jesus reveals the Father and his will for you, he helps you carry the yoke you bear, and he puts his Spirit in you. You are a son and daughter of God. We are all very busy; why not pause for a short time and pray listening to Jesus’ words, ‘Come to me all you who labour and are heavy burdened and I will refresh you.’

You’ll find it works.

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Is. 55:10-11

Rom. 8:18-23

Mt. 13:1-23 or Mt. 13:1-9

Jesus was close to nature and to people, learning from what he saw and bringing that into his preaching. He watched the sower sowing his seed, not in fenced off areas, but broadcast widely on paths, rocks, weeds, and good soil. That was how Jesus wanted to broadcast the message of the Kingdom of God hoping that people could take it in, be transformed and grow. But he also knew that people could not face the naked truth, so he clothed truth in a story or parable. A parable was like a nut you had to crack to get to the kernel of truth. To tell whether someone got the message you could use the image of a diamond. A fake diamond made of glass simply let the light pass right through it. But a real diamond held the light, bringing it to life and setting it on fire.

Jesus was aware that some people were open to his message, but he was also aware of the growing number whose minds and hearts were closed to the Good News, which was both good and new, but they did not want to hear it. For them Jesus' parables were confusing. To really hear the parable, the listener needed a level of commitment.

There are two quotes from Isaiah, one in the first reading, the other within Jesus words in the Gospel. The first compares God's word to the rain and snow that soaks the earth and prepares it to become fruitful (Isa. 55:11).

In the same way God's word has a dynamic purpose to really change us if we would receive it. Jesus in the Gospel, however, picks up the reason for the hardness of heart and blindness in people. It is fear that if they dared open their eyes and ears, they might see and hear, understand with their heart, and be converted and healed by Jesus (cf Isa. 6:9-10). Isn't that extraordinary!

As the Word of God, Jesus wishes to work with us to accomplish God's plan and to fulfil our destinies. But there's a hitch to God's action becoming productive in us: our cooperation is required. God's Word is omnipotent but will not bulldoze us to accept or reject it. It's the reality of sin — the very thing that we know would bring us true joy we reject.

'Fear wist not to evade, as Love wist to pursue...for though I knew his love who followed yet was I sore adread, lest having him I must have naught beside' (Francis Thompson, *The Hound of Heaven*, from *The Complete Poetical Works of Francis Thompson*, p 89).

The word in the teaching of Jesus is like the seed sown by the farmer. Some falls on open paths only to be lost to the birds of the air. Some falls on rocky ground only to perish for lack of depth of the soil. Some falls among thorns only to be choked as soon as it flowers. Some, however, falls on fertile soil and yields great abundance. All that prevents God's Word from having its full effect is the limit of our cooperation. The seed is sown, but we determine where the seed falls and how well it prospers.

At Pope John Paul II's funeral, the plain pine coffin standing before the altar with the open book

of the Gospels on top of it, symbolised his life, a life lived under the Word of God. But that word needed the living tradition, the communities from which the Gospels came to truly interpret and understand the word.

For Matthew it's not enough to hear the Word of God, but to do the word. We can consider the word only as a personal matter for my spiritual life. But there is the need, while growing in God's plan for us, to take the word into the marketplace and live it. Then we meet the struggle that Jesus said would mark us as his followers. In prayer together, studying the issues that really matter, and group action, we ask God to make us more receptive to his word. Social media can easily get a group together to protest, but for the long haul each of us needs to get serious about our Christian growth and responsibility for our local patch where we can sow the seed of the word and nurture its growth.

Second Homily

In the film, *A Beautiful Mind*, in which Russell Crowe portrays John Nash, the mathematical genius who suffered from schizophrenia, there's a scene at the end, a small gesture that might go unnoticed. Before coming forward to receive the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics Science, his wife puts a white handkerchief in his breast pocket. For both of them it is a kind of sacrament of their struggle together that enabled Nash to work with his illness and attain a goal he never thought he could reach.

In this reading we are invited to see another kind of sacrament, God's creative word in the whole of creation, not only in the first spark of life, but in God's active involvement within everything that exists, bringing it and us to a successful completion. 'My word does not return to the empty,' God says, 'without carrying out My Will and succeeding in what it was sent to do.' God's very being is life itself, bringing everything into existence, like a bushfire that sets alight whatever it brushes against.

So, in the things that God has made, in the people we meet, or events we go through, we encounter a personal God. Vincent Pallotti in the 19th Century, lived an intense experience of God; he often said, 'Seek God and you will find God in all things. Seek him always.'

In Pallotti's time, a sense of God's existence dominated an entire culture and consciousness. But we live in a culture in which the sense of God in everyday life is fast disappearing. God is absent, someone said, but we've still got this calling card, which can even be lost.

If God seems to be absent, it could be we're going through a tough time, like a dark night or it could be that we've lost the capacity to see — we're not aware. We lack contemplativeness. That's why Jesus offers us parables that offer God's Word to us, if only we could see or hear.

The full realization of God's Word, on what God wants to do in our lives, is dependent on our openness to understand the parable and to try to become his productive soil. Jesus suggests four

responses to the Word that he continues to offer. Jesus wants us to be who we are meant to be — salvation is offered whether our capacity is 30, 60 or 100 per cent.

Modern terms for the obstacles that Jesus mentions include:

Narcissism — we are so pre-occupied and focused upon our headaches and heartaches that we are oblivious to God's presence. Like a busload of people going through the beautiful countryside with all the blinds down and arguing about who's the most important.

Pragmatism — we're so task-oriented, concerned with what works; if something can't be solved it's of no value and so we miss the mystery around us.

Unbridled restlessness — we're caught up in daydreams and distraction, wanting to try every experience, but we are not in touch with reality.

We need to be contemplative, to be fully awake to all the dimensions within ordinary experience. Once we are fully awake then comes a sense of wonder, of the infinite, the sacredness of God.

Jesus challenges us to seek a personal experience of God: anyone who has will be given more, anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away. Use it or lose it — Jesus wants us to work at being fully awake, to grow into the awareness of God in the everyday, to experience a God with whom we can talk, find comfort and consolation.

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wis. 12:13, 16-19 Rom. 8:26-27 Mt. 13:24-43 or Mt. 13:24-30

We want a perfect outcome, like the harvest, but we are disappointed. It's as if we were asleep and woke up when it was too late. The servants' suggestion, in the first parable about the weeds and the wheat, seems quite straight forward. Roll up your sleeves, get in and pull out the weeds. The trouble is by the time the weeds and wheat grow and are distinguishable, the darnel or zizania which is stronger than the wheat has deeply entangled its roots with the wheat; the danger is that the good will be ripped out with the bad.

Jesus uses ordinary images that we think we know, but it's not so clear when taken into Jesus' perspective of the Kingdom, God's overall intent for the saving of all humanity. To understand, requires that we want to know the mind of Jesus, and conform our lives, thinking and behaviour to his. The key to understanding the parables is Jesus himself. Understanding must lead to faith in Jesus and to his cause which is the growth of the Kingdom. For Jesus does not explain the parable, it's left for the hearers to figure out. Faith in him leads to deeper understanding.

When we take up the parable of the mustard seed, we realise that it, also, is a weed, a weed Jesus uses to show that although small and insignificant, it spreads. It will take over the whole

garden. If we could have the mind of Christ, small though we may be, through us the Kingdom of God can spread in our society.

The same with the leaven, regarded by the Jew as corrupt, the bread gets mouldy and will go off. The amazing thing is that the small amount of leaven in a huge batch of flour can work imperceptibly and raise the whole batch (cf Romans 11:16 where Paul writes 'a whole batch of bread is made holy if the first handful of dough is made holy').

We, like the leaven, can raise the moral level of our culture. Those are Jesus' images of the early Christian community, smelly like sour dough, despised and cut off, a weed that spreads and to which all the Gentiles fly, like birds, and who nestle in its branches. There is an inner dynamism of the Kingdom ultimately revealed in the disaster of Jesus crucified who through faithful obedience to his Father redeems the universe and is vindicated as Lord and Saviour by being raised up by the Father.

In regard to the weeds and the wheat which in human terms demands drastic action, the householder counsels patience, to let both grow until harvest time and then the fruits of each will be obvious. Leave the judgment to God at the last.

In Jesus' time, the Pharisees demanded strict separation between themselves and sinners (the weeds) — the kind of people that Jesus associated with in table fellowship. It was from these, like Matthew the tax collector, that Jesus called his apostles. They were a mixed bag. Jesus in the parable told us that it is not always possible in this age to distinguish between those who are contributing to the progress of God's Kingdom and those who are resisting and obstructing.

It is only from the standpoint of God that such discernment is possible. Any attempt on our part to make a determination will be premature and risk disaster. Jesus bids us wait. It is only God's final judgment that will be able to distinguish weeds from wheat, sheep from goats, the saved from the reprobate.

As we look back on our own lives, we recognise moments or statements we made about others that now cause us embarrassment or shame. We ourselves are an abiding mixture of good and evil. Because we do not have the capacity to view our life in its entirety, we can't immediately discern what things are desirable or not. We need to be able to take life as it comes and leave for God the task of assessing the ultimate value of our actions. To humbly admit that God hasn't finished with us yet.

With the eyes of faith, we must learn to detect the weeds among the wheat. We must resist evil wherever we see it and stand up for righteousness. In this, we depend on God's help, relying on the truth of his word, the power of his love, and his grace and strength.

We finish with a story about good and poor discernment when we want to escape the evil one. A Filipino, an Australian and a Scot were to face the firing squad. The Filipino suggested that when the rifles are pointed at you, yell out a natural disaster and run for your life. He yelled out 'tsunami!'

The guards looked around and he escaped. The Aussie, when his turn came, yelled out 'earthquake!' and made a run for it. The Scot, slightly under the weather, when the guns were pointed at him, yelled out, 'fire!'

God help us in our discernment. May we, after a life well-lived 'shine like the sun in the Kingdom of the Father'.

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Kgs. 3:5, 7-12

Rom. 8:28-30

Mt. 13:44-52 or Mt. 13:44-46

Close to where I was staying in upstate New York, there was a Sunday market in Newburgh. One lady rummaging among the jewellery, found a pearl brooch, covered with grime. She liked it and bought it for a few dollars. She sent it to Tiffany's, New York city, to be cleaned. A couple of weeks later she received a telegram asking her to come in. To her amazement she received red carpet treatment, champagne, the works. The manager came to meet her with excitement and explained: 'When we cleaned the brooch and opened the back of it, there was inscribed. "To Josephine from Napoleon Bonaparte". The brooch you sent in was worth over a million dollars.'

When expensive jewellery is all lumped together in a jewellery box, it looks cheap. We are immersed in massive amounts of trivia so that it is easy to lose appreciation for what really counts in life. Four 'A's can lead to this loss of soul in modern society:

Affluence

Appearance

Achievement

Apathy.

If we have everything and want to be successful in every experience we try out — whether to impress or to feel good, then life can become boring because life is superficial, without soul.

We are born for a high purpose; we are also built for that purpose. We are fired into life with a madness that comes from our incompleteness and lets us believe we can recover our wholeness through the embrace of another, through making a name for ourselves that will live on, or through the contemplation of God. It's the waiting and yearning that produces great love, great art, great achievement. Is the discovery haphazard or the culmination of years of searching? Like Solomon it can come in a dream. The dream that he requested was for a discerning heart to know right and wrong and to choose to live rightly. No wonder Solomon was known for more than his mines.

Hans Schlieman, a wealthy German businessman and archaeologist, believed that Homer's *Iliad* was not poetic fiction but related to Troy, an historic place in northern Anatolia, Turkey. He discovered seven cities. During the excavation, he found under a shield, King Priam's treasure,

hurriedly hidden by one of the Greeks who hoped to return later and get it. Schlieman called his foreman, gave the men digging a day off while he, his wife and the foreman spirited the gold and jewels away. He gave the treasure to the Berlin Museum, but it disappeared after the war. A question comes to my mind. In attaining our treasure what kind of person have we become?

Jesus' parables emphasise the joy that the peasant farmer experienced when out of the subsoil of his daily work a treasure is unexpectedly uncovered, and the joy of the merchant who, after a lifelong search finds a pearl beyond expectation. When we find what really counts in life, really appreciate its worth and make that our prime concern, then joy is the result.

'The Kingdom of God is like...!' It is precisely in living for the Kingdom, being conformed to Christ, working to do what God's will is for us, that we will find joy. Jesus encourages us to give the Christian way of life the full respect and devotion it deserves. Do not be ashamed of your Catholic heritage — it is rich and full, and can enrich your life. The Kingdom should be so valuable that you would do anything to enter it and live by its principles.

For Jesus there was no treasure greater than his Father's will: when he uncovered what it was, he renounced everything to make it his own. His own family and neighbours thought his ways either confusing or foolish; and when he gave up his own life, even his disciples could not understand this ultimate folly. But there was purpose in it: even in death Jesus kept hold of the treasure for us if we follow him.

Vincent Pallotti from his youth was intent on gaining the greatest treasure: intimate union with God. But God was so immense, far above, that he almost despaired of ever reaching God. That was until he discovered St Paul's way: that he was predestined and called to be conformed to the image of the Son, the firstborn of many brethren. Vincent latched on to that. If he could become like Jesus, his firstborn brother, he could make it into the same love relationship Jesus the risen Lord has with the Father, that led him to universal apostolate.

'The real treasure of life is under our noses — in the people we share life with, in the opportunities we face every day to exercise the values of Jesus. It is in the heart of the ordinary that we encounter Jesus. He is the authentic article. He is hidden in the commonplace, hoping we'll stumble on that truth before long' (Denis McBride, *Seasons of the Word of St Paul's*, Bandra 1997, p 271).

Second Homily

Pope Francis said something wonderful: 'Every vocation is an exodus from self. It leads us on a journey of adoration of the Lord...and service to him in our brothers and sisters.'

'Every vocation is an exodus from self.' Vocation takes us out of ourselves, from our own self-centred concerns into a wider horizon that gives our life meaning and greater purpose. It's no longer a question of what's in it for me; it takes me away from being upset at other people's

demands, to a deeper sense of what's worthwhile; to the recognition that people are more valuable than all my things.

The lay missionaries who were preparing for our mission in Western Australia, were asked: 'Why have you volunteered?' People, even family, thought they were crazy, but they gained so much from the experience. In every life there is a wanting to be happy, to really be at home with myself and others, to use my gifts to the full and to grow. It is the search for more.

In 1947 a Bedouin boy called Muhammed the Wolf was shepherding goats on the western shore of the Dead Sea. One of the boy's goats strayed, and to follow it he had to climb a steep cliff. Passing a cave in the rock face, he threw a stone inside; and when he heard something breaking, he became frightened and ran back to get his friend. They discovered the Dead Sea Scrolls but didn't realise the value of the treasure they had uncovered.

Hans Schlieman did. In excavating the seven cities of Troy, he found under a shield King Priam's treasure, likely hurriedly hidden in the battle by one of the Greeks who hoped to return later and get it. Schlieman called his foreman, gave the diggers a day off while he, his wife and the foreman spirited the gold and jewels away.

The Gospels speak of two discoveries: the unexpected finding of a treasure in the field and the search for a pearl of great price which once found leads to the same response: joy, excitement, a willingness to give everything away to get that treasure or pearl.

When my mother asked whether I wanted to be a priest, my immediate response was 'No, why do you think I became a carpenter?' But over time I realised that Jesus the carpenter wanted joiners. My vocation was more a search for what Jesus wanted of me, praying, reflecting and looking at the lifestyle of others, asking — is it for me? It led me to adoration of the one who called. Pope Francis's second point, 'Vocation leads on a journey of adoration of the Lord.'

Larry Norman describes it well:

'I am a servant, I am waiting for the call;

I've been unfaithful but I sit here in the hall.

How can you use me when I've never given all?

How can you choose me when you know I quickly fall?

For he healed my soul and he made me whole; and he let me know he loves me;

I am worthless now, But I've made a vow;

I will humbly bow before Thee.

O, please use me. I am lonely.'

It then must lead to 'service to him in our brothers and sisters'. This is what leads to an exodus

from self. Giving ourselves to the Lord, not for self-approval or gain, leads us to great joy and fulfilment.

But there's a danger. We can begin to count the cost, compare ourselves with others, and lose the joy of giving. We need the wisdom of Solomon who, when asked what he wants from God, did not seek revenge or power over enemies or wealth, but wisdom in his dealings with others which God granted him. But he began to lose it when luxury, dabbling in adoration of his wives' gods, led him away from adoration of the true God.

We know that Jesus had to give up everything he valued —his family, his home, his security — to do his Father's will and preach the Kingdom of God. For Jesus there was no treasure greater than his Father's will. When he uncovered what it was, he renounced everything to make it his own. His family and neighbours thought his ways confusing or foolish; and when he gave up his own life, even his disciples could not understand this ultimate folly. But there was a purpose in it: even in death Jesus kept hold of the treasure for us and for our salvation.

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isa. 55:1-3

Rom. 8:35, 37-39

Mt. 14:13-21

Did you catch the words of love in the first reading? This tremendous lover is almost pleading: 'Come, Oh come to the water, you who are thirsty. Come, eat, and drink at no cost, corn, wine, and milk. Listen, listen to me. I will satisfy your deepest desires and you will live. With you I will make a covenant out of the favours promised to David.'

Let's pause a moment and ask ourselves: How do I respond to God's love? What time do I set aside to stop and listen to God? Waste time with God, doing nothing, simply being there with God? Are we almost unable to face our God, afraid that this lover will demand too much?

'For though I knew his love who followed,' wrote Francis Thompson in the *Hound of Heaven*, 'yet was I sore adread lest having him, I must have naught beside.' Yes and no! His love may not deliver us from our problems, but God will certainly carry us through them.

Paul discovered this: 'Nothing can separate us from the love of God.' It's not our love of God that keeps us faithful, but God's free gift to us in Jesus. It's in view of God's stable, faithful love in Jesus that Paul can say, 'In all these trials we are more than conquerors through him who has loved us' (Romans 8:37).

My mother told us again and again: 'God with us, who can be against us' (Romans 8:31). We can withstand any trial.

The Gospels let us see this tremendous lover in action, a God in Jesus who is deeply moved, with butterflies in his stomach like any lover, as he sees the needs of the people. What a God we have in Jesus! Not the passive Greek notion of God as unmoved mover, but one who is deeply moved, deeply affected by us. The wonderful sensitivity of Jesus who spoke to the crowds at length, healed them, and then fed them; and that despite the impact of John the Baptist's death on Jesus' sensitive nature. His cousin had been murdered by Herod yet seeing the crowds he was moved with compassion and rose above his grief.

He drew on immense energy within to minister to the crowds. The source of his energy was his relationship to his Father in prayer. Jesus' love-relationship to his Father was not 'out there' but deep within. Jesus' whole being responded powerfully and lovingly in compassionate ministry. Jesus is not a manifestation of the Father. Although he shares the divine nature, he is distinct. Jesus is somebody in a real sense; the Father is spirit, a spiritual being. Only Jesus was born of Mary, not the Father. Only Jesus was baptised in the Jordan, not the Father. Only Jesus died on the cross, not the Father. Yet the Father and the Spirit were intimately involved in every action that Jesus did in love and in obedience to his Father. If Jesus is only a manifestation, then we deny three centuries of theological searching, culminating in the Nicæan Creed 325.

Like any great lover, with all his human feelings, Jesus wants to share. He calls his disciples into

ministry with him. 'Give them something to eat yourselves,' was his response to his disciples' suggestion to send the crowds away. He wants them and us to know that our hungers and yearnings can only be met by our response to Jesus' invitation. As we bring our small meagre offerings to meet the needs of others, the Lord can work miracles and blessings among us, still leaving plenty over.

Ministry is not our doing alone. Jesus takes what we can offer into a communal Eucharistic context, raises his eyes to his Father, blesses, breaks bread and hands it to the disciples who then give it to the people. Dependent on Christ, the food never runs out —there is a super-abundance for all. You don't throw scraps away if you are hungry, certainly not scraps to fill twelve baskets.

Parishioner Nancy Sims prayed with Pauline Perrin the night before she died. Pauline prayed for our parish family which she loved, then suddenly broke off and said: 'A miracle has just happened.' We should expect a miracle when our parish family prays, especially at Mass. We have received Jesus, the tremendous lover who is attentive to our cries. What is it we want him to do for us?

Our First Eucharist children, eager to receive him should join their desires to his desire to do great things in our parish and beyond. Who are the people we want Jesus to heal? Jesus, we want you to bring our parish alive, alive to you and to one another, that by the love you have for us and we for one another, people will know that the Father has sent you; that by our unity we will be known as your disciples.

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Kgs. 19:9a, 11-13a

Rom. 9:1-5

Mt. 14:22-33

Do we understand how God sees us, loves us and depends on us? Each of us has a calling. In the discharge of this calling, we stand not only before people but also before God. This calling relates to who we are. It can be very lonely at times standing up for what's right, for your faith, struggling to maintain your identity as a person.

Elijah felt like this. He prayed to God, 'I am the only prophet in Israel', as he faced 400 of Queen Jezebel's prophets of Baal who had turned the people away from God, who had created a climate, a culture against God. In the contest with the prophets, Elijah defeated them and then turned to the people and challenged them, 'If God be God, then follow him, but if Baal, then follow him and go to hell.'

Elijah stood up for God, but then everything seemed to go against him. Queen Jezebel threatened Elijah, 'I will do to you what you have done to my prophets', and Elijah ran for his life. When we run, back down, our emotions are often in turmoil. Elijah runs to save his life and then wishes he could die.

At these times we need to return to our sacred space, to our deep traditions where we locate ourselves in the story of our people. Young people are looking for clearer signs of identity. Elijah made it back to Mt Horeb where Moses the first prophet had received his call.

The first reading begins with Elijah in a cave wanting to meet God, but God was not in the signs that first manifested God to Moses. God was not in the cyclone, earthquake, or bushfire but in the small thin silence of the desert air. Elijah covered his face and went to meet his God. God challenges again, 'Elijah what are you doing here? You can't run away. Dare to live your call.'

A 'small thin silence' is an unusual term. It is the peace that comes after the turmoil and gives us strength to go on. An illustration of this is the story of what happened to a community of Carthusian monks, friends of Thomas More, who also refused to take the oath to Henry VIII. Henry would later personally witness the torture and death of each monk. They knew it. They knew that Henry was absolutely ruthless with anyone who opposed him. The monks had gathered in the chapter house chapel for a final Mass before going to the Tower of London. After the consecration the prior suddenly stopped, rooted to the spot, and a gentle stirring went through the whole place. Each monk knew that God had visited them to give them courage for what was ahead.

In the Gospels, the young church is a boat battling it out in rough seas; they were encountering a life-threatening crisis as church. Jesus seemed so far away. Isn't that how it feels? But Jesus was praying, watching from a distance (the only other time Matthew mentions Jesus praying on the mountain was when he was struggling with the knowledge of his own death in Gethsemane). He is no stranger to our fears.

At the fourth watch, between three and six in the morning, Jesus comes walking on water. We hear his response to Peter's impulsive request, 'Lord if it is you...?' Jesus says, 'Come!' It is the call to discipleship. Peter readily leaves the security of the boat, puts his foot on the churning sea, and begins to walk. Suddenly he feels the force of the wind, is knocked off balance, fear takes over, and he begins to sink. 'Save me, Lord,' he cries in panic.

At times we think that we can do things on our own, we are doing great things for Jesus, and it may not work out as we hoped. We have that sinking feeling and fear takes over. 'Where are you, Lord?' But his outstretched hand is always there reaching out to us.

'Halts by me that footfall. Is my gloom after all, the shade of his hand outstretched caressingly. Ah fondest, blindest, weakest, I am he whom thou seekest. Thou dravest love from thee who dravest me' (Francis Thompson, *Hound of Heaven*, p 93).

Jesus wants us to have faith in him — 'Why did you doubt?' He is found not only in the silence but in the storm; the struggle, where we learn to depend on Jesus. He wants us to succeed. And then the storm subsides, and the disciples bow in worship, 'Truly, you are the Son of God!'

At the beginning of Genesis when there was only darkness and chaos, what did God do? He breathed his Spirit and there was light. Insight, direction, and courage come from facing the storm.

Second Homily

To get a modern image of the boat battling the waves in the darkness, which is the Church, there is the Chaldean Church in Iraq. Fifty thousand people were forced to flee and leave everything behind to go to a mountain surrounded by ISIS jihadists who would kill anyone who attempted to descend. It is a way of the cross, Christians faced with genocidal extermination. One 75-year-old man, a teacher, was weeping. 'I will never die in my home where my ancestors have lived for thousands of years.' Churches are being destroyed and ancient documents burned. 'God where are you? Jesus where are you?' In the midst of the chaos, Jesus walks toward us and invites us to come. But to where? We need a new kind of faith!

Impulsive Peter steps out at Jesus' invitation, 'Come.' But when a strong wind hit him, he began to doubt and began to sink. Jesus reached out and held him up, and asked, 'Why did you doubt?' We need real faith in Jesus. In the circumstances facing the Chaldean Christians, like them, do we believe God loves us up here in our head? Or do we believe God loves us in our heart and our whole person?

The prophet Habakuk upon seeing Assyrians and then Babylonians devastating their land, and worshipping their gods of power and war, complained to God: 'God, we were taught that you were the God of history,' then asked: 'Is might right or righteousness more powerful?' God replied: 'Write the vision down, inscribe it in tablets to be easily read, for come it will. If it delays, wait, for it will surely come.'

That's what real faith means; it's more than a notional assent; it's a faith that changes our behaviour, links creed and conduct, creates a faith that does justice. But first it needs to be planted and built up in Jesus Christ. If we're going to step out, we need to hear Jesus saying to us, 'Do not be afraid. It is I.'

Jesus is with us, not just as Messiah but as the divine 'I Am,' with power to overcome the destructive forces in our lives and give us a firm footing when things are changing under our feet.

In our own worries about work, paying the rent, the way we have tried to bring up our children who no longer practice their faith, we might identify with the anguish of St Paul. His sorrow is so great as he agonises over his Jewish contemporaries who refuse to accept new life in Christ, despite his preaching, visitation, and concern for them. But he still has hope in God who adopted them, made a covenant with them, gave them the law, rituals, and promises. Why? Because of his trust in God's plan in Christ who ratified it with his blood.

Elijah's story resonates with us. His time was one of chaos. The ancient way of life had given way to a society at odds with Moses' teaching. He had tried to take on the establishment, the northern kingdom of Achaz and Jezebel; had contended alone with 400 prophets of Baal and beat them to bring his people back to God. But now Queen Jezebel was hunting him down. 'I'm going to do to you what you did to my prophets of Baal.'

He soon came to recognise his inadequacy. In mortal danger he fled to Mt Horeb, (Mt Sinai) the mountain of God where Elijah's people had experienced God's choice of them, sealed by the covenant. He stood on that same spot and demanded from God an answer. 'Where are you? Everybody has abandoned you. I alone have tried to be faithful and see what is happening to me.'

We all know what happened as he stood at the mouth of the cave; the former signs of God's presence, mighty wind, fire and an earthquake do not happen. Can you imagine the desolation felt by Elijah? And by us? We have tried to be faithful, faithful to prayer, the Mass, the sacrifices we have made for our family and for God — does it all count for nothing? Then something startling happens. In the last place he expected to find God, God's unmistakable presence is felt. The sound of sheer silence right in the depths of Elijah's being. And he knows that something new is happening within. The old way of making contact with God no longer satisfies. A new revelation of God is at hand.

To a people in exile, suffering the loss of everything, like today's Chaldean Christians, this is a profound experience of God's continued care for them. They know that they can still encounter the mystery within the deep recesses of their own hearts and in the shared intimacy with others. Each revelation of God demands a new way of responding, a new way of forming community, a new way of being a disciple. Today we are being introduced to a new experience of God. And with that comes a new task when we thought all was finished.

'What are you doing here, Elijah?' God asked Elijah, then sent him to anoint a new prophet and

a new king. God still had a job for him, to continue the work of reform.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isa. 56:1, 6-7 **Rom. 11:13-15, 29-32** **Mt. 15:21-28**

Security is a high priority today — security systems are on doors, cars and computers. The fear of terrorism, so very real, can seal us off from different races and beliefs. Our God, though, is trying to break into our closed world.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has demolished the pharisaic laws of clean and unclean by saying: 'It's what comes from the heart that makes a person, clean or unclean, not the externals.'

And now he is confronted by one who epitomises all that is abhorrent to a Jew. Jews don't mix with Gentiles. She came out of her Gentile territory onto Jewish turf, shouting after Jesus, following him down the street, and she won't be put off. She is driven, desperate by her daughter's illness, to engage in a battle of wits with a Jewish stranger who can save her.

This Gospel brings out the underlying struggle in the early church: to admit pagans to Christian table fellowship; and our own, to accept the stranger. The point is that it's faith that breaks down the barriers and admits them, not ethnic cleanliness. Matthew's Gospel was clearly composed to convince his Jewish audience that Jesus fulfils and exceeds all the messianic promises, and it records the sharp story of a Canaanite woman whose faith in Jesus is greater than the Jews of his time.

Look at the irony of this text — irony is right in our face and forces us to look below the surface for meaning: the woman is a Canaanite, a hated enemy of the Jews, one they wanted to wipe out, who addresses Jesus as 'Lord, Son of David', titles his own people refuse to admit, that he is the Messiah. Jesus, the Saviour of all, initially refuses help to a woman only he can help (a demon possesses her daughter); a non-Jew who seeks help from a Jewish rabbi who ought to shun Gentiles, and especially a woman (Canaanites don't ask Jews for help). So, the irritated disciples tell Jesus to give her what she wants and get rid of her.

Is Jesus, deliberately in his behaviour and words acting out and exposing his own people's bias? There's both humour and sting in the ping-pong banter between Jesus and the woman that wins Jesus' admiration: 'Woman, you have great faith. Let your wish be granted.' Her daughter was cured instantly. The underlying issue is: are faith-filled Gentiles to be at, or under, the table? Is our Eucharist ethnic or ethical, that is, one that leads us to welcome the stranger?

At Jesus' trial, there were three charges against him. The religious charge against him was blasphemy; he claimed to be God's Son. The political charge was sedition, he was against Caesar. But the psychological charge, the worst of all, was that Jesus welcomed outcasts into table fellowship with himself in the name of the Kingdom of God, in the name of the Jews' ultimate hope and so both prostituted that hope and shattered the closed ranks of the community against their enemy. It is hard to imagine anything more offensive to Jewish sensibilities. Their security was

gone. Jesus seemed to be undermining it. He stated: you have to be a sinner and admit it. Fundamentally, God's Kingdom was being promised to tax collectors and harlots.

This woman has gone even further. She widened Jesus' vista beyond Jews on the margins to the Gentile mission. Jesus rewards her persistent faith by healing her daughter instantly and from a distance. What strengthened her faith was love.

Love gives persistence to faith. The woman loved as she shouted to gain Jesus's attention. Inside she may have been thinking:

'Oh, please answer me. I know I have no right to ask, but my daughter is everything.

I know you are a healer, a man of compassion. Why do you ignore me?

Now his disciples are trying to get rid of me. But I will not let go. This is too important.

My daughter must get well. Help me, Lord!

He is right. I have no right to ask. But I will be bold.

I ask not for myself but for the one I love. I have nothing to lose if I cry the louder.

Perhaps I have gone too far. My proverb might just anger him.

It is done now. I cannot have regrets.

His eyes. How powerful his eyes. They twinkle at my faith, small though it is.

His lips grant my wish. How can I ever thank him?'

Will we accept the strangers in our midst?

Second Homily

A man was attending a lecture in Greece. The speaker had just finished and was looking out of the window when the man asked, 'What is the meaning of life?' Some of the audience laughed, others got up to leave, but the speaker put up his hand, held the audience and said, 'I will tell you the meaning of life.' He pulled out a little mirror from his pocket about the size of a 20-cent piece. 'When I was a boy, I found this part of a broken mirror. I rubbed it on concrete and made it round. Then I played a game trying to shine light into dark corners of rooms and houses. As I grew up, I realized that this wasn't a game. The light I shone was not from me. My meaning in life was to shine the light whenever I experienced deliberate dark corners whether in government or even in church.'

Jesus shone a light into the dark corners of a delegation of Pharisees and scribes who came from Jerusalem to interrogate Jesus' disciples as to why they ate without washing their hands, breaching the barrier between clean and unclean.

Jesus countered by showing how their preoccupation with remaining pure and apart, made

them blind to wrong traditions, like taking oaths to escape the responsibility of caring for parents. Jesus' final remark undermined their whole system: 'It's not what goes into the mouth that makes someone unclean. It's what comes out of the mouth that makes one unclean.'

They were outraged, so Jesus withdrew into Gentile territory, the area around Tyre and Sidon. He had shone light into the dark corners of their entrenched blindness, but they refused to change. He told his disciples to leave them.

Now in this Gospel, a Gentile woman shines the light into Jesus' pastoral approach and thinking, to bring him to his true mission. Her persistent faith widens the scope of his mission to include Gentiles.

As man, Jesus is totally focused on his Father's command to bring back the lost sheep of Israel before the final end-times. He had commanded his disciples in mission to go only to the lost sheep of Israel. That was the approach of the Apostles, even Paul, first to go to the Jewish people and later to the Gentiles. But this pagan woman broke down the barrier and forced Jesus to open his eyes — he learnt from the encounter.

Matthew took this story from Jesus' ministry to shine a light on the dark places, the biases in his own community. The failure to observe practices on the washing of hands does not exclude anyone from eating at the Lord's table, nor does being a Gentile exclude a person.

Matthew took Mark's story but made it harsher, to bring out the struggle within his community. For example, the disciples' plea to Jesus to get rid of her, echoed some of the attitudes in Matthew's community. Ghandi was attracted by Christianity and decided to go to a Christian church. But he was told, 'Go and worship in your own community.' Secondly, Matthew changed Mark's Syro-Phoenician woman to a Canaanite, a traditional enemy of Israel. Jews called Gentiles 'dogs.' But Mark softened the insult by referring to puppies or house dogs that were loved by a family.

This Canaanite woman sought help for her daughter possessed by a demon. Love and faith go together in her. Matthew heightened the tension between Jew and Gentile to get his community to open themselves to Gentiles, to shine the spotlight on their ingrained bias. Matthew showed the battle of wits between Jesus and the woman; she refused to take offence because she was doing battle for her daughter, and with humour she outwits Jesus. 'Yes, Lord, I know that the Jews have a special place in God's plan, but surely the puppies under the table can get the scraps that fall from the master's table?'

Surely we Gentiles can take part, somehow, in the Church's fellowship?

Jesus' admiration for her faith brought praise and healing for her daughter, from a distance. The incident highlighted the depth of faith of Gentiles who believed when Jesus' own people did not. She called him from the outset, 'Lord, Son of David,' (messianic titles) and did not deviate. She is one of the great women of the Gospels, opening the doors of the Kingdom, and the Church to

Gentiles. There were many implications for all of us from this Gospel, regarding our biases; who we exclude or include, what our entrenched positions are; how at the same time to be true to the Gospels.

Alan Paton, in his novel, *Ah, But Your Country is Beautiful* (Penguin Books, 1983) tells the story of Robert Mansfield, principal of a well-to-do white boys high school in South Africa, and a famous footballer. He arranged football matches between his boys and black boys in a neighbouring school. When apartheid was enforced in the 1970s, Mansfield was told to stop. He promptly resigned as principal in protest against apartheid. A black activist Nene Emanuel, who heard of Mansfield's stand, joined him and said he would be wounded but wanted to fight alongside him. Mansfield asked Nene why he wanted to be wounded. Nene replied that after he died the Big Judge will ask him, 'Where are your wounds?' If he had none, then the Judge would say, 'Wasn't there something worth fighting for?'

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isa. 22:19-23

Rom. 11:33-36

Mt. 16:13-20

Steve Hooker in the 2008 Beijing Olympics soared high in the Bird Cage, Beijing, reaching with all he had cleared the bar at 5.95 metres, and snatched gold from his Russian competitor, Evgeny Lukyanenko. It was a magnificent pole vault. I held my breath with many an Australian, as he raced forward, hoping he could make it on his last attempt, and he did.

Peter also, in his confession of faith soared beyond popular opinion, beyond his contemporaries, to the truth of who Jesus is. Faith gives the ability to see further, to see deeper, to see beyond appearances to what lies hidden. Peter not only saw, but he also acted on what he saw. He committed himself to the truth he discovered, and in the midst of the inevitable struggles, he kept allowing the Lord to pick him every time he failed.

The place was Caesarea Philippi, in northern Galilee, named after Herod the Great's son Philip, who made it his capital. It stood on the site of an ancient grotto dedicated to the god of nature, Pan, on a high rock, above a cave, the god of the underworld. It is here that Jesus asks the disciples, 'Who do you say I am?'

In the context of the story as Matthew narrates it for us, we might think of Peter listening to the variety of opinions being offered. 'Yes,' he might be thinking to himself, 'there is some truth in these notions, but they are not enough. There's more to Jesus than this.'

We might find ourselves in the same situation as we listen to people talk about Jesus today. 'He was a great prophet,' they might say. 'He was a brilliant and gifted teacher.' Others might see it differently. 'He was,' they might suggest, 'a man who left us a vision beyond compare, of what life could and should be like.' And in response, we might want to say with Peter: 'Yes, yes, but he was and is even more than this. He is not just a great figure from the past: he lives today, and somehow or other, we find the meaning of our life in him.'

For Peter, as he listened to the sincere attempts of others to put words to their experience of Jesus, the answer came with great clarity — 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

This was an act of faith built not on a doctrine he had been taught, but on his experience of the living Jesus. He knew there was more to Jesus because he knew Jesus and loved him.

Peter's belief in Jesus was built, too, on the rock of a gift given to him by the Father of Jesus, a gift of revelation. It was a gift of seeing more deeply, more truly. And because Peter knew Jesus and loved him, he was able to receive the Father's gift. For a moment, Peter is where Jesus is. It is a unique experience of Jesus for Peter, seeing Jesus almost from the inside, that enables Jesus to entrust the care of the community to him. And Peter is given a new name in that place, 'Rock' on which the Church is built, not dedicated to a pagan god, but to the one true God.

Faith is a journey. Peter experienced the highs of being with Jesus in ministry, doing great things, and the lows of betrayal, of sinking in the storm. But wherever Peter found himself, there he found Jesus. This was faith for Peter: to know that no matter how he failed or abandoned Jesus, Jesus would never fail of abandon him.

This is faith for us, too. It is not only about having the right words, although getting it right is very important; faith is more than getting it right in our heads: we must also get it right in our hearts. 'Do you love Me?' Jesus asks Peter. It is the same question Jesus asks us.

Peter, the man of little faith, will be entrusted with the keys — to maintain the unity and faith of the disciples. But he himself will need the keys of forgiveness with his many denials — and so should compassionately deal with others. The Church, the Body of Christ, is meant to be a compassionate community that can withstand evil, because Christ is somehow incarnate in its members. If we believe Jesus is the Lord of all peoples, the key to every human door, we ourselves have the power to open or close that door.

Dorothy Day tells the story of Charlie, an old Jew who regularly had a meal at her soup kitchen during the Depression. As a little boy he had wandered into a Catholic ghetto and was brutally bashed. Dorothy said, 'Charlie will never say the name Christ, because of the behaviour of Christians.'

Jesus' question: 'Who do you say I am?' is not only about creed, but also about how I am going to live that belief.

Second Homily

We are used to opinion polls being taken for any number of reasons, such as: who should get the Brownlow medal; win the Logies, or be the next prime minister? Jesus takes his own opinion poll: 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' All his apostles know what the local gossip is. But when Jesus asks, 'Who do you say that I am?' they are silent. Only Peter spoke up. 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

Between the two responses there is a leap over the abyss, a 'conversion'. To answer the first question, it was only necessary to look around, to have listened to other people's opinions. But to answer the second question, it was necessary to look inside, to listen to a completely different voice, a voice that was not of flesh and blood but of the Father in Heaven. Peter was enlightened from on high.

It is the first clear recognition of the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth in the Gospels. The first public act of faith in Christ in history. Think about the wake that a big ship makes in the sea. It widens as the ship goes forward until it is lost on the horizon. But it begins at a single point, which is the ship itself. Faith in Jesus Christ is like this. It is a wake that widens as it moves through history, and travels to the very ends of the earth. But it starts at a single point. And this point is

Peter's act of faith. 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'

To indicate that it is not only Peter's faith, but Peter himself, Jesus uses another image, which implies stability rather than movement. It is a vertical rather than a horizontal image. 'You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church.'

The other Gospels tell of Peter's confession of faith, but it is only Matthew who links Peter's confession to the Church. The Church is rooted in the confession of Jesus as Messiah, Son of God. Peter's confession of Jesus is not the result of an opinion poll. The insight about Jesus comes as divine revelation. He doesn't reason his way to the acknowledgment of who Jesus is. Nor is Peter's role as vicar of Christ the result of an opinion poll. His role in the Church is a divine gift. We call it the Petrine charism that continues in the Church till the end of time.

Jesus changes Simon's name to Cephas, Peter — 'rock'. The true rock and cornerstone is, and remains Jesus himself. But once Jesus rose and ascended into heaven, this 'cornerstone', though present and active, is invisible. It is necessary for a sign to represent him, a sign that makes Christ, who is the 'unshakable foundation', visible and efficacious in history. This sign is Peter and after him, his vicar, the Pope, successor of Peter, as head of the college of apostles.

We popularly think of Peter as keeper of the keys, standing by the pearly gates to let people in or bar them from entering. But the gift of the keys goes back to Isaiah 22 where God elects Eliakim and puts on his shoulder the key of the house of David. It meant he was the highest official in the king's court. He was next to the king, like a prime minister able to interpret and enact decisions. Jesus uses this well-known Jewish symbol to constitute Peter as his chief executive officer among the Apostles.

It was a special authority to prescribe laws and judgments for the community or to dispense with them. This makes Peter the ruler of the Church, the one whose decisions in faith will be confirmed by God. As God makes Peter his choice, so Christ is seen to make Peter's decisions at one with God's. Matthew later extends this authority to the whole body of disciples in chapter 18.

Let's get back to Jesus' question. It's as relevant today as when spoken to the Apostles two thousand years ago. 'Who do you say I am?' There are so many wrong interpretations, like Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* which reduces Jesus to merely human. Yes, Jesus is fully human, but he is also Son of God, truly divine.

Jesus asks us, 'Who do you say I am?' It is a question asked in humility and love. It is a question to summon a response from the silent depths of our heart. It is a response that needs to be shared with others.

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jer. 20:7-9

Rom. 12:1-2

Mt. 16:21-27

Two things confront us, no matter who we are or what our belief system is: death and suffering. It comes as a shock to us, as it did to Peter. Like Peter, our instinctive reaction is, 'This must not happen!' We can't dig deeper and find meaning to our suffering. Our thinking is too human; we need to get back to that earlier blessing given to Peter — to see how the Father sees. It is not flesh and blood that reveals this to us, but our Father in heaven.

We need to be taught by Jesus, because there are so many different attitudes to suffering and death. It is difficult to change our thinking about such things because they seem so real, so tragic, so final. In their presence even Jesus wept (John 11:35). For the non-believer and the atheist, they are final. No wonder euthanasia is so attractive to them. John Buchan said: 'They have no invisible means of support.' They rely on the opinion of others around them, and not on God. It all seems so pointless.

Despite his being the privileged recipient of divine revelation, Peter's grasp of Jesus' mission remained incomplete. He and the remaining disciples had a long and painful journey before they could reconcile two seemingly incompatible truths: that Jesus is the unique Son of God and that he 'must' enter into the pain and suffering of this world to heal it from within.

We can't explain the connection between God's cause and suffering, but they go hand in hand. Nelson Mandela gave up a lucrative law career to espouse the cause of his people. He had to leave his wife and family, constantly hiding and on the run from police. He spent 27 years in jail, much of it on Robbens Island. Mandela brought about the end of apartheid. In standing for what's right, it's not the short term, but the long term that matters.

After 33 years, Jesus faced the future before him and voiced it to Peter and the disciples. He knew that the Kingdom of God cannot come without suffering. But like Peter we fight and deny things that are difficult. Seeming good will, expressed in concern for what's best for a person, can often conceal self-will, wanting things to be my way. Peter's argument was: 'If Jesus is going this way of suffering, he can't expect me to follow.' Jesus had to be redirected. Peter didn't want a suffering Messiah; he wanted a glorious Messiah. He ranted and raved against Jesus: 'Heaven forbid that a good God would want anything bad to happen to you.' Peter's forceful attack was a serious temptation for Jesus. Here was his friend, the one he had chosen as top man, undermining his mission. And Jesus pulled Peter up sharp before he infected the others.

The struggle was between two ways of thinking: God's thinking and 'suit yourself' thinking which really is an obstacle to growth. When parents excuse their children's bad behaviour by saying 'Oh, he or she is just going through a rough patch', they miss a key moment to teach values. These moments are not only on a personal scale, but much wider. Who will confront those in

power and protest against injustices that need to be righted?

Jeremiah was given the task to warn Jerusalem; their sins had earned the destruction of the temple, its worship, and the city by Nebuchadnezzar, and his own people being led into exile. He tried to warn them to avert the imminent destruction, but the reactions he got were attempts on his life, being made a laughing-stock, and being physically attacked.

His complaint was not about his treatment by people, but to God who called him from an early age to be a prophet, wringing from him the dramatic accusation to God: 'You have seduced me!' God's words to him are hard; he has to speak them forthrightly to the people. If he holds back, they burn like a fire within him. The cause he had received from God, his word had to be spoken.

Jesus confronts Peter. It was only last week that Jesus had called Peter 'Rock' because through faith he had touched God's mind. Today Peter is called a 'stumbling stone', a 'Satan' because his thinking is too human. He is a Satan, getting in the way of God's will for Jesus. Nothing must divert Jesus from doing his Father's will. Jesus says to Peter, horrified at the prospect: 'Peter, I know the will of my Father for my life. It entails the cross and I'm going that way. Get behind Me.' It's only as we get behind Jesus and walk in his footsteps, beginning to take on the mind of Christ, that we can face tough decisions.

Paul challenges us, 'Do not be conformed to today's standards. Put on the mind of Christ; undergo a spiritual revolution in your thinking so that you can know God's will for your life.'

We don't have to follow the crowd. Putting on the mind of Christ means putting off sin. At the centre of sin is 'I'. 'I did it my way.' Jesus challenges us to put the selfish self aside, both in ourselves and in our relationships. The desert Fathers said: 'At the door of your mind there is a sentinel who, as thoughts come in through your senses, asks: "Whose side are you on? For Christ or against him?"' If we follow Christ we need to know his mind, choose the right, and stay the course. The Word of God and the teaching of the Church are sure guides along the way.

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ezek. 33:7-9

Rom. 13:8-10

Mt. 18:15-20

Happy Father's Day to all our dads, grandpas, and significant role models, teachers, and single men. On a day like today we want to thank you very sincerely. In all of us there is a great nostalgia, a longing for dad's presence, to know the warmth and strength of his role-modelling for us his sons, and his loving protection of his girls as a reflection of his deep love for his wife.

Take that line in Ezekiel: 'God has appointed you as sentry to the house of Israel.'

God has appointed you to be husband and father, no matter how you see yourself or rate your performance. God has put you here in this role, graces and strengthens you with authority for it. God has appointed you sentry.

The context in Ezekiel is that Jerusalem is about to be invaded by Babylon. If the prophet doesn't sound the alarm, no-one will be spared. A sentry is one who becomes aware of the enemy and warns of the danger. As father, you are on the lookout for your children. In a video clip I saw, the father said he would run in front of a bus to save his child.

But a father can't be everywhere. He needs to listen to his wife who is often more aware of deeper issues with a child. An exasperated mum might say, 'Just lookout when dad gets home.' If there's teamwork between you, at times you must discipline your child but often you are a softie inside. However, do not abdicate this role. The authority of you and your wife comes from authoring your child. You have calling power — calling your children to be the best they can be.

There's an African saying: 'It takes a village to raise a child.' It's true. A supportive community supplies different kinds of inputs for a child's growth. The charge of being a sentry applies to us all. To have authority a dad needs to be informed.

Jesus' admonition in Matthew's Gospel can apply not only to home but also to work. A fellow told me he found the words of today's Gospel to be the most challenging in the New Testament, partly because the directives were so clear and because, like many of us, the avoidance of confrontation was strong in him. He recently gained a new insight into the Gospel passage.

The incident was this: He told a colleague about a project he had in mind, swore him to secrecy, only to learn that he had later announced it at a staff meeting. You've no doubt had experiences like this of someone taking your idea and claiming it as their own. The man who was wronged was furious, saying to himself, 'I should have known better than to trust him with a secret. He's famous for this.' The next morning, he drove straight to work, appeared at the office door, and told him how wrong he'd been. The other man admitted his error and blurted out, 'That's one of my problems and I've just got to work on it.' He was like the big salmon in a fish-shop window which had two signs beside it; one sign indicated the price, the other sign read 'If only I'd kept my mouth shut.' The incident brought them closer and into a more honest working relationship for the rest of

the project.

Notice two things about the process: first when we feel we've been wronged, we are the ones to seek out the other person and initiate reconciliation. Comments that don't help include: 'She did it; she has to come to me first'; and 'if you don't know what you've done, I'm surely not going to tell you'. Fostering resentment, harbouring grudges, gossip and back-biting have no place in the process.

Second, the purpose of initiating reconciliation is to regain a brother or sister in Christ back into the family, or community. The purpose is not to extract a confession, nor to dump all that has been building up in us on to them; it's not even necessarily to succeed in achieving a solution. The purpose is to restore the family into wholeness out of humility and being open to our own part in whatever has happened.

There is power in the father's word to affirm and build up, or to hurt. It needs a listening heart in you as father. When you and your wife are one in mind and heart about an issue and clearly say that to your children, the Lord promises to be with you. God has appointed you to be father. So, let's pray for our fathers, grandfathers and our single male role-models and acknowledge their authority to be sentries of our house and community.

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sir. 27:30–28:7

Rom. 14:7-9

Mt. 18:21-35

There are times in our lives when we are badly hurt by family members, friends, associates at work, university or in any field. The hurt goes deep and festers unless we can resolve it. Some take it to court; walk away from a business; others stew it over, and can make themselves ill in the process. Harboring thoughts of ill will towards the person harms us more than the other.

We may have heard or experienced times when the tide turned, and we could get revenge. Paul in Romans (12:20) taught us not to seek revenge but heap love on the one who hurt us.

Thomas Fleming tells a story about his father, a Catholic immigrant in Jersey City in the 1900s who was desperately in need of work. The people next door, the Blaines had a watch factory which paid one dollar a day, good money at that time. It was back-breaking work. Each day he joined a line going into the factory and had to walk past a clerk in high collar who asked, 'Are you Catholic or Protestant?' If you said, 'Catholic,' the clerk would say, 'No work today.' Thomas' father was really struggling and needed the money. He gritted his teeth and said, 'Protestant.'

Thomas' father worked with others through the ballot box to break the political control of Mr Blaine. The Depression sealed his fate, his factory went into receivership. In the 1940s Thomas remembered a man, down and out, who walked up the icy path to his father's house. It was Blaine's son who had hit hard times. He asked for work. Fleming's son thought, 'This is a chance to get revenge.' Instead, his father put out his hand, said, 'Nice to meet you, Mr Blaine. What work do you do?' and promised to help him.

Thomas ends his story with these words: 'Mr Blaine disappeared into the windy night. I sat on the stairs, thinking of those ragged lines filing into the watch factory each morning to accept their humiliation...They were part of history now...with five minutes of matter-of-fact kindness my father had healed the wound and proved to me the ready power of his quiet faith.' It is a powerful story of forgiveness (William Bausch, *Story Telling the Word*, 23rd Publications, 1996, pp 174-5).

Peter must have thought he did well with his 'forgiving the person who hurt him seven times'. But Jesus challenged him, and us, with God's unlimited forgiveness. He did it by means of a parable. A parable can be either a window to let us look into a situation, or a mirror to reveal our true motives. So, for example, when we forgive, is our motivation one of fear of being punished by God, (thrown into jail) if we do not forgive, or is it a forgiveness that comes from the realisation that we have been forgiven freely and fully by God?

Let's look at the parable! One servant owed his master 10,000 talents and a second servant who owed the first servant one hundred denarii. A denarius was payment for a day's wage, like the dollar in the story, but a talent was the equivalent of 6,000 denarii. That meant the first servant owed his master 60 million denarii equivalent to 160,000 years of work. The same plea came from

both servants. The first made an impossible promise to pay back, but he'd never live that long (160,000 years). The second servant could reasonably pay three months of debt. The incredible mercy of the master completely wiped out the debt of the first servant.

Yet it's as if the first servant suffered from amnesia and had a total lack of gratitude for the master's mercy. And in strict justice demanded his 100 denarii from the second servant. When the second servant couldn't pay, he put him in jail so that his family would scrounge to get him out.

When the master heard of it, the rest was history. 'So, you want justice, not mercy? Well, let there be justice!'

Someone suggested that when we pray the Our Father, we should say, 'Do not forgive us our trespasses, as we do not forgive those who trespass against us.'

Robert Louis Stevenson always prayed nightly with his family, ending with the Our Father. Once as they were about to finish, Stevenson quickly got up and went out of the room. His wife followed and asked if he were ill. 'No,' he said, 'but I am not fit to pray the Lord's Prayer today.'

The parable shifts to be a mirror that reveals our deepest motives, as Jesus says: 'And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother or (sister) from the heart.' In the first reading, Shirac the teacher, gives us three motives to overcome our amnesia of God's mercy and to learn to forgive. Three times he says, 'Remember'.

'Remember your death and stop hating; remember the commandments, and do not bear your neighbour ill will; remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook the offence.'

We have to stand before God, not only at the end of our life, but already here and now.

Nelson Mandela was asked by President Clinton, his friend: 'Aren't you still angry at the way they treated you in Robben Prison for 27 years.'

'Yes, I am angry but if I continue to be angry, they will still have me in prison.'

If we forgive, we set ourselves free and cooperate in God's work.

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isa. 55:6-9

Phil. 1:20c-24, 27a

Mt. 20:1-16a

In the Gospel, the men at the end of the line were not dole bludgers, but husbands desperate for work. They were standing out in the heat in the market-place, waiting for hours, hoping to get some work to support their families. Without that one day's wage their wife and children would go hungry. We've had smaller experiences of being chosen last, such as at school during the sports period when people were being picked for a football or netball team. The two captains chose the best ones for their side; the weaker players were left to the end, and only grudgingly accepted in. We've been stirred by films when a hopeless team through sheer hard work wins the trophy.

Children love stories with reversal of fortune, like Cinderella who did all the dirty work and was put down by her two lazy sisters who went off to the ball; but when the handsome prince came from the ball with the glass slipper, it was only Cinderella's foot that it fitted. There are stories of the youngest son of the family, the last in the line, who would inherit nothing of the family estate. He is the one who marries the beautiful princess.

I think it is the child in God who delights in these stories of reversal from real life, such as Bernadette Soubirous to whom our Lady appeared at Lourdes. Her dad was out of work; the only home they had was an old disused jail; and Bernadette was slow, found study hard, and had the beginnings of TB. She was fourteen when Our Lady appeared to her near an old tip on the River Gave where she was collecting firewood. In Franz Werfel's film when Bernadette, after all the struggles with authorities, was put in a convent, an old nun was jealous of her. The old nun asked God: How come this wretched girl had these visions while she a dedicated nun spent hours in prayer, fasting, depriving herself of sleep and had received no favours from God? She gave Bernadette a hard time with heavy chores. Once she asked Bernadette why she was limping, no doubt wanting sympathy, until Bernadette showed her the ravages of TB on her body. It was Bernadette's obedience and total trust in God that God and Our Lady saw and blessed, but not without suffering.

The labourers in the marketplace were obedient and went to work in the vineyard when the master said, 'Go ye into my vineyard.' The master at the beginning told the first group of workers what they would get, one denarius for the day, and they were quite happy, that is, until the master started with the latecomers and gave them the same amount. The first now expected to get more, but they didn't! No wonder they were angry and disgruntled.

Put yourself in their shoes. You stayed out all night to get tickets for the Grand Final, and then on the day, as you are filing through the turnstiles, one of the officials comes out and gives free tickets to people at the end of the line who have just come in the last five minutes. We're not happy. It's not fair. This is a reversal that we don't like. It's all right for fairy stories and for saints. The officials may have had the right to give free tickets to who they wanted. We demand to know

what's going on, what's the point of the story.

Remember the story is about the Kingdom of Heaven, or God's way of looking at things, as the first reading says. The Pharisees' complaint against Jesus is that they are the favoured ones in God's eyes; they've kept the law and earned better treatment; but here is Jesus mixing with tax collectors, sinners and claiming that this last group have turned their lives around through his preaching and healing. They have entered the Kingdom of God ahead of them. Instead of rejoicing that this has happened, the Pharisees stay aloof; they have some claim on the Kingdom ahead of this riff raff. On the basis of justice, they have merited to be first. They most likely would have condemned Jesus' words to the thief on the cross. 'This day you will be with me in paradise,' he told the thief who stole into the Kingdom at the last minute.

There's no first and last in God's eyes. Surely God's comfort is here. No matter when a person enters the Kingdom, late or soon, that person is dear and precious to God. Certainly, the Jews are God's chosen people, but Jesus revealed God's loving choice to also include Gentiles. William Barclay wrote: 'There are people who think that because they have been members of a church for a long time, the Church practically belongs to them, and they can dictate and control its policy; they resent newcomers.' But all are welcome and equal in God's sight.

There is also the generosity of God which goes beyond justice. 'Are you jealous because I am generous?' As Mother Teresa said, it is not the amount of work done, but the love in which it is done that matters and marks the true Christian. God's thinking and action reverses our thoughts and actions. It is grace, God's free gift. Therese of Lisieux said: 'All is gift; all is freedom.' When we say yes to God then it lets God gift us in unexpected ways.

Second Homily

Prior to today's parable, Peter had asked, 'Lord, what's in it for us who have left everything to follow you?' Jesus' answer has nothing to do with enterprise bargaining, but everything to do with the goodness and generosity of God. It is a two-pronged parable — God's goodness and our response to such a compassionate, loving God.

The grapes ripen in September in Palestine and all hands are needed to pick them before rain spoils the crop. The men in the marketplace were not idlers, hanging around with nothing to do. They were labourers hoping for one day's casual work. The marketplace was the equivalent of a labour exchange. These men waited, hoping to start work at six in the morning until five in the evening, an 11-hour day. The ones employed at the eleventh hour hadn't straggled in late but had waited all day, standing in the dust and heat hoping for work. 'No-one has hired us,' they said.

If a day's wage (a denarius) was a subsistence wage for a man and his family, anything less was a cause of worry for him, and hunger for those who depended on him. You see the insight of the master into the condition of the workers' lives.

The parable has a modern ring: we are all feeling the heat of the day, the burden of recession created by Covid. We have entered a decade of tough and sober options after Covid; a decade of austerity and survival, but I also hope a decade of compassion. When we begin to feel the pinch ourselves, we know the pain in others and can move out of our isolation to help. A crisis does that!

When vulnerability meets power there is alienation, but when vulnerability meets vulnerability there is compassion. On the question of immigrants and refugees, Pope John Paul II said: 'We are Christians who have made the acceptance in solidarity with those in difficulty a distinguishing characteristic of our faith. Our faith demands that we reach out to all in difficulty.' Pope Francis goes even further in reaching out to refugees of different faiths.

The payment of all, starting with the last to the first has no real significance except to highlight God's compassion. So, the answer to Peter's question 'what's in it for us' is the same that everyone asks in this first part of the parable. But all people, no matter when they come, are equally precious to God. The master knows that all need enough to live on and maintain their dignity. But the first ones, seeing that the last ones get the same wage, are jealous. They are angry because God is good. At the last day, the least and the poor receiving the same reward is the reversal spoken of in the Gospel. Heaven starts here! It tells us, 'Let's deal with people the way God does.'

To Peter's question, Jesus is saying: there is one reward for all in the Christian life. Being longer in service in the Church doesn't mean we can claim greater honours or rewards. Some people feel, because they have been members of a church for a long time, that the Church belongs to them, that they can dictate and control its policy.

They resent the intrusion of new members, new blood, new insights. The Jewish Christians in Matthew's community may have felt like that towards Gentile converts.

I sometimes feel that as a church we're not as alive, because we have become middle class; we've lost touch with the hidden poor in our community.

In God's economy there is no such thing as a favoured nation status, no master race. We can learn so much from people who enter our community, no matter what their nationality, culture, economic level or personal situation. They enrich us. But we need to welcome them into our community. Against our calculation comes the freedom, the generosity in giving, the goodness of God that we have to imitate.

The parable can be extended beyond the social to teach us something of the comfort of God — no matter when a person is called, late or soon, in youth or old age — that person is loved and welcomed by God. The rabbis have a saying, 'Some enter the Kingdom in an hour, others hardly enter it in a lifetime.'

In the Book of Revelation there are twelve gates. There are three gates on the east, which is the direction of dawn, whereby a person enters in the glad morning of his or her days; there are three gates in the west which is the direction of the setting sun, whereby he or she enters in old age.

Both will receive the same gracious welcome from God. For both, Christ is waiting, for neither, life has ended too soon or too late. They may not have done the same work, but they receive the same pay. Everything is a gift.

Don't work just for what you can get. It's the spirit in which you work and the One for whom you work that makes the difference and the joy.

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ezek. 18:25-28

Phil. 2:1-11 or Phil. 2:1-5

Mt. 21:28-32

In Matthew's Gospel we have a series of confrontations with the Jewish religious authorities. Time and time again, they try to trap Jesus with questions such as: 'By what authority are you doing these things [like cleansing the temple] and who gave you this authority?'

Jesus' authority comes from God, but to claim this directly would place him in their hands on a charge of blasphemy. He confronts them instead with a question of his own concerning the baptism of John. Was John's baptism from God or was it of human origin? They thought if we say from God, then he will ask us why did we not believe him? If we say of human origin, we are afraid of the crowd's reaction. Trapped, they are forced to feign ignorance: 'We don't know.'

Jesus said, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I act.'

In this Gospel, Jesus pursues them with a story about two sons whose father asked them to go and work in the vineyard. The first said, 'No' then changed his mind and went. The second courteously said, 'Yes sir,' but didn't go.

Who did the will of the father? It's so easy to say 'Yes', to promise without performance. It's one thing for lovers to marry, but quite another thing to begin the real task of living together.

Do you remember the story in the case of David after his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband? The prophet Nathan came to David and told him the story of two men, a rich man with many flocks of sheep, and a poor man who had only one ewe lamb. The rich man had a visitor. He did not take a sheep from his own herd to feed his guest but took the poor man's lamb and killed it. David sprang to his feet: 'The man who did this deserves to die.' Nathan replied, 'You are the man.' The story seemed general enough at first, but as the listener is caught up in the story and is asked for his response, it reveals him to himself like a mirror and offers him the chance to change. David realised what he had done and repented.

Which son did the will of the father? They said, the first son, not the second. The first son represented the tax collectors and the prostitutes who said 'No' to God by their lifestyle, but at John's preaching they changed the direction of their lives and said, 'Yes' to God.

They were open to receive the message of Jesus which opened for them the Kingdom of God and showed them the true face of God the Father. Because of that they were ahead of the priests who were indifferent to John's call, for they felt neither the need nor the desire to change. Further in this chapter, verse 45, Matthew writes: 'When the chief priests and Pharisees heard his parables, they realised Jesus was speaking about them.' Instead of changing, they were intent on getting rid of him.

They had seen the change that John the Baptist brought about in the lives of the people on the

margins. 'Even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.' Jesus' parable is a gentle confrontation, revealing to them what they were like, hoping for a change of thoughts and actions. As parents with children know, direct criticism can make a person close down, and not hear what you want to tell them. But if they can see for themselves like in a mirror, then the opportunity to change is greater. Who are the hard teachers that we know? The ones who confronted us and helped us see what we were really like and put us on the right track.

The Pharisees were not truth tellers; they would say one thing but in their inner selves they did not intend to do anything about it. 'These people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.'

In the West we put a lot of store on the intellect, on the power of reason to arrive at truth. But our intellect can make us unwilling to accept other truths that might challenge our held position. Reason can become a barrier to change. Jesus wants to reach not only the intellect but the whole person. We often say, 'That's interesting, let's talk about it, explore it as an idea,' but actually do nothing about it. To meet God, demands openness to enter the realm of God and not just seek information about it. That's what the story does if told well.

The story makes the point that what God looks for is the final outcome in people's lives. God can put up with an initial 'No', and a lot of other 'No's' besides, on the way to a final and lasting 'Yes.'

Thomas Merton, the famous Trappist, describes the 'Yes,' he said to God in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He had just graduated from high school, was travelling alone in Europe, and was living a rather fleshy existence. One night in his hotel room, he was struck with an awareness of his sinfulness. He wrote: 'The whole thing passed in a flash. I was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the misery and corruption of my own soul. I was filled with horror at what I saw and my soul desired escape from all this with an intensity and an urgency unlike anything I had ever known before.'

For the first time in his life, he prayed to a God he had never known to reach down and set him free.

People will consider changing their personal life only if they are dissatisfied with it and have a deep-down desire to be better; second, there needs to be a trigger event, like Merton's hotel room experience. The third step is to make the first concrete move in the direction of a new life.

In the morning after his experience, Merton walked out into the sunlight. His soul was broken with sorrow and contrition. Although he was not yet Catholic, he went to a church and prayed the Our Father slowly with all the faith he had. After his prayer he went into the sunlight again. He felt reborn. He found a low stone wall and sat on it and rejoiced in his new-found peace of soul. It was a peace he had never known. He still had a long way to go, but it was the beginning of his conversion such as the first son might have experienced (narrated by Mark Link, pp 217-8).

Ezekiel makes a similar point. God judges each one of us according to our conduct. There is no

room for complacency. We can't presume on our former acts of goodness to offset giving in to temptation in later life; but equally, if we've had a 'bad past,' we need not think it will dog our steps forever — we can break free. For Jesus the great tragedy of many of the religious leaders was that they only *thought* they wanted to do God's will. Those whose grasping and immoral lives they had despised were now changing, putting their past behind them, and showing the fruit of repentance in lives offered to God's service. Lord help us to say, 'Yes', and mean it.

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isa. 5:1-7

Phil. 4:6-9

Mt. 21:33-43

There are no greater words of madness in the scriptures than the words of the owner of the vineyard: 'I will send my son. They will respect my son.' Madness, because surely he must have seen the murderous intent of the tenants, how they treated the servants, the prophets, sent to them. Yet he decided to send his only son and heir, the climax and completion of that prophetic voice. This may have been the last parable spoken by Jesus, possibly after the cleansing of the temple. The Jewish religious leaders had resolved to make an end of Jesus. Calvary was not far away.

This parable was an insight into the heart of God who acts not rationally but out of wide-open, unconditional love. God loves his Son and sends his best and greatest love to us, hoping we could do no other than reverence Jesus and respond to love in our turn.

Thomas More's favourite daughter, Meg, came to him in the Tower of London because of his prophetic stance against Henry VIII's oath, for which he lost everything and was imprisoned. She said: 'In a nation that was in any way decent, you would have been rewarded, given the highest place in the land.' In desperation, she pleaded: 'In reason's name, haven't you done enough?'

'Meg,' Thomas replied, 'in the last analysis, it is not a matter of reason but of love.'

There's a great deal of attention to the landowner who gave us the vineyard. We did not create it, plant the vine, build the watch tower, dig the winepress, nor put a hedge around it. The vineyard was leased to us, we did not own it, we are tenants; God gave it to us hoping for the fruit of love that we might produce for the Kingdom.

One point of the parable is: the earth does not belong to us; life does not belong to us. We don't own it. We are all renters here, no-one has a down payment on the condominium, it's all rental units. Everyone is a tenant on the earth. The earth is not our possession. It is somebody else's possession. We get to participate in the mysterious universe of time and space, but we don't own it. We are tenants. There is a deep drive in us to possess it. But all we can do is acknowledge our tenant status and participate in its gift. And offer its reality to the one who does own it.

We do not want to be reminded that we are passing through. Birth and death are truths of that fact. We want to forget it and build here a lasting abode. The one who owns it sends people to remind us, 'By the way you are renting here.'

We do not want to hear this, so we kill the messenger. We want to possess and are willing to kill to get it. 'Here is the heir, come let us kill him and seize his inheritance. We can have it all.'

A very moving and true story that Amy Nguyen sent many of us, one of death and birth that reminds us of our tenant status, and of the love that surrounds us. After the Japanese earthquake had subsided, when the rescuers reached the ruins of a young woman's house, they saw her dead

body through the cracks. But her pose was somehow strange, she knelt on her knees like a person was worshipping; her body was leaning forward, and her two hands were supported by an object. The collapsed house had crushed her back and her head. With so many difficulties, the leader of the rescuer team put his hand through a narrow gap on the wall to reach the woman's body. He was hoping this woman could be still alive. However, her cold body told him that she had died.

He and the rest of the team left this house and were going to search the next collapsed building. For some reason, the team leader was driven by a compelling force to go back to the ruined house of the dead woman. Again, he knelt and put his hand through the narrow cracks to search the little space under the dead body. Suddenly, he screamed with excitement, 'A child! There is a child!' The whole team carefully removed the ruined objects around the dead woman. There was a three-month-old little boy wrapped in a flowery blanket under his mother's dead body. Obviously, the woman had made the ultimate sacrifice, and saved her son with her body. The little boy was still sleeping when the team leader picked him up. The doctor came quickly to examine the baby. After he opened the blanket he saw a mobile phone, the text message on the screen said, 'If you can survive, you must remember that I love you.' The rescuers passed this phone around; everybody who read the message wept. 'If you can survive, you must remember that I love you.'

Some scholars say Calvary was a quarry. Some of the stones had gashes in them and were rejected, but these stones were used to steady the cross of him crucified whose very life said, 'Remember that I love you.' What amazes me, is that if we believe in Jesus, crucified and risen, that we become heirs, co-heirs with Christ. Jesus becomes the cornerstone of believing Jews and Gentiles. Jesus has not rejected the Jewish people; he only confronts the blind, hardened religious authorities. The parable is not an excuse for anti-semitism.

The heartbeat of God's love and the promise of the fullness of the Kingdom remain constant. It is the love of God and Jesus who died for us who call us today and say, 'Remember that I love you.'

Second Homily

I have been fascinated by St Brendan the voyager who in a feather and wood boat, with seventeen other monks sailed from Ireland to the western edge of America, Newfoundland, in the 6th Century. How did the monks do it? They kept close to the land; when they could not see the land they navigated by the stars. But when there was no land or stars in sight, they got to the bottom of their frail boat and listened to the currents. Familiar with the sea they listened to avoid whatever could hinder their progress.

Jesus listened to the poor, the lame, the blind and sinners, and ministered to their needs. This scandalised the authorities who lived by the law, aloof from the people. They failed to live by God's Word brought by the prophets and made visible in Jesus.

Near his death, Jesus is still trying to reach the authorities. He tells a parable which is both a window parable, that is an insight into the situation, and a mirror parable in which the authorities can see themselves.

Jesus asked them: 'What will the owner of the vineyard do to those tenants?'

They passed judgement on themselves: 'He will bring those murderous tenants to a wretched end.' They failed to produce fruit and gave only sour grapes.

The various anti-life Bills being pushed is a mirror of our present authorities. The former federal attorney-general Lionel Murphy, announced years ago that he was going to dismantle the Judeo-Christian ethic. That's precisely what these Bills intend. In the frailty of our situation, we need to go down in prayer and listen to the currents in order to respond to them.

The main current: we are in a secular society. There is a soft secular which is not anti-religious. It is disposed to religion if it helps, but it doesn't impinge on my life, except for baptisms, weddings, or funerals. In these Bills we are confronted with a hard, ideological secular which argues against faith. It wants to tell us what our story, identity and beliefs ought to be. It wants religion to disappear, stating that it has no place in society, it's against reason; it's private and can't claim a public voice; it's dangerous, against democratic progress and against women. The position of the Church is postulated as 'mere prejudice' and 'without adequate justification'.

If you eliminate religion, you end up with a purely selfish humanism; there is no self-transcendence, no great social consciousness, no imagination. If God is absent, it relieves me of the burden of believing in anything. But God is still at the heart of the world. Who would have thought that the killing of the Son in order to seize the inheritance, would be used by God to make those who believe in Jesus, heirs and co-heirs of the Kingdom?

The debate about these Bills has made the issues clearer for me. It's about what it is to be human; not to be self-made, shaped by the culture, but to have our identity in God, shaped by God's choice of us. This identity is our mission. At this time, we are called to critique the culture, at other times to affirm what is best in it. Thank God, that the other Christian churches are taking a stand against these Bills which on the pretext of choice forces people, doctors, nurses, pharmacists to act against their conscience. We are invited to pray with other Christian churches for our nation. Let's be warriors in prayer!

What we need today are pilgrims, like Brendan, who make a deliberate journey, who know where we've come from and where we are going; who claim our Christian identity and respond to a call we have received; who journey in faith towards an encounter with Jesus, to love him, to know him, and to confess him in word and deed. The monks were explorers and missionaries who took incredible risks to start Christian communities in the wild places on the edge of their world. We must dare to be missionary at the heart of our so-called civilised society.

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isa. 25:6-10a

Phil. 4:12-14, 19-20

Mt. 22:1-14 or Mt. 22:1-10

On Friday night I was preparing a young couple for marriage, the young woman had just come back from two weeks in Greece and the islands and was desperate to get back. The best two weeks of her life, she said, she was with friends, away from the demands of work, taken by the beauty of the islands around her, the freedom, and the feeling of carefree abandon. We search for paradise, somewhere that meets our deepest yearnings.

The image of paradise for the Jew was a banquet enjoyed with love and laughter, the Covenant relationship of God with his people, on this mountain is spread out fine food with the best wines. In the Gospels, it is a wedding banquet of the Son into the joy of which the Jewish people are invited.

An American pastor gave his parishioners helium balloons and asked them to release them when they experienced joy during the service. At the end of the service most people were still hanging on to their balloons. Are we hanging on to our helium balloons in case something better comes along?

Why are we reluctant to respond to God's invitation? In responding to God's loving demands we let down our defences and can grow beyond our own estimation. Francis Thompson says it beautifully in that line from his poem, *The Hound of Heaven*:

'...for though I knew his love who followed, yet was I sore adread, lest having him I must have naught beside.'

And in that vein the poem begins: 'I fled him down the nights and down the days, I fled him down the arches of the years...'

Matthew in the Gospel sketches out the whole of salvation history in two allegories. Note the difference between a parable and an allegory. In a parable there's a central message we wrestle with; in an allegory all the characters and events have meaning. In these two allegories there is first, God's choice of his people by Covenant. The Covenant is described as a huge banquet to which they are invited. The first servants are the prophets. The Jewish people reject the invitation by killing the prophets. The second group are the Apostles and Christian missionaries who share the same fate. The destruction of Jerusalem in CE70 and the invitation gone out to all the pagans, follows. In the second allegory, even Christians can't presume they are invited. They need to put on the garment of salvation, to put on Christ by being converted and changing.

The failure to respond applies to both the Jews and to us. Are we reluctant because we're hanging out for something better to come along? We want God to come down to our level. We settle for less, for fast food instead of the banquet; for a \$10 note instead of a bar of gold. I want my way of doing things and remain in my comfort zone. Why does this God disturb me? I'm afraid to say yes, because like Kitty in *Anna Karenina*, 'If I say yes to love where will you take me?'

'For though I knew his love who followed yet was I sore adread lest having him, I must have naught beside.'

God disturbs us because he wants to use us for a purpose beyond our making, a purpose beyond ourselves. Mother Teresa of Calcutta wrote about Jesus wooing her; it was a honeymoon time as she responded to Jesus and decided to work among the poorest of the poor. But once she responded and searched for a flat with only a few dollars in her pocket, she experienced darkness right up to her death. The darkness was because God was taking her beyond the level of the senses into the realm of spirit, of God. Yet look at what God did through her!

Are we ready to say yes to God?

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isa. 45:1, 4-6

1 Thess. 1:1-5b

Mt. 22:15-21

Pharisees and Herodians came and asked Jesus whether they should pay the hated Roman tax or not. They had an answer ready in their pockets because they carried with them the coins a Jew had to buy to pay his taxes, coins with the head of the emperor on them. They didn't come for an answer, they came to trap him.

If Jesus said, 'No, you should not pay the tax,' the Herodians would report him to the Roman police. If he said, 'Yes, you should pay,' he would be caught by his own people as a collaborator.

Jesus knew they had only come to trap him. He knew they didn't care about the poor or the oppressed, so he asked them to show him one of those tax coins. One of them was naïve enough to do just that. He put his hand in his pocket and produced one. Jesus took the coin, tossed it head-side up and asked, 'Whose head and title is this?'

At the answer, 'Caesar's,' Jesus replied, 'If it belongs to Caesar, give it back to him.'

He successfully escaped their trap but put the onus back on them to decide for themselves where to draw the line between the emperor's jurisdiction and God's jurisdiction. They were amazed at Jesus' brilliance and left him alone.

In asking the question, 'Whose image is this?' Jesus takes the issue to a deeper level. The coin bears Caesar's image and belongs to Caesar. Humans, on the other hand, bear the image of God. They may pay the infamous tax, but they don't belong to the emperor. They belong to God, and that belonging has powerful implications, whether they are in church or engaged in social, economic, political, or religious spheres. Their primary loyalties don't switch when they move out of church and into parliament. That image of God moves us to challenge those governments which might act as if all citizens belong to the state or treat people as less than human.

Look at the words the Pharisees and Herodians use of Jesus: 'Teacher we know that you are true; you speak the truth to peoples' faces no matter who they are.'

It's a true picture of Jesus. But they are not truthful. They are saying one thing and intending another, and Jesus sees right through them. Jesus asks us to tell the truth even in difficult circumstances; to be truthful and yet to use prudence as Jesus did, not allowing ourselves to fall into other people's traps. There are times when every person must stand up and say what is right.

It's the same for adults. We are citizens of two worlds — citizens of this world and citizens of heaven. We have obligations toward each which we must respect. It is hoped that our dual citizenship and the obligation we have to each will never clash. But if they do, we must resolve them without compromise to our God or to our conscience.

This is nothing new to Catholics who have the example of Thomas More who remained true to

his conscience, saying, 'I die the King's good subject, but God's first.' Thomas More did not shirk the office of Chancellor when elected by the King, but he knew where he located himself before God.

Civil disobedience, non-violent protest, became an accepted response to unjust situations. Martin Luther King Jnr applied it with courage during the civil rights marches. Robert Kennedy wrote: 'Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation.'

Our first and basic loyalty is to God and to the deepest reality of being human. To change the life even of one person can result in the enrichment of many. This story to finish captures that thought. An old man shuffled through the dark, dreary streets of London in the autumn of 1741. His health was poor, due to an illness that left him partly paralysed, and, on the surface, there appeared to be little left for him in life. On returning to his lodging, he decided to open an envelope which had sat on his desk, unopened, for days. Inside was a letter asking him to set music to the words that were enclosed. After some reluctance, the man started work on the task. He became spellbound and hardly left his desk for almost a month. By the time he had finished, the world was given a great masterpiece — *Messiah*. The old man was George Handel.

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ex. 22:20-26

1 Thess. 1:5c-10

Mt. 22:34-40

Over the past three Sundays we have seen the Jewish religious authorities put questions to Jesus in order to trap him. Last week the Pharisees and the Herodians asked, 'Should we pay tribute to Caesar or not?'

As before, they came off second-best and went away defeated. They still wanted to kill him. They tried a different method. 'When the Pharisees saw that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they sent in one of their top lawyers, a scribe — (the scribes were trained in the minutiae of the 653 laws of the Torah) — to question Jesus. He asked: 'Which is the greatest commandment of the law?' Laws tend to overlap, so he was asking which law came first. What he wanted was an intellectual jousting match to put this upstart Jesus in his place.

Instead, Jesus went to the very heart of Jewish Law, the Shema O Israel prayer (Deut. 6:4) said by a Jew every day. 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind.' It's a matter of the heart, not simply an intellectual exercise.

Jesus is the only one who links Lev. 19:18 with Deut. 6:5: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' If God is the spiritual heart of our life, in loving our neighbour we are loving God. There is no separate holy existence. That's what Thomas Merton realised in a mall in Louisville, that he loved all these people even though he did not know them; and that there was no separate holy existence.

When we look at our day, what is the value of all that we do? Is it purposeful? We can feel hassled, or we can try to live Jesus' two-fold love in the mundane things we do — washing dishes, feeding the baby, making music, pushing the supermarket trolley, driving the car, reaching out in welcome, using the computer, cooking meals. The list is endless.

Vincent Pallotti taught that if we did all these things with the intention of doing them for love of God and others, they would become apostolic and would define us as apostles. He wanted a church alive, inviting everyone, and awakening in them all kinds of ministries, so necessary in our church today, especially if like-minded people come together in faith and love.

In the second reading, Paul's preaching by his life was more than words — it was power, the Holy Spirit and utter conviction. The Thessalonians took hold of the Good News and became imitators of Paul and of the Lord as they faced persecution with joy. In turn, they became ministers of the Gospels to others because of their renewed lives as servants of the living God.

Pallotti saw that God established a church and reached out to all of us, not just a clerical few. All were needed as apostles to carry Christ's mission to the wider community. A church without spectators.

The church is you and I, called to live decent, moral lives and bear witness to the Gospels. We are called to do this right here, in our homes, neighbourhoods, schools or places of work — in everyday living, loving, hurting, struggling, and dying. We choose love by enabling the image of God to emerge in others in the way we treat them, when depressed or ill.

Pallotti lived in the presence of the living, loving God — he knew that love costs. In the confessional, he gave his coat to a shivering man, and caught pneumonia and died. It was a foolish, stupid thing to do. But who said that love was logical? To love as deeply as to die on the cross; who ever said that was sensible?

Off the coast of Ireland, a 400-year-old ship was discovered. Found in the wreck was a ring which, after it was cleaned, had on the wide band a hand holding a heart. Below was the inscription, 'I have nothing more to give you.' These words could have been written on the cross of Jesus. 'I have nothing more to give you,' for on the cross Jesus gave us everything he had. He gave us his love; he gave us his life. He gave us all that one person could give to another. He had nothing more to give us. What are we prepared to give Jesus for all he has given us?

A parent responds to a baby's cry in the night; a nurse gently bathes a patient with bedsores; a teenager listens to a friend's tale of family tensions; a retired person volunteers for some charity; a motor mechanic repairs a traveller's car. All these scenes are ordinary. But love has been chosen, they are done with love.

Pallotti knew that apostolic action is the fruit of love; that it is love that keeps us working together unselfishly for God and others. He knew that anyone who offends love is a destroyer of the union that we Catholic apostles have with and for one another; it undermines the mission of Jesus. To live love makes Christ's mission possible:

- reach out
- come together
- love

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mal. 1: 14-2:2, 8-10

1 Thess. 2:7-9,13

Mt. 23:1-12

I want to talk on sincerity in service. How often have you been in a store and had to search for the assistant, or been served quite reluctantly at the counter, no smile or eye contact, as if they are doing you a favour. The word 'sincerity' comes from two Latin words, '*sine*' 'cera', 'without wax'. When a block of marble had a serious flaw, the ones selling it would cover the flaw with wax. When hot weather came and hit the pillar on the front porch of a villa, the wax would melt, and the marble would be seen for what it was — flawed.

Malachi in the first reading and Jesus in the Gospels get right into the priests and scribes and Pharisees, people in positions of authority, who are flawed. They are not into service, but into self-service. Authority does not mean asserting yourself over others, it is rather caring for those over whom God has put you in their service.

Jesus said, 'The greatest among you must be your servant.' But humility does not mean putting yourself down. It means knowing who you are before God, being your true self without airs and graces, and serving sincerely with all your gifts, abilities and acknowledged limits and weaknesses. Paul describes his service like a mother caring for his community, loving them, not only willing to preach but to lay down his life for them as a true witness to the Good News.

Pope Francis practices what he preaches; taking the name of the poor man Francis, he shows it in his dress, his accommodation, a chair instead of a throne, coming in a Fiat to the White House instead of a limo and police escort. He invites discussion for the good of others; at the Nessuno, the World War II graveyard on All Souls Day he called on all to stop the world going more forcefully into war; he requested a debate over ordaining married men for the remote villages in the Amazon; and he was willing to risk his life by going to dangerous places like Bolivia to bring opposing parties to reconciliation and life together, and to Iraq to pray for peace and respect of each other's religious beliefs.

Mother Teresa's humble service was not changed after she accepted the Nobel Peace Prize. She knew where she came from, from years of picking up people and babies that others walked over and refused to touch in the gutters of railway stations. She used the money to continue her work for the poor. God's word and the Body of Jesus she touched in the Eucharist were a living power that enabled her to touch the bodies of the poor. She put into practice Jesus' words, 'Whatever you do to the least you do to Me.'

Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees who said one thing and did another, often to the harm of others. The scribes may have been brilliant on the minutiae of the law; but there was no sincere love as they burdened people and refused to help or lift the burden they had imposed. Hypocrisy is an aspect of pride that makes us say things for appearances sake, things we

don't personally believe in or practice. We pontificate, we cover up our dark deeds with fine words.

Jesus is particularly hard on religious hypocrisy, which is a greater flaw because it is not expected from people who are officially religious. It offends greatly when the supposed holy ones set themselves above others, claim titles, the best seats, and put on religion as show.

The phylacteries are black boxes tied on the wrist and on the forehead in which the inscription from Deut. 6:8, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul' is kept before the eyes of those who wear them. But the words inside these boxes are not practised nor kept. Instead of being close to the people, they quite deliberately kept themselves apart. You've met people who foreclose too early in their development, they know everything and are arrogant, claiming a superiority they have not merited, or a self-sufficiency that separates them from their essential connectedness with others. 'Thank you, Lord, that I am not like the rest of men,' the Pharisee prayed before God.

Jesus put himself among people as humble servant. He promised the humble would be made great. Humility in Jesus' view is acknowledging our intrinsic worth as human beings, our dignity as children of God. We have only one Father. Self-inflation on the other hand seeks a position of dominance. When people give us an honest critique of ourselves or our work, how does it affect us? Humility keeps us open to grace and growth; arrogance slams the door.

We invite you to remember those who have sincerely served us over the years, all our loved ones who have passed away and have gone to their rest. We remember them, seek to imitate them, and pray for the repose of their souls. Come forward, light a candle for those dear to you.

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wis. 6:12-16 1 Thess. 4:13-18 or 1 Thess. 4:13-14 Mt. 25:1-13

In September 2015, Bart Cummings received a state funeral at St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney. He was known as 'the cup king', with twelve Melbourne Cup winners to his name. A few years ago, Bart Cummings' stables were visited by Health Department officials. A health inspector told him: 'Your stables are clean and well kept. Everything is in order, but there are too many flies.'

'Oh,' said Bart, 'how many flies am I allowed?'

Bart was noted for his one-liners. Wisdom is found by those who look for it.

We need wisdom as we race toward the finishing line, the end-time of our lives, as we strive to enter the Kingdom of God. The end may come suddenly and in the mad scramble to get in the door we may be left outside, crying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us.'

We need to be prepared because we do not know when that day will come.

How prepared are we? Jesus goes straight to the point with the parable of the virgins waiting with the bride for the bridegroom to come. When you read the parable, how many people can you count? Five wise virgins, five foolish ones, and the bridegroom. How many is that? Eleven? But what about the one who shouts, 'The bridegroom is here. Go out to meet him.' They had all fallen asleep. We the Church, singly and together, are meant to be awake. Sentinels who herald the Kingdom as it breaks in upon us. Are we awake?

The parable is about the unexpected coming of the Kingdom and our preparedness for the bridegroom who comes at midnight or at any hour. Wisdom was lacking in five of the bridesmaids. They might have thought 'I'll leave it till later. I'll go to confession later. I'll be reconciled with my cousin later; get my affairs in order later' — and the later becomes 'too late'. The wise five did not have an advantage over the others when the bridegroom came suddenly. All of them had fallen asleep. Except that the wise ones were prepared for the delay of the bridegroom and brought enough oil in their flasks along with their lamps. When the foolish ones trimmed their lamps and saw the flame fading fast, they asked the wise ones for some of their oil.

But they replied, 'There may not be sufficient for both you and for us.'

How is the oil in your lamp? Oil is the source of light, the deep resource within of enlightenment. What is our inner life like, what is our awareness of Jesus alive in us, his love burning in us? We might have felt disappointed at the wise virgins' response, 'Go and buy some oil for yourselves.' But you can't acquire wisdom from others like buying goods. It is something you work at in your own life.

Matthew states that wisdom comes from hearing the Word of God and acting on it; hearing and doing. Wisdom comes from trying to live the word and life of Jesus every day. Matthew is a tough

teacher about the end times, the day of the Lord's coming. He doesn't let us off the hook; either we keep the flame alive in our heart; we build our house on rock, we use the talents the master has given us, or we find ourselves outside, weeping and gnashing our teeth, because the Lord is going to exact an account from us.

I know a young man who was full of promise. He had an experience of the Lord in his life; he gave his life in service for a while. He married, but after a few years he gave God away and became very angry and bitter. He was living on the surface of life. Just listen to those terrible words of the bridegroom to the cry of the five foolish virgins, 'I do not know you.' Why? Because there is no resonance, no spousal relationship with the bridegroom; we have become strangers to him.

Matthew tells it as it is. The Lord is coming and wants to find us ready. If we are awake, we have time to change. For some of us the Lord's coming becomes a priority, maybe through illness, hardship, or the death of a loved one.

St Therese of Lisieux saw blood on her handkerchief when she coughed, she knew tuberculosis was taking hold. She quietly prayed, 'It is the sign of the bridegroom.' Charles De Foucauld, the founder of the Little Brothers of Jesus, killed by Tuaregs in his hermitage in the Sahara, predicted his own violent death, and wrote, 'Here is the bridegroom, this is how God showed his love for us.' He prepared for his life and death by making time in his life for moments of intimacy with the Lord.

It takes courage to face what needs to be done, and not to procrastinate. Whether that is downsizing and leaving the family home; the operation that is worrying us, or the flight overseas to be with a relative who does not have long to live. The Lord's coming is all around us. Be ready!

Are we ready for him?

Second Homily

'If only...' are two of the saddest words in our language. They speak of regret and lost opportunities. 'If only', thought the five foolish virgins, 'if only we had brought more oil. We didn't think the bridegroom would come so late and so unexpectedly as we sat by the bride, waiting to be the lighted escort of the bridal couple to the bridegroom's house. We hurried to buy more oil but arrived too late. We're kicking ourselves because here we are outside while the party is going on in the house. Sure, we've got oil now, but we missed the point, missed the purpose of it all.'

In village life, a wedding happened in two phases. First, the betrothal of the bride to the groom in her parents' home. She stayed there until her husband had his place ready. The second phase occurred when the bridegroom was due to take his bride home. The news went round, 'He's coming!' but they didn't know when he was coming. The bride's younger sisters or girlfriends would keep her company in the meantime; ready to light her way to her new home.

The second phase was a bit of fun. The bridegroom would delay and detour round the village

and then suddenly arrive at the bride's house to take her to her new home. The shout would ring out, 'The bridegroom is here!' Then there would be a mad panic as the young girls hurried to light their lamps and form a procession to light their way in the dark.

With a twinkle in his eye, Jesus said, the coming of the Kingdom would be like that — we don't know when or where.

The parable refers not just to physical death, but to all Christ's unexpected intrusions into our lives that take us by surprise. Sometimes he comes when we are our lowest ebb. When we are in pain, angry, bitter, struggling with our sexuality or the feeling of abandonment, this incredible loving presence appears, as if to say 'What's the matter with you? Just because it got a little dark you did not see Me. Be awake, don't let your heart fall asleep.'

When we least expect Jesus in the darkest part of the night, it's not our pleas that brings the master back or opens the door. He comes when he sees that we have completed our preparation. How do we prepare? By our attentiveness to Christ in the present moment and in gratitude for the gift of each day.

In dealing with the regret of 'If only', researchers found that if we could continue to be grateful for certain events each day then after a few months our sense of regret will diminish. Giving thanks takes us into a Eucharistic stance with Jesus, looking forward to his coming each day. Gratitude is the memory of the heart, recalling the wonderful things the Lord has done for us.

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Prov. 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31

1 Thess. 5:1-6 Mt. 25:14-30 or Mt. 25:14-15, 19-21

The servant was in shock. At his feet lay a sack bulging with a quarter of a million dollars. He blinked and looked around. The other servants were also rooted to the spot. Multiple bags of cash obscured their feet. This time the multi-millionaire, their master, had definitely taken leave of his senses. He was going away, didn't know when he would be back. 'I will be very interested to see what you can do for me,' he smiled. Then he was gone.

Didn't the master have anyone better to entrust his wealth? Why didn't he retain total control and transfer the funds to where he was going? What did he expect from casual help; and more puzzling yet, why did he trust them to do as he asked?

The other two servants emerged from the shock and dragged the money off to their quarters. The third servant grabbed his sack, straightened with panic in his eyes, then fled the estate but not before he grabbed a shovel from the shed. After the disturbing fortune was buried, he felt much better. The money would be waiting when the master returned, every cent accounted for. His master would be pleased.

What is the talent? It's not money. It represents the sum of our life entrusted to us by God. Our life is an undeserved gift that involves a task. Chapter 24 of Matthew had begun with the disciple's question: 'When will the end be, and what's going to happen then?'

Last Sunday, Jesus told us to prepare and be vigilant. This Sunday, he entrusts us with the fantastic gift to fully develop ourselves and to advance the Kingdom, according to our abilities. If we do this well, we are given greater responsibility and the joy of sharing the master's happiness, 'You have been faithful in little, now I will entrust you with more. Enter into my happiness.'

The response of the third servant asks us to consider how we will claim the future — will we simply bury the precious gift given to us, or will we act boldly, claiming the future as we push forward the Kingdom? We will all be called to an accounting.

Jesus is defending his ministry and reaching out to the religious leaders. They revolt against a God who asks for more than the normal. A God who unexpectedly enters their lives and throws everything into confusion, and who manifests in such an astonishing and revolutionary way, his own being in Jesus. Jesus illustrates that when God meets us, our images of God may need to change. It's change, unwarranted change that faces us and that has us questioning God. What is our conception of God?

Is God a puppeteer pulling our strings? Is life a plan God has for us? We're free within the range of its strings, but captive to its latitude? God the puppeteer becomes responsible for everything in our lives, not us. Everything is God's will — that the poor are poor, that earthquakes and tsunamis happen, that the Covid pandemic hits and human lives are lost. This spirituality feeds the notion

that God is responsible for evil, not us, not I.

Is God a magician, saving us from the realities of life? God moulds circumstances and situations to our liking — changes the red to green. If we do enough suffering God will give us blessings, like a vending machine. We don't see the changes and struggles of life as a stepping-stone to development.

God is not a puppeteer nor a magic act. God is the ground of our being, the energy of life, the goodness out of which all things are intended to grow to goodness. Our lives are given into our hands, and we must take charge before anything important comes to resolution. Change and struggle is the process that drives us to find God within us and in the darkness around us.

If we acknowledge God's relationship to us, that God enters our lives through Jesus, then we are called to live life differently. We are called to shape the world anew and to leave previous attitudes and assumptions behind. For seeing Jesus means active service, making the most of our gifts, bringing forth fruit and loving the will of the Father. If we do, we will be ready for the accounting and rewarded with the joyful response of the master, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'

Second Homily

If you had a six-year-old with no right hand and half a foot, and he asked you, as you watched the Grand Final: 'Do you think I could play footy? Do you think I could end up on the winning team?'

What would you say? 'Get real!'

And yet Tom Dempsey, an American footballer, had no right hand and only half a foot. He went to school and college and began to pace kick for his team. He got so good that he was signed up by the New Orleans Saints. On 8 November 1970, the Saints were trailing Detroit 17-16 with two seconds to go. The Saints had the ball and the coach tapped Tom on the shoulder and said, 'Give it your best shot.' Tom's half-foot made perfect contact 63 yards from the goal posts. Dempsey shattered the NFL field goal record by seven yards. The Saints won 19-17 in the last second (ibid. Mark Link, pp 248-9).

We are all gifted by God, but we need to give it our best shot. A talent in today's parable was worth 1,000 silver pieces each, worth approximately \$16,500 — a real gift. The master giving talents to each 'according to his ability' has changed our understanding of talents to one of personal gift. If we use our talents well it can lead to a fulfilled life.

Do we use our talents? Often, we put ourselves down, let our fears, inhibitions and limits determine us. To put ourselves down is to kill part of ourselves — burying part of ourselves as we bury our talent. We are given the raw materials with which to build our lives — we are to be the artisans of our own future. We are to trust the gifts God gives us and to stretch and dare our gifts.

When that goal went through, Dempsey would have defined fulfilment as a feeling of wellbeing and joy that comes from the realisation that he is creating himself — developing his potential as made in God's image. Fulfilment doesn't mean we have reached our destiny. Dempsey's goal was just one marker along the way — fulfilment means we are in the process of activating God's plan for us.

Browning observed: 'A man's reach must exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for?'

Although we depend on God, God wants us to dare, to risk, to show flair in our loving, our work, all we do for the building of the Kingdom of God.

The generosity of God who 'entrusted his whole property to us' must become the measure of our giving and sharing our talents. All the knowledge and skills we acquire are not for us only, but for the service of others.

Recently, I visited a young friend in the Royal Melbourne Hospital who had a brain tumour and was waiting for surgery. He reflected on how he had used his talents; that his focus on his career or watching his favourite television shows had made him neglect love for family or friends. When they rang during a show, he said – 'I'll ring you back' – instead of using the interruption as an opportunity to love. The more we love, the more capable we are of loving. The less we love, the less capable of love we become.

We can't blame others for our unused talent. The third servant took the money as a fearful risk rather than as a gift. He came back to the generous master and said, 'Here it is, all safe and sound, it's yours.' But the master wanted his servant to be as daring and extravagant as he was. Look at how the servant defends himself by blaming God instead of facing his own fear. Either we use our gifts, or we lose them.

A wife complained to her husband that he was ruining the lawn when he played cricket with his boys. The father's reply, which deeply influenced his son, was, 'Mary, we're not raising grass, we're raising boys.'

Because the father spent time with him and helped him develop his athletic gifts that son became a test cricketer for Australia. He also learned values: he resolved his house would be shared, and things would never get in the way of his children or people.

Don't let your generosity or gift be cramped by the criticism of others.

When have you given your best shot lately?

Christ the King

Ezek. 34:11-12, 15-17

1 Cor. 15:20-26, 28

Mt. 25:31-46

Mother Teresa of Calcutta took to heart Mathew's Gospel which begins with the words: 'When the son of man comes in his glory...' But he doesn't — he comes identified with the hungry, those who are unwelcome, imprisoned, and sick people.

Jesus captivated Teresa's heart. She was a Loreto nun teaching in a Catholic college for well-to-do girls in Calcutta. After she came back after a retreat, she saw poverty all around the train station and she gave her heart to Jesus for them, the poorest of the poor. In terrible conditions where people lived in despair, she began with Christ who sustained her, and five dollars.

Mother Teresa said she touched the Body of Christ each morning and went out to touch the Body of Christ in abandoned babies, helpless old people, homeless mothers. She did not spiritualise the Eucharist; she met Jesus in the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, and welcomed them into the unused places she managed to scrounge from the local council, her first home an abandoned shelter for pilgrims, putting them to shame because of their lack of action.

As we listen to the Gospel, we are taken into the story. A separation takes place into right and left, sheep and goats, and we don't know the basis of the separation. It's only when the King says, 'I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I was naked, I was sick, I was in prison,' and mentions the response of each group, that we get the answer.

Yet both groups declare, 'We didn't know it was you.' It's not even a matter of religion but of concrete action. An atheist; Sikhs delivering food; doctors, nurses and hospital staff risking their lives during the Covid pandemic in caring for the sick and hungry may not know Jesus, but they will be welcomed to heaven, perhaps even before religious people.

The ones who did not give food or drink, make welcome, clothe or visit the sick and the imprisoned said, 'If we knew it was you, your majesty, we would have been there. Yes, we would have been there for you. But there was only this sick guy. We didn't know it was you' (John Shea, *Gospel food for hungry Christians*, Mathew, disc six).

The ones who gave food, drink, welcome, clothing, medicine, and aid, also said, 'We didn't know it was you.' What is the difference between the groups? What is the point Matthew is making? It's the difference between living from the heart indiscriminately and loving only because of the loveliness of the object. Do we love from the heart, really take in the situation of the person before us or do we respond because the person is attractive? It gets down to how we see and treat people.

In the film, *Entertaining Angels, The Dorothy Day Story*, Dorothy the co-founder of the *Catholic Worker* during the Great Depression, when thousands of people were out of work, homeless and hungry, was visited by the Cardinal of New York who voiced the concern that her work was giving

the Catholic Church a bad name.

She replied: 'If you feed the poor, you're a saint; if you ask why they are poor, you are a communist. We do both, but we are neither saints nor communists.'

'But you embarrass the Church.'

'I'm sorry about that: I thought we are being church.'

'You threaten people by your whole way of living. Your devotion to the poor, and your insistence on being poor yourself. They ask a very uncomfortable question.'

'What do you think about changing the name of your organization? Just take out the word "Catholic". Then I won't have to be blamed for what you're doing.'

'I'm sorry. We are Catholic.'

'Well, I insist.'

'Your Eminence, you are the head of the archdiocese, and we are loyal sons and daughters of the Catholic Church. We are not going to change the name. But what we'll do is move across the bridge to Brooklyn. I'm sure that Bishop Malloy has plenty of people that he would like fed.'

'You wouldn't? They didn't tell us about people like you in the seminary. You set a very tough path for yourself, telling us things we don't want to hear. Loving people who are hardly lovable, giving and you get nothing back. I couldn't do it. I just wonder how long you'll be able to.'

Pope Francis challenges the comfort and cautiousness of clergy like that cardinal, church leaders and us also in his wonderful exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel* (EG). He is calling the whole church to obey the great commission to go forth, go out into the streets, and touch the suffering flesh of Christ in others' (EG 24, 29, 39,48).

'I prefer a church that is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out in the streets,' he said. (EG 45, 49) 'Our parishes must put the Church in real contact with the homes and lives of its people.' (EG 28) 'We must become a church for the lost, a church of the poor. This is why I want a church that is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us ... in their difficulties, they know the suffering of Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelised by them.' (EG 113, 198)

We are at the end of the Church's year, it's time to look at our lives.

FEASTS

Year A

The Triumph of the Holy Cross

Num. 21:4b-9

Phil. 2:6-11

Jn. 3:13-17

How can we talk about the triumph of the Holy Cross? Isn't that a contradiction in terms? As humans, we shy away from pain. Even Jesus prayed to his Father that his cup of suffering might pass him by. Suffering is at the core of our lives, but how do we respond to it?

Pope Francis went to South Korea where there is a growth of Catholicism. He asked people: why are so many turning to Jesus? They replied, the cross of Jesus gives us hope in suffering. The cross enables us to face pain rather than avoid it. For the cross reveals God's love. God is with us strengthening us in the enduring of pain. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, not to condemn the world but so that through him the world might be saved.

Nature offers us an example — if a tree does not bend with the changes of wind and weather, it breaks, like the branches of the gum tree that prove so dangerous. The same with people in their experience of suffering; they either bend with the cross or break in depression. Women speak of the pain of childbirth and may say they never want to go through it again. But when the child is born, they work through the pain so as to be able again to bring forth new life in love. There is a constant bending to God's love in the child's growth. The French say it takes 700 blows to grow from adolescence to adulthood. The lobster in growing loses its shell and becomes very tender. Think of the crises in your own life when you were vulnerable, tender. Life involves constant losing. If we try to escape it, we don't grow, we don't live. The deeper sorrow is carved into our being, the more we are able to receive.

If we would be disciples of Jesus, we must enter that same mystery that characterised Jesus' life. The following of Jesus, the denial of self-interest even to the point of losing one's life for Jesus and the Gospels, paradoxically results in making life more secure (that is, saving it).

The triumph of the cross is the heroic quality of Jesus' human spirit which, while immersed in suffering, rises above the pain to a steadfast following of God's will. The total obedience of Jesus is the spiritual power which transforms his all-embracing humanity — his, ours and the whole universe in the death-resurrection mystery. The Christ-power unleashed in our world conquers sin, Satan, death, and sickness. In Jesus and in ourselves it's not just our trying to do God's will, but rather if we accept it, God's will is working transformation in us. We sense we are changing during as well as at the end of our suffering.

In the readings we see in Jesus lifted up, the mystery of love — no greater love does one have than to lay down one's life for one's friends. But this man is also God — it's unthinkable! That God would suffer for us; take on our sin, weakness, pain, working it through in his own person.

The idea of a crucified Messiah was a scandal to Jews and a source of ridicule for Greeks; their god, the unmoved mover would be impervious to our painful pleas, but not Jesus the God-man

who came down to us, sent by the Father to save us. And yet Jesus is not the instant cure-all. Sometimes healings are instant — but often constant care is needed.

It is the identification with Christ that has led many Christians to found hospitals, schools, and orphanages... but it isn't just imitation of Jesus as our model. Jesus also empowers us when we call upon him. Jesus identifies himself with a strange incident in Israel's history in the Exodus — the bronze serpent — as he says: 'The Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert.'

Do we understand the psychological import of this image? When we sin and conceal it, it continues to work in us destroying ourselves and others. But when we face the ravages our sin has created then there is openness to change, we begin to live. The Jews in the desert had sinned against God. Serpents with a lethal bite were ravaging the people. When they cried for help, God commanded a replica of their sin to be put on a pole. As they looked and faced what they had done, they were saved. In Jesus on the cross, tortured, disfigured, bloodied and in pain we recognize the ravage our sin has caused. He hangs there out of love for us — when we acknowledge what we have done and beg forgiveness. God's grace, the power of Jesus' cross begins to work salvation in us. This is the triumph of the cross; the selfless love of the Son has already transformed our human lives.

The Birth of Saint John the Baptist

Jer. 1:4-10

1 Pet. 1:8-12

Lk. 1:5-17

John the Baptist, whose birth we celebrate, is a model for our church. At the Second Vatican Council the Church struggled to officially state its identity as a world church. It entered a dialogue of salvation with present-day society. Dialogue brings so many voices, with various ways of seeing and interpreting the world and our place in it, that it's quite bewildering. Change has pushed beyond traditional formulations. Since Vatican II, the Church has been grappling with immense changes to bring Christ into this changing world and culture. Like John the Baptist standing at the juncture of the Old and New Testaments, we are at a critical time.

Since the '60s we have accepted that we live in a secular society. Yet sociologists like Lasch, Bellah and Greeley insist there has never been a time when people believed so much. The modern world is not secular at all but is essentially sacred. What is different is that the sacred is now the private. We live in the secular, in the world. It is not only to be converted but encountered. It's there that we give most of ourselves. If there is no sacred in the heart of the world, then the sacred is an insignificant experience for everyone.

And John is right there straddling the old and preparing for the One who is to come. He knew the inner heart of those attracted by his preaching. He challenged Sadducees and Pharisees to repent, not presume they are right with God because they are descended from Abraham; he called on the crowd to give to the poor by sharing clothing and food; on tax collectors to collect no more than the amount prescribed; and soldiers not to threaten or extort but be satisfied with their wages (Luke 3:7-14). He was not preaching a message that was in the heart of his world.

I think the tragedy is that we've accepted the secular as the real; we've settled for things; we've written off John and Jesus' invitation to enter a deeper relationship with God the Father; we've dismissed as irrelevant or not for us, the invitation through Jesus to experience an intimate relationship with God as sons and daughters through the powerful experience of the Spirit within the Catholic Church. People give away the Church and look to other traditions to give them the private religion they want. And in my view, that's tragic.

There's a depth in our Catholic tradition — the development of the fully human; a response to the world all over, and a depth of the Spirit not only in the various spiritualities and charisms, but in the teaching and tension within the global Catholic Church. We need to express the sacred in our lives. Our Catholic worship is public worship or it's nothing. We need to make religion real in our lives. The Holy Spirit and John the Baptist are behind the yearning to make church structures more relevant for our time, which is the desire behind the thrust for a Plenary Council, not only in Australia but in many countries throughout the world. People have embraced the teaching of Vatican II and are meeting in Gospel discussion groups with the prayer, intent, and action of moving the Church forward.

What is encouraged for parents is to be pioneers of faith as John and Jesus were; like shepherds going ahead to find new pastures and drawing their children after them by the relevance of their lives; so, the same needs to be spoken to our bishops' conferences.

We have grown up in an era of centralization under Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI, but Pope Francis is calling for the Church to be a synodal church, discerning in dialogue with all the members of the Church; to discover what we need to let go and to discern the way forward with the help of the Holy Spirit and prayerful action. May John prepare the way again for Jesus and for his Body the Church to regain our spiritual vitality and really be a church in the world in this change of an era, not simply an era of change.

The Sacred Heart of Jesus

Deut. 7:6-11

1 Jn. 4:7-16

Mt. 11:25-30

June is the month dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. James MacAuley, the Australian poet captured the theology well in his words put to music by Richard Connolly:

'Jesus, in your heart we find love of the Father and mankind,
These two loves to us impart,
divine love in a human heart.'

The Sacred Heart devotion has as its foundation the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon which state that there are two natures, human and divine in the one person of Jesus. And so, in adoring the Sacred Heart we are adoring the God-Man Jesus Christ.

The biblical foundation for the feast comes from (John 7:37-39): 'from his breast will flow fountains of living water'; (John 13:23): 'The disciple Jesus loved...leaning back on Jesus' breast; and (John 19:33-38): 'blood and water that flowed from Christ's pierced side'.

Pius XII quoting Leo XIII in *Haurietis Aquas*: 'There is in the Sacred Heart the symbol and express image of the infinite love of Jesus Christ which moves us to love in return.'

The patristic devotion, in the early and late Middle Ages, sowed the seed for the revealing of Christ's Sacred Heart to St Margaret Mary Alacoque. Her visions did not centre upon a personal grace for her own growth in holiness, but rather upon a mission to the Church.

Margaret Mary Alacoque was a French Visitation nun and mystic who promoted devotion to the Sacred Heart in its modern form. In the Visitation convent in Paray-le-Monial, between 1673 and 1675, she experienced four visions of Jesus Christ, concerning devotion toward his Heart as symbolising his love for mankind, which men so often rejected. She was charged to promote this devotion. Jesus revealed his burning love to Margaret Mary and told her: 'Behold this Heart which has so loved men that it has spared nothing, even to consuming itself, in order to testify its love... But what I feel most keenly is that it is in hearts that are consecrated to me that treat me thus...'

These revelations accidentally became known to the other nuns, some of whom looked on these as delusions, and Margaret Mary had much to suffer, not least when in 1677, she told them with fear and trembling that Christ had twice asked her to be a willing victim to expiate for their shortcomings. But she had the support of a holy and experienced Jesuit, St Claude de la Colombiere, and by the time of her death opposition in her community was at an end. All the Visitation convents promoted the devotion. The remaining four years of Margaret Mary's life were filled with her efforts to spread the devotion.

The uniqueness of these visions stem from the fact that they were directed beyond the saint to the universal church. They resulted in the defeat of Jansenism which held that only a few, (the

elect) would be saved, while the rest were damned. The popes ratified the visions and from Pope Leo XIII on, promoted devotion to the Sacred Heart, ultimately raising the Feast of the Sacred Heart to a solemnity.

Vincent Pallotti often placed in the wounded side of Jesus every needy person he met in his apostolic work. Pope Pius XII, John XXIII, and John Paul II especially, have promoted the devotion to divine mercy, the two-fold fount of grace from the Heart of our Saviour. Pope Francis repeatedly in *Gaudium Evangelii* (EG 86,143, 174, 183, 197, 283) mentions the Heart of Jesus.

Karl Rahner wrote: 'All the ingredients of devotion to the Sacred Heart are borrowed from dogma, and in this sense is valid for all ages of Christianity. These elements are so important and suggestive, and they fit so naturally under the concept of heart, that one can truly say: Just as there always has been a certain devotion to the Heart of Jesus, since the earliest days, so will there always be one.'

Second Homily

The Heart of Jesus resonates with all the yearnings of the human heart. In the heart of God all the loves of the world are contained there. But the reality of the Sacred Heart is so much more. We are talking about divine love in a human heart. In the mystery of the Sacred Heart, we are talking about the heart of God who wanted to be so intimately related to us that he came in Jesus to divinize our human hearts, to make our hearts like his.

The heart of Christianity is the heart and intent of Christ's heart who took all the hurts of our unloving into his life through death to resurrection to set our hearts aright. This heart where divested divinity and human vulnerability (not sin) meet has now become divinized.

The yearning for authentic self-realisation; to love and be loved in all its depth is no longer just human potential but actuality in Jesus. The human heart of Jesus (which means the loving totality of the man Jesus — one in person with the Son of God) pulsating with love for the Father and for us, is the source of our divinization.

The Covid pandemic caused millions of deaths, resulted in human hearts grieving, in families crying out to really live, like the families of Solomone. Jesus responds with certainty, because he has achieved it for us: 'Behold this Heart which has loved you so much...Come to Me all who labour and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest, learn from Me.'

His way is so direct, yet we easily divert from it.

God in Jesus tells us: I have plans for you, the plans of my heart to a thousand generations. Are we willing to spend time with him, to listen and learn from him? His love is to be brought to perfection in us. Once we respond, the battle begins — it's so easy to be mediocre, better to remain asleep, not to know we have the key to the Kingdom, that the treasure is in our hand, but we never

took time to look at it. If I go to confession every few months or so, I don't feel any relief. But if I go week after week, then I see my mediocrity and the struggle is on. The tennis player at the top of his seeding knows when his performance is off.

God can never give up on us. He holds the memory of us in his heart. 'God showed what love is by sending his Son, who gave his life for us so that we could live. Real love is not our love for God, but God's love for us.'

God's love makes us loveable. When we don't feel good about ourselves, let God's love in. Instead of pulling yourself down, say, 'God loved me first, I am loveable.' Then go and help other people, because of that love.

Love, especially God's love, is an energising force but we're afraid of love. Love is an assimilating force — couples look alike over time. Jesus doesn't just want to forgive us, he wants to energise us, make us like him, divinized, so that he can work through us — our eyes, hands, feet, words.

St Margaret Mary who told us about the heart of Jesus was an apostle of God's love. It was a time when Jansenism was rife in the Church of France, Ireland and around the world. It took Augustine's phrase, we are a *massa damnata*, a doomed race that could only be saved by a perfect act of love. Only a few could make that kind of act of perfect love. It held that God would never forgive us if we did wrong, a harsh God whom people feared, and people in authority judged each other harshly.

When Margaret Mary opened herself to God's love, she wasn't promised a rose garden. From the ages of eleven to fifteen she was bed-ridden with rheumatic fever. When her father died, relatives took over the house, and she and her mother were treated like servants. She fought to join the Visitation Order at Paray Le Monial. On 27 December 1673, after two-and-a-half years of prayer and service to the sick, Jesus revealed his Sacred Heart to her; then the persecution really started in the convent when Jesus asked her to tell the sisters that they were not living the life Jesus wanted. With trepidation she got the courage to tell them; for who was she to be so bold, she worked in the kitchen and cared for the sick.

The Lord asked her to keep nine Fridays, going to Mass and Communion the first Friday of every month and to keep one hour of prayer every Thursday night with Jesus' suffering in Gethsemane. Fr Claude de la Colombiere came to the convent as a confessor and was convinced of the genuineness of Margaret Mary's revelations. He challenged the sisters, who eventually took to spread the devotion to the Sacred Heart as their mission. Near the end of her life, Margaret Mary said she was like a broom which the Lord had used and put behind the door when he was finished.

Are we willing to learn the plans of the Heart of Jesus for our life? Will we make time to be with him, so that in his good time he can use us? He wants people who are humble of heart, teachable, and whose ego doesn't get in the way. Then love can grow in us through looking, listening, serving, in very simple ways.

Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, Apostles

Acts 3:1-10

Gal. 1:11-20

Jn. 21:15-19

I often wonder how two men so different as Peter and Paul could be celebrated together as the pillars of the Roman church. The blood of martyrdom united them, Paul by the sword in CE 62 and Peter by crucifixion in CE 64 during Nero's persecution.

Pope Francis, referring to present day martyrs, said to the patriarchs of the Armenian and Orthodox churches: 'The blood of martyrs is the seedbed of our unity.' Peter and Paul are revered because of their dynamic leadership and preaching. By their witness the primitive Christian community came to be not a memorial society with its eyes fastened on a departed master, but a dynamic community created around a living and present Lord.

In some sense Peter and Paul were ordinary men, people like you and me, with gifts and failings, strengths, and weaknesses. Who would have chosen a fisherman to head his church or a persecutor to spread the Gospels? What made the difference was meeting Jesus and being chosen by him, and they, despite setbacks remained faithful to that choice.

That was certainly true of Paul who met the Lord on the road to Damascus. The risen Lord turned Paul and his plans upside down. It was true of Peter right at the beginning. The eyes of Jesus followed him where no natural eye could see. The eyes of Jesus penetrated Peter's inner being and saw his heart. Right at the start of John's Gospel, Jesus called him no longer Simon, son of Jonah, but Kephas, Petros, 'rock'.

Matthew has this same story, as does Mark, at a pivotal point of the Gospel. If Christ's work is to continue, he needs people who know his deepest identity — and this knowing is the graced work of God. Jesus built his church on Peter's faith yes, but also on the man. Jesus met Peter and Paul many times in their own ministry, like he does with us, to take them deeper.

In the first reading, we see a change of attitude toward the Christians in Jerusalem. In CE45, as Claudius was overseeing his soldiers in the capture of London, his supporter Herod Agrippa to whom he conferred the Judean territory, was overseeing soldiers persecute Christians in Jerusalem. James was beheaded and Peter was cast into prison. Things looked grim for the early Christian community. They resorted to prayer and God delivered Peter. God and Christ were working in his life. Peter came to recognise this. He had developed, through suffering and persecution, to be the one who could hold the community together in its fundamental faith in Jesus.

There is a little church on the outskirts of Rome called Quo Vadis, where Peter, escaping Rome, met Jesus. He asked Jesus: 'Quo Vadis, Domine?' (Where are you going, Lord?)

Jesus replied: 'To Rome, to be crucified again.' Peter turned back and followed him.

Peter and Paul surrendered their own life plans to take up a higher destiny — they went with and for Jesus. His concern became theirs — to bring forth God's Kingdom of justice and love. It's the same question Jesus asks you and me: Do you want to give your life to Jesus?

They brought their gifts to Jesus: their own character, who they were. Paul went to the end of the road, to the end of the world. Once a fanatic, he became an ardent apostle — his passion was channelled into new creative ventures under the lead of the Holy Spirit. No half-measures for Paul, he could stand up to anyone, even Peter, for the sake of this fundamental Christian principle — *that salvation is in Christ Jesus*. But he never questioned Peter's authority to lead the Christian community. Paul's passionate character, charged with zeal for the Gospels, comes out in these three phrases: 'My life is poured out; I have fought the fight to the end; I have run the race to the finish.' That's why he and Peter are models for us.

Both men had risen to new heights. Peter was Jesus' choice to head the Christian community and be its source of unity; Paul was Jesus' choice to take his message to the Gentiles. It's happening today as Christians pray, 'Jesus, please choose me, use me'; for this, they were thankful.

Dedication of St John Lateran

Ezek. 47:1-2, 8-9, 12

1 Cor. 3:9c-11, 16-17 Jn. 2:13-22

St John Lateran is the pope's church in Rome, with the title 'Mother' and 'Head of all the Churches in the world,' and from there the pope asks for help from all Catholics reaching out in motherly care to churches in need.

Why is St John Lateran important to us? For the first 300 years Christianity was illegal; it was a persecuted religion with penalties of torture and death. In fact, the Roman Empire unleashed ten persecutions against it, catching not only Peter and Paul, but many martyrs whose names are in the First Eucharistic prayer. The Christians at this time went underground. They met secretly in homes, barns, in cemeteries such as the catacombs. But in the year CE313, the Roman Emperor Constantine became a Christian and granted religious tolerance to Christianity.

Christians became free to worship openly and publicly, and they needed to build churches. There was a palace in Rome that the Laterani family had given to Constantine. He turned a wing of that palace over to the Church making it the first public church in Rome that was Christian and gave it to Pope Melchiades. There the Pope presided and resided as did popes after him until 1871 when Pope Pius IX, during the Italian Revolution fled to the Vatican Hill where popes have lived ever since. Most popes have been crowned at St John Lateran. It remains the pope's official church in his capacity as bishop of Rome, and to this day the Holy Thursday ceremonies are held there.

We celebrate this feast of St John Lateran because it is the first Christian church, the mother church. But at a deeper level, it reminds us of our origins. Rome was evangelised by Peter and Paul and countless missionaries. In turn, Rome, being the world centre at the time, the heart of the Roman Empire, sent missionaries out to the west, although that is changing. It was mainly Irish priests, brothers and sisters who nurtured the faith in Australia from 1820. But we celebrate that originally we have been evangelised from Rome, the mother church. St John Lateran is an historical sign and symbol of our deep rootedness, our connection with the past, our touchstone of faith with the long line of popes who have resided there.

This feast reminds us of our catholicity with a small and a big C, that through our connection with that mother church, we in Melbourne belong to a vast brotherhood and sisterhood both vertically to the past and horizontally to the present. We're part of a worldwide Catholic community.

Our focus is on Jamaica, a nation deeply troubled by violence and crime. With the second highest rate of gun-killing anywhere in the world, communities across Jamaica live in constant fear. Young people living near the ghettos hope to just stay alive. Hence the theme, *When I grow up, I want to be alive*. The Jamaican Catholic Church, in Marist sisters like Sr Teresia Jinaniscolo, have dedicated their lives to offer life-saving spiritual and practical support through their Holy

Family Self-Help Centre near one of the most dangerous ghettos. Through vocational skills training programs in cooking, hospitality, sewing, literacy, computers and house-keeping, they create employment opportunities in the growing Jamaican tourist industry, helping them provide a better life for themselves and their families.

With the prevalence of violence in Mount Salem, it is easy for children to slip into a life of crime, violence, and destruction. Sr Teresia is desperate to break this cycle by offering non-violent education classes to the children in the community. At a time of extreme individualism, we all need a home to belong to, a safe place that gives identity and cohesion. This feast of St John Lateran reminds us that our church, however grand or humble, is a sign of transcendence, a gathering for worship, to proclaim openly that Jesus is Lord, without the fear of violence or ridicule.

A final reason we celebrate this feast of our mother church St John Lateran, is that it reminds us that we ourselves are unfinished temples. We indeed have a great history. Over the centuries the Catholic Church has been responsible for more good, decency and help than will ever be realised. The constant media focus on our failings should not blind us to the enormous good we have done throughout the ages, and still do. Realise Caritas that we support this weekend, is the largest private relief service in the world. Think of all the Sr Teresias there are, the countless Catholic hospitals, schools and clinics, leprosaria. Perhaps the biggest assistance to AIDS patients is the Catholic Church, although you would never know it. We're in every part of the globe ministering to others, day and night, endlessly. We do Christ's work.

But, of course, we are, as I said, unfinished. Just as St John Lateran had to be restored many times throughout the centuries because of the ravages of time and vandals, so has the whole church. We have sinned and we have constant reforms and renewals to call us back to our origins.

This is the reason we celebrate this feast. It recalls struggles, countless martyrs, sacrifice, Peter and Paul, missionaries, and it challenges us to see how far we have strayed from the message they left us at so great a price. To that extent, this feast beckons us to reform. We should have pride in our ancient and present heritage that keeps us grounded to the truth and resolve that our spiritual ancestors have not died in vain.

Much of the history is from *Story Telling the Word*, William J Bausch, pp 275-8

The Transfiguration of the Lord

Dan. 7:9-10, 13-14

2 Pet. 1:16-19

Mt. 17:1-9

The Transfiguration on Mt Tabor takes us into the mystery where Jesus embraces the exodus he will accomplish in Jerusalem. The original exodus was when Jewish people were released from slavery through the blood of the lamb. Christ takes that event to a new level; when the paschal lamb sheds his blood for us all to set us free. On the mountain the three disciples get a glimpse into the divinity hidden beneath his humanity, in order to bear the sight of his crucified face and their part in his death, which unknown to them at the time, was a death for us all.

We are invited to look at the glory of God shining on the face of Jesus. The Eastern Church sees the Transfiguration as the goal of our spiritual life. We are to be transformed in Jesus into the likeness of God. This our destiny.

The doctrine that Christ was incarnate that he might destroy death, was but the prologue to the Gospel of the Resurrection — 'Christ is risen' (Mark 16:6). 'As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive' (1 Cor. 15:22). This confession of faith in the resurrection was far deeper than an assent to some unique historical phenomenon; it was the acknowledgment of a triumphant victory that could be personally appropriated by the believer; death was not only overcome for Christ on that first Easter morning, but for all those who by baptism become filled with Christ.

Not only was the resurrection the seal of the redemptive work of Christ for the soul of every person, but also for every department of human life which, by the Fall, had become subject to bondage...Already, through the sacrament of baptism, the Christian is risen with Christ; our life has entered upon its new condition — we are a temple of the living God, whose power is not confined only to the restoration and sanctification of our soul but to the preservation of our whole being, spirit, soul and body (1 Thess. 5:23). It is our belief in the risen Christ that he has already brought about a transformation in the person at the deepest level of Spirit to which we must respond (Evelyn Frost, *Christian Healing*, Bradford and Dickens, London, 1949, pp 28-9).

Christ, for Paul, is the new Adam. The risen Christ is the only one who has fully realised the image of the Father, and so can assimilate the Christian to that image. The Vatican II document, *Christ in the Modern World*, (par. 10), sums up what we said above: 'Christ who died and was raised for the sake of all, can show us the way and strengthen us through the Holy Spirit in order to be worthy of our destiny. Christ is the key and the centre of our whole lives.'

That destiny is spoken of by Paul: 'We are *predestined* to become conformed to the image of his Son, that he should be the firstborn of many brothers and sisters' (Romans 8:29). Humans sharing in the image of the Son means their real participation in the glorious way of being that pertains to the Risen Christ as 'image of God'. In Christ...the divine likeness or glory, upon which human dignity and destiny depend, is restored to humanity (Brendan Byrne, Michael Glazier, *Reckoning with*

Romans, Wilmington, 1986, p 175).

St Paul writes: 'All of us...seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18). This transformation is in progress during our life; the process initiates with baptism. The more we are formed in the likeness of Christ, the more we become ourselves as God intended.

Vincent Pallotti found in Romans 8:29 his way into the Trinity whereby God could work through him in his busy, multi-faceted apostolate. He wrote: 'God, in his infinite love gave us his Son to perfect his image in us. Jesus, by his holy humanity, wanted to teach us how we should live in order to perfect our souls in so far as they are living images and likenesses of God. 'For those whom he has foreknown he has also destined to become conformed to the image of his Son' (Romans 8:29). God gave us his divine Son incarnate, not only as Redeemer, but also as our first-born brother.'

In his own human nature Pallotti strove to unite himself with the humanity of Christ as his way into union with the Trinity. As St Augustine said: 'Walk in the man and you will arrive at God.' We are effective in the apostolate precisely because of our renewal in Christ. This is the fundamental basis of our mission. We are meant to continue this apostolate, especially in and through love, by being radiant images of God in Christ (Pat Jackson, *Empowered by Love*, Martini Publishing, 1994, p 77).

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

1 Chron. 15:3-4, 15-16; 16:1-2

1 Cor. 15:54b-57

Lk. 11:27-28

Life goes by so fast, with efficiency and performance at a premium. There's no time to read or think about death, and what happens after death. The poor and the vulnerable — women, children, and ageing parents — are pushed to the side. Impatient with waiting, especially during a long illness, we cut it short under the euphemism of quality of life.

What then does this Feast of the Assumption mean? Pope Pius XII in 1950, after consulting bishops and theologians throughout the world, defined as a dogma 'that when the course of her earthly life was finished, Mary was taken up, body and soul into heaven'. Body and soul refer to the unique historical personality of Mary, which is not obliterated with death but lives with God, and is ever attentive to the needs of her children.

I got a sense of that in 1975 when I stayed in Mexico for a month. There was a picture of our Lady of Guadalupe, a symbol of hope for native Indians, in all the Churches. It said to them that we have a mother in heaven, her name is Mary, Mother of God, and she really cares for us.

In 1519, the Spanish had conquered Mexico and the Indians were treated very badly, working in the silver mines, and not even considered human. In 1531, just outside Mexico City, our Lady appeared to a poor Aztec peasant, Juan Diego. She spoke to him with great love and said, 'Beloved and honourable son, you must go to the bishop (Zumarraga) and ask him to build a church here.' The poor man was afraid but went to the bishop. The bishop wanted proof; he wanted roses to flower in December even though it was winter, a time when rose bushes are pruned and are dormant. Juan Diego tried to avoid the Lady but after two days she met him, and Mary pointed up the hill where beautiful Castilian roses were blooming. He put them in his cactus fibre cloak (*tilma*) and brought them to the bishop. When the roses fell from his cloak, there was a picture of the Lady that Juan Diego had seen on the hill.

She's one of us! She speaks our language (Aztec) and dresses like us. Mary appeared as an Aztec princess. You get a sense of the love of Mary for the down-trodden. She stands on the moon and blots out the sun (the Aztec gods to whom thousands of native Indians were sacrificed). She is pregnant but in prayer before God and wears a special brooch with a cross at her neck like that seen on the flags of the Spanish ships.

Mary is alive in the powerful change that can be brought about in the world when we say 'yes' to God and put him first in our lives. A further extraordinary discovery is, according to Dr Robert Sungenis, that the stars on Mary's cloak show a constellation of stars in the exact position as they would have appeared before dawn on the morning of 12 December 1531, in Guadalupe, Mexico.

Pius XII in defining the Assumption as a dogma of the Church, said explicitly why he was doing

it. He said he decided because the previous fifty years included the slaughter and genocide of the Armenian people, the loss of ten million lives in World War I, the loss of forty million lives in the Russian Revolution, the loss of six million Jewish lives in the Holocaust, the loss of fifty million lives in World War II, and the invention and use of new weapons of mass destruction.

Pope Pius XII referred explicitly to this history. He deplored the destruction of human life, the desecration of bodies and the increasing loss of respect for the God-given identity of every human being. And he said, 'What I intend, I intend that the celebration of the Assumption might make clear the sacredness and the high destiny of every single human person.'

The Assumption of Mary is a singular participation in her Son's resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians.

Mary came to the poor Indians in their need. They knew Mary, a peasant like them, was there for them, to give them courage to stand in the face of oppression. Over thirty years ago when Pope John Paul visited Latin America, including military dictatorships, he found his visit censored by government officials. One text was removed from his planned visit. It was never allowed to be read, never allowed to be heard.

It was Mary's prophetic words: 'Our God has shown the strength of his arm and has scattered the proud in the conceit of their hearts. He has put down the powerful from their thrones and he lifts up the lowly. He fills the hungry with good things and the rich he sends off empty handed.'

In history, Mary has appeared when the faith and dignity of Christians and others, but especially the Church, were being trampled: the Reformation in 1531 when the unity of the Church was broken, she came to Guadalupe; Mary came to Lourdes in 1858 when faith was being undermined by rationalism; Mary came to Fatima in 1917 just before the Russian Revolution, and to Medjugorje before the war in Bosnia and Croatia. When Mary comes there are miracles and healing. While one million people left the Church in Europe, one million people became Catholic in South America through the power of Mary's visitation, not by word but by love and identifying with the poor.

We are born for immortality. Just as Jesus rose victorious over death and won eternal life for us, so Mary was the first among us to be taken up body and soul to heaven without corruption and shared that privilege.

There are two driving forces that come up again and again in our lives and in our society. One is sheer self-interest, and the other is the use of power to get our way. These need to be challenged again and again in our society, and in our own hearts. Every election is a challenge to us to vote well, to keep in tune with the values and vision of the Gospels and to keep ourselves in harmony with the song of Mary, who celebrated and became an instrument of a God who raises the lowly and is faithful to all people. May our lives magnify the Lord. May our spirits rejoice in God, our Saviour. Amen.

All Saints

Rev. 7:2-4, 9-14 1 Jn. 3:1-3

Mt. 5:1-12a

We used to compare saints with those seen on stained glass windows who are lit up when the sunlight shines through them. For me it's even more. Saints open their lives to let God work through them to do wonderful things for people in need. 'The Lord wants us to be saints, not settle for a mediocre existence,' those are the words of Pope Francis in his new *Exhortation on the Call to Holiness in Today's World*. We are all called to be saints with a passion to bring about the kind of world the Father wants.

I came across the story of Margaret Haughery, of New Orleans. Margaret was born in Ireland but lived most of her life in New Orleans. By the time she was twenty-three, Margaret's parents, husband, and infant daughter had died. She was penniless, uneducated, and alone. She worked as a laundress, but she founded a dairy and sold milk door-to-door. She used the money she made to buy a bankrupt bakery and turned it around, becoming enormously successful. The penniless orphan made a fortune and gave almost all of it away.

A devout Catholic, she lived a life of great simplicity — she owned two dresses at a time. She was known as the 'mother of orphans' because, for decades, she made and gave away vast sums of money to feed the poor, while founding and supporting homes for orphans and widows of all backgrounds.

Margaret's wisdom was proverbial. Seated at the doorway of her famous bakery, she was consulted by people of all ranks. When she died in 1882, she was given a state funeral and all New Orleans mourned. What is most moving is that the plain but fabulous Irish social entrepreneur that everyone called 'our Margaret' did all this without ever learning to read or write (*Fruitful Discipleship: Living the Mission of Jesus in the Church*, Our Sunday Visitor, 2017).

There's an energy in the saints for the things of God. They see what has to be done and they do it. They create a counter-response to the culture. Jesus explained with great simplicity what it means to be holy when he gave us the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are like a Christian's identity card, whether we are married, single, a priest or a young person. We're all called by God to be holy and to have Jesus' passion to bring about the reign of God no matter the cost; called to be saints in the particular vocation we have been called to, each with its own dignity and value before God.

Holiness is seeing with the eyes of Christ. Saints are those who see and act on what they see. They see what is important, what matters, what takes priority, and see hints of the divine. There are saints around us who at crucial moments in our lives were there for us. They listened, held, supported, and challenged us, providing us with what we need at the time to heal and grow.

The lives of the saints teach us that holiness comes in all shapes and sizes. Yet the saints act in character, sometimes in spite of their character: Matt Talbot the alcoholic; Therese, extremely

sensitive; and Dorothy Day from a Bohemian background, to name a few. They tried to shape their character in the light of the Beatitudes — to be gentle, merciful, and forgiving with a hunger and thirst for justice.

The Beatitudes make us look at what we do, and the sort of people we are. What part does gentleness and compassion play in our lives? When have I shown a hunger and thirst for justice?

Jesus himself warns us that the path he proposes goes against the flow, even making us challenge society by the way we live and, as a result, becoming a nuisance. He reminds us how many people have been, and still are, persecuted simply because they struggle for justice, because they take seriously their commitment to God and to others. Unless we want to sink into an obscure mediocrity, let us not long for an easy life, for ‘whoever would save his or her life must lose it’ (Matt. 16:25).

Second Homily

The Feast of All Saints is not only the feast of all the holy men and women who have lived before us. It’s also our feast. We may be the only Gospel people know — we are the living Gospel. We are called to be holy. It flows from our baptism. At Jesus’ baptism, the voice of the Father was heard: ‘This is my Beloved...’ That voice is also for us. Jesus became one of us to help us become beloved of the Father. John tells us that we are already children of God. We gave ourselves to Christ and he gives us back our true selves, a renewed humanity.

And the Gospels gives us practical ways to become saints: to be pure in heart, meek, merciful, and makers of peace. Dorothy Day who lived the Beatitudes and whose cause for sanctity is being promoted by the Diocese of New York, said: ‘I don’t want to be a saint. They are too easily dismissed.’

What did she mean? I suppose she was referring to the attitude: ‘They did extraordinary deeds of charity and penance, I’m not good enough, the bar is too high.’ Or: ‘They are too pious and sweet, not real flesh and blood people like us with our faults, failings and battles on so many fronts.’

Holiness is seen as a contest, and I’m not up to it. But if you look around the Church, here are the same people. I think that holiness isn’t so much our performance, our PB, our personal best that we bring to the challenge; that we made it by our own effort. Rather it is responding to God and loving with all our heart, soul, and mind.

Jesus gave us a priority commandment to make love the central drive of our lives. For Jesus, holiness was identified with lovingness, with being beloved and walking before the Father in love. The one thing that holy men and women in history have had in common is that they were loving people. Holiness is not a matter of doing extraordinary things, but being habitually loving.

Bernadette, an illiterate girl of fourteen did not become a saint because she had visions but

because she lived life and met suffering with quiet heroism. To live life with heroism. And to do this each moment in the ordinary circumstances of our lives. The saints are those who have done God's will throughout the ages, as we say in the Second Eucharistic prayer.

Jean Pierre de Caussade in his book, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, puts the question to anyone who wants to be a saint: 'What kind of life must I lead?' And responds: 'Don't make any particular plans, but do only what each hour, each minute demands of you. It is God in his providence who looks out for you. The road to sanctity travels the complicated fabric of life itself. It is the situation you are in which speaks with the voice of God, and which says: "This is necessary, you must help this person, you must do this work, you must show patience under this trial..." not making excuses, or doing it for personal aggrandizement, but for God.' Or in Maximilian Kolbe's equation: 'My will aligned to God's will equals sanctity.'

Cardinal Cushing spoke of what a smile can do, the smile of a surgeon for the patient, a parent for a child. Simply to radiate love. A flashlight with a good battery does not need special transformation to give light; it simply needs to be turned on.

The communion of saints means people who love and support one another, wrote Carol Luebering who was in church with a group of people, (the priests were all away), praying for Joe, who was in his twenties, and dying. Joe's best friend said the litany of the saints. Carol said that as they prayed the names of the saints, the pews around them were filling with Peter, Therese, Perpetua, and Agatha. There is a communion of goodness and love all around the world.

We are God's living Gospel. We are the Father's beloved sons and daughters.

The Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed (All Souls)

Is. 25:6-9

Rom. 5:5-11

Mt. 11:25-30

We look to our God in whom we hope for salvation as we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Souls. It's difficult to speak about the afterlife, but we know the extent to which God went to save us. 'In Jesus, he emptied himself of his Godhead, took on the form of a slave and became as all humans are...became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.' God's way is his Son, Jesus, risen from the dead, who continually intercedes for us. Jesus is our companion and guide as we cross over into the unknown, crossing over from a secure land to one whose roads we have never walked.

Jenny Gateau's poem, *The Bridge*, expresses well the pain of parting from our side: 'It's a precarious place to be, on the bridge between the two worlds of life and death, and fairly soon you'll have to step off at the other side and I will have to let you go. For me, it will mean retracing alone the steps we took together along the bridge back to my side. You will be home safe and sound, but I will have to go the long way round and I don't like the sound of it one little bit' (Jenny Gateau, *Mike's Story: A Journey of Grief and Grace*, Triangle, SPCK, 1997).

Our hope for eternal life for our loved ones is founded on our trust in Jesus who proclaimed his power over life and death. His power justifies our belief in immortality.

The church has always taught that our charity should not be limited to the living. Charity and prayer have the power to cross the last boundary — death itself — and when we celebrate the Feast of All Souls we pray for the dead and keep their memory alive. The Feast of All Souls is keeping the pledge not to forget. Not to forget those who have gone before us, those who await completion, those who can still be touched by the charity that finds its voice in prayer.

When Judas Maccabaeus' companions were killed in battle and found to be wearing amulets of the gods, he sent money to the temple for a sin offering to be made for them. In Second Maccabees 12:44 we read: 'For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. Therefore, he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sins.'

It's our hope in the resurrection that is the incentive to pray for the dead, in words I knew as a boy: 'It is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they might be released from their sins.'

Unless we are very young, probably all of us have experienced the death of someone we loved. No matter how prepared we are for the death of those we love, their death is always a numbing experience. Because we love people, we miss them when they die. And we can feel disabled for a long time.

We believe that Jesus is risen. He is Lord not only of the living but of the dead. That is our faith which gives substance to our hope. Our hope is not deceptive and is extended to all who have died and who await the day of their fulfilment when they see God face to face.

Jesus reaches out to us who are burdened: 'Come to me weary one and find rest for your soul. Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart' (Matthew 11:28). In Jesus we find mercy. The Latin word for mercy is 'misericordia,' God has a heart for all our misery.

What is purgatory? Catholic catechism says it is a state of those who die in God's friendship, assured of their eternal salvation, but who have need of purification to enter the happiness of heaven. It is not a place, but a state of minor sinfulness which needs God's healing before he or she can fully accept God. Maybe purgatory is simply another way of saying it is not our prerogative but God's to say when a person is fully reconciled and fit for perfect union with God.

It's a process not a place. Someone likened it to coming before God as before a full-length mirror. It's not God who delays our entry, but our own realisation of our sinfulness before such a loving God. The souls in purgatory are saints needing the final purification. They are blessed and joyful, but perhaps their suffering is their intense yearning to be with God now, but not yet. The suffering our loved ones undergo at death are the final stages of letting go and surrendering to God, not to be cut short. Our expectation of eternal life is founded on the unconditional love that God has for us.

John O Donohue writes *On Passing a Graveyard (To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*, Doubleday, New York, 2008, p 96):

'May perpetual light shine
Upon the faces of all who rest here.
May the lives they lived
Unfold further in spirit.
May all their past travails
Find ease in the kindness of clay.
May the remembering earth
Mind every memory they brought.
May the rains from the heavens
Fall gently upon them.
May the wildflowers and grasses
Whisper their wishes into light.

May we reverence the village of presence
In the stillness of this silent field.'