



# WRESTLING *with the* WORD

**HOW THE LORD INSPIRES THROUGH HOMILIES**

Father Patrick Jackson SAC

**YEAR B**

# FOREWORD

## Homilies for Sundays and Feast Days for Year B

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.

# 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 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 B**

**Gospel of Mark**

# **THE PROPER OF SEASONS**

**Year B**

# **THE SEASON OF ADVENT**

**Year B**

# First Sunday of Advent

**Isa. 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7**

**1 Cor 1:3-9**

**Mk. 13:33-37**

The first Sunday of Advent is the beginning of the Christian year, but for most of us, exhausted and frayed, we are looking forward to the end of the year for a break. At times it feels that the Master is gone, and we are left to struggle, with his four-times repeated warning: "Stay awake." Be alert, like a sentry on guard during the four traditional watches of the night: evening, midnight, cock-crow or dawn, on the ready to open the door when the Master comes. The door-keeper was a key role in Mark's community, especially during Nero's persecution. Who do you let in? Jesus is coming — Christians running for their lives are coming at any hour. Be alert! Stay awake!

When everything has broken down the prophet Isaiah, standing amid the rubble of David's temple, voices his people's cry to God, "Why did you let us do it, let us stray, harden our hearts in wilfulness — it's our frailty, our sinfulness speaking! But it's immediately followed by a plea to God — you are our Father, our Redeemer is your ancient name, and the recalling of God's mighty deeds in the Exodus-event, happening again now. Return, tear the heavens open — come down — melt the mountains with your presence and power. When things are bad, we need to remember God's past graciousness to us, a promise of what he will do for us now.

When our life is broken down, God like a potter, takes us, moulds and fashions us, putting us and our situation together in his own time, in new and wonderful ways. We pray in the words of St Irenaeus, "Keep our clay soft O Lord, lest we grow hard and lose the imprint of your fingers."

Like the alarm going off, in the responsorial psalm, we ask God to rouse himself and come to our help. And God has come to our help — Redeemer is his ancient name. God sent his Son not to condemn us, but to save, set us free. Christ incarnates himself, immerses himself as one of us again in our situation — he invites us into a relationship with himself. He shares and understands our struggles — he does not come to further alienate the alienated by imposing laws from the outside. He promises to enrich us with graces, not only by our teachers and preachers — but by the effect of their word and knowledge now become our own that we might share these gifts of the Spirit with others and be strong in our witness for Christ.

God has joined us to his Son. We are gifted, graced in Christ Jesus. This is the promise of this Advent — Christmas time. We hold to that promise because in those wonderful words of St Paul, God is faithful.

God is ever faithful. He is the potter who can refashion, bring something new out of what has been broken down, like when we're inwardly flattened, and feel like a lump of clay. We are in the hands of God. Don't give up on God even in tough times. Await the hand of the artist, offer him your heart, soft and tractable, "Let your clay be moist, lest you grow hard and lose the imprint of his fingers" (Irenaeus). Don't foreclose too early in your development that you become set in your

ways; keep open to learn.

It's how we respond in a crisis that proves our mettle more forcibly than any other event in our life. The fruit of a crisis isn't people falling away — the silent schism mentioned by Morris West, but people emerging who have really grasped the essentials of their faith in God, in Jesus, in the Church, and who live it in a way that speaks to our age. We have our task, our calling that can keep us steady and without blame until the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, writes Paul.

Jesus said he would be away, going back to the Father. He assigned us our tasks, put us in charge of his home, calling us to be ready for his return. We may be afraid to answer his call until we are properly equipped, little realizing that if we answer the call Jesus will equip us to be like him; he will equip us to listen, heal wounds, and bring us together round one table. He might come in different guises — across the breakfast table, in a cry for help, in the charges or tasks that are allotted us in the people we serve.

He also told us he would be back soon, hoping to find us not asleep. In Advent, besides setting alarm clocks, another sound that summons is not the ring or knock at the door, but the phone. We don't know when it's going to ring. You never know when a loved one will call, especially if it's a call from overseas; and so you wait, ready to pick it up when it rings. It changes your mental outlook. You are always pricking up your ears, straining to pick up the buzz or the ring. We know Christ has come, but he is coming again, like the Master unexpectedly. Don't fall asleep at your post.

That is why we should prepare for him. Stay awake! Don't let your heart become hardened and lose his healing touch. How are *you* preparing for Christmas? Can we pray every morning when we get up, "Lord, show me someone today with whom I may share your love, mercy and forgiveness." It could be your children, your husband, your wife, or whoever; do it for Jesus. Every night when we go to bed, let us ask ourselves, "Where have I found Christ today?" The answer will be God's Advent gift to us that day. By being alert and watchful we will receive an extra gift: Christ himself. Let us remember the saying of St. Thomas Aquinas: "Without God, I can't. Without me, he won't."

## Second Homily

They brought terror to Mumbai in November 2009, these young men in jeans and T-shirts. They struck at 10pm Wednesday, targeting the eating places and hotels frequented mainly by British and American tourists; at 2am they were still taking hostages. They turned Mumbai into a slaughter-house, with 145 dead and over 300 injured. They created tremendous worry and lamentation for relatives here, as well as in India. That Advent cry of Isaiah to God when everything was in a mess, "Oh that you would tear the heavens open and come down" must have been on the lips of many caught in the attack. It is the cry for a redeemer, for a parent, a father or mother to put things right.<sup>1</sup> Those words of Isaiah came true at the Baptism of Jesus when the heavens were torn open, the Spirit descended on him, and the Father's words were heard. The Father has sent a

redeemer in his Son, Jesus.

Brian Keenan, taken hostage in Beirut from 1985 to 1990, tells how he was suddenly taken prisoner, blind-folded and thrown in with men he did not know, all so different, nothing in their life histories that should have brought them together. He wrote: “We were all in our own way innocently walking over a bridge that had collapsed and we had all tumbled down here into this hole in the ground and found ourselves together. Why?” Through all the anguish and questioning they discovered love as the reality that underlay everything else. “We each of us had fallen into meaning; if we cared to seek it out and climb with it out of that awful chasm into which we had been toppled. The experience of love was the stepladder up which we could climb” (*An Evil Cradling*, Penguin, 1993).

Jesus’ words, “Be on your guard, be alert because you do not know when the Master is coming,” awaken us to search for meaning, the meaning of our lives. Advent is this time. Advent tells us that our Redeemer, Jesus, is coming into the present circumstances of our lives. Advent means ‘coming’. Jesus’ first coming, he became one with us in the messiness of our lives, coming as a child, God with us in every aspect of our lives. In Advent we are waiting for the child, but we are also waiting for Jesus who comes in grace and who will come morning, noon, midnight; we don’t know when, not to terrify us but to be our Redeemer. The concept of redeemer, ‘goel’ reflects one who is intimately related to members of his family and who will go to any lengths to set them free, even to the extent of putting himself in the other’s place.

God is ever faithful. He is the potter who can refashion, bring something new out of what has been broken down. We are in the hands of God. Don’t give up on God, even in tough times. Await the hand of the artist, offer him your heart, soft and tractable; “Let your clay be moist, lest you grow hard and lose the imprint of his fingers” (Irenaeus).

The door-keeper was a key role in Mark’s community, especially during Nero’s persecution. Who do you let in? Jesus is coming — Christians running for their lives are coming at any hour. Be alert! Be alert to the sacred moments not only in the Church but in your daily life — moments in our families that occur quite spontaneously, like children asking questions as they grow, learn, and discover new things. Such times can give us a wonderful opportunity not only to give information but to explain the wonder of God’s love, vision, and purpose for each of us.

The times of questioning and struggle for our teenagers as they search to understand themselves, can also lead to such precious moments. We don’t have to have an answer — just spending time and listening can be enough.

For us as adults, we are invited beyond a merely sentimental understanding of Christmas as waiting for the baby Jesus to an adult and social appreciation of the message of the Incarnation of God in Christ. Jesus identified his own message with the coming of the reign of God, whereas we often settle for the sweet coming of a baby who asked nothing of us in terms of surrender,

encounter, mutuality or any studying of the scriptures or the actual teaching of Jesus. It's time for us Catholics to leave aside inferiority complexes and become valiant witnesses against the dictatorship of relativism, an anti-Christian attitude that makes attacks on Christians, and especially Catholics, and passes these attacks off as politically correct. This is the hour of the laity. It's time the sleeping giant awakens.

1. David Coleman Headley (Pakistani father and American mother) was one of the leading planners of the 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai which killed 166 people over three days at two five-star hotels, a train station, and a small Jewish community centre. He is serving a 35-year sentence in a US jail.

# Second Sunday of Advent

Isa. 40:1-5, 9-11

2 Pet. 3:8-14

Mk. 1:1-8

The Christmas rush is on; the shops are crowded with people getting their last-minute shopping done. So many things to choose, hoping to please the different tastes of the family. In our secular world, Santa is coming with his Ho! Ho! Ho! and jingle bells. The laughter is forced, and the bells don't ring out the real reason for our season. Often, we're left hollow, the happiness is hard to find or doesn't last. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds and kings are crowded out. But even in all the best presentations of Christmas there's one person left out most of the time. It's John the Baptist who emerges out of the wilderness, an unmistakable figure with weird costume and strange diet. Why does he come now? What's the meaning of John for this Second Sunday?

Let's go back to the scriptures and slowly take in the word. We almost pass over the first line of Mark's Gospel, "The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." What's beginning? In Jesus's time, there was a sense of something about to happen. Isaiah's prophecy speaks to the heart of the Jewish people that their time of servitude is ended, their sins atoned for. The battle for true freedom is about to be enjoined. It is Jesus who will bring in the reign of God. He is the strong one who will baptise with power and the Holy Spirit and bind Satan, the spirit of evil. He will set people free.

That victory for Mark only comes at the very end of the Gospel when the pagan centurion proclaims in faith, "Indeed this man is the Son of God." But even after Jesus is risen in victory over death and the power of the evil one, and the angel has told the women to go and tell Peter and the disciples that he is risen and goes before them into Galilee, the women out of sheer terror run from the tomb and tell no-one. But note the beginning starting over again. The original ending in the Greek text ends with one word, '*gar*'... '*for*' which signals it's not the beginning of something we read, but the beginning of something we do. That simple word '*gar*' tells us we must live, put into action what we have just read.

The Gospel of Mark picks up that shout of Isaiah, "Shout Good News" and brings it to fulfilment. It meant great comfort for the Jewish people in exile, far from their native home. The Gospel proclaimed brought comfort to Mark's small Christian community in Rome who were experiencing failure within, and almost total extinction from outside, as Nero, seeking to put the blame for his burning of Rome on the Christian community, unleashed a terrible persecution. The shout was the beginning of Good News in Jesus crucified and risen even as they went to the lions and to death.

That shout found a voice in John. God's voice in prophecy had been stilled a long time until an emergence out of the desert of one in the garb, not of any prophet, but of the great prophet Elijah, known by his cloak of camel hair who would prepare the way for the Messiah. John, as the new Elijah, took Isaiah's words, "Prepare the way of the Lord" and put it into action. "Change your



outlook, turn back to God. Look inward at the condition of your heart and mind — Go to Confession. Get ready for God. And be ready to stand aside for someone more powerful.”

John points to Jesus. That’s the greatness of John. He knows that God wants him for this job — that people are hungry, want to come into a living relationship with God in whom their, and ours, true happiness lies. John is not afraid to challenge evil, the wrongs he sees people do to others, even Herod over marrying his brother’s wife, even if it will cost him his life. He points out the right path for people to follow.

John is *the voice* sounding beyond the wilderness: yet see the humility of the man as crowds come; he constantly gives place to Jesus who is *the Word*, the content of the Good News. The water he gives in his baptism of repentance is but the container, the fire and the Spirit are the contents given only by Jesus. This is God’s doing. God is faithful. He wants to bring us back to our beginnings, our first love of wife, husband and family, and fundamentally with God, then out to others to bring God’s Good News to them.

If John were here, eye-balling each one of us, where would he want us to begin to prepare for Jesus? With the bills passed in Parliament that attack our Christian beliefs we are all facing something new. Don’t sit back and let it wash over us. Don’t just say, “I’m a good Catholic, I go to Mass each Sunday.” Jesus is the world-changing event that has to take effect in our lives, in our time. Don’t ignore people who have given the Church or partner away, who say they are no longer Catholic. Pray for them. Fast for them. God is patient, not wanting anybody to be lost, but to change their ways.

For Jesus, time is not about how much, in terms of days, months, years. It is about the quality of our time together with him, time with others. Every moment is a grace-given moment for bringing God’s promise and purpose to fulfilment in our and other’s lives. Can we become a Good News community, an evangelising community, moving from the Church bell to the doorbell, to tell others of our great Good News? How can that begin?

## Second Homily

“Go up to the mountain, joyful bearer of Good News! Shout with a full voice, ‘Our God is near!’” *Joyful bearer of Good News — Prepare the way of the Lord*, two ideas Mark took from the Prophet Isaiah; one is the word ‘*Gospel*,’ ‘*Good News*,’ and the other is ‘*The Way*.’ Mark is the first writer to conceive the idea of proclaiming Christ as Gospel or Good News. It was a new literary device, it wasn’t a letter, like Paul’s letters, or a chronicle or a series of proverbs. It was the life of Christ as *Gospel, as Good News*.

Do we believe in the power of the Gospel to touch lives? Mark certainly did. He wrote the beginning of the Good News about Jesus, Messiah, and Son of God. In saying ‘beginning’, he doesn’t just mean the beginning of his narrative, but that the beginning, the foundation of Good

News for his community and for us today, is Jesus, Christ, and Son of God.

The second word that Mark uses is *'the way.'* His Gospel is a Gospel of the way. It is the way in which Jesus, the Lord, walks and it is the way into which Jesus calls us, his followers. "Prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight." If there's one thing that characterises this State Government it is roadwork: roads being widened, tunnels, major freeways. Massive shifting of tons of rock and soil, an enormous effort even in terms of today's heavy machinery. It gives an insight into the moral effort required of us by the Lord this Advent through the prophet Isaiah and John the Baptist.

What will it take to shift our thinking, our attitudes? The horror of the pandemic hitting the world and the tragedy of lives and security lost has done that. God is in our midst crying out "console my people, console them". God yearns that we may return and be saved. The way of the Lord and preparing for it is a constant theme in Isaiah, spoken to refugees, to people broken and in exile.

In today's first reading, **Isaiah 40**, God promises to bring his people back home, out of Babylon, across the rugged mountainous terrain. In **Is. 35: 8** God will make a way for his people through the sea as in the Exodus and call it a sacred way for his redeemed. In **Is. 51: 9** God will split the sea monster Rahab in two and make it a way for his people. Rahab represents the wild sea, symbol of primal chaos for the Jew, and out of this chaos, disaster, slavery, he will make a way. God will bring us through our disasters and chaos into a new life and land that's promised. John the Baptist's proclamation of the way and the preparation for it through a ritual baptism of repentance, was at "the place of the crossing" where the Jewish people from Egypt first passed over the Jordan into the promised land (**Josh. 3: 1ff**).

To his Christian community facing death, persecution and struggles, Mark presents Jesus as the way — the way of freedom and liberation — proclaimed Son of God by a pagan soldier, in the abject dereliction of the cross. It is the Gospel dream message that gives courage and hope. That in the blackest night, Jesus, the Son of God is with us — making a way through.

Martin Luther King Jr. grasped this text when he spoke in Washington: "I have a dream today, I have a dream that one day 'every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be laid low, and the rough places will be made plains, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together.'

"This is our hope. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to work together, pray together, to stand for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day ... "

But that day of freedom, the Day of the Lord, as we saw in the recent Black Lives Matter protests, is slow in coming. It comes, as Peter says, with patient, loving action. We must be people of faith and hope — every human act, every Christian act, is one of hope. We must be people of the present, living this present moment, not just enduring it — because something is coming to birth;

this present moment, for all its imperfection and frustration, is pregnant with all sorts of possibilities and pregnant with the future, with love, and with Christ.

The readings challenge us to a personal encounter with Christ, and with those Christ may send into our day. He is asking us to:

1. *Console my people*, like we did during lockdown, caring for others, a phone call, a meal, clapping, being in touch with Zoom. But it can be lost now that cars flood the road, and we're rushing again. The Good News in Jesus is that we have been forgiven. Forgive people who have hurt you, forgive yourself. Seek the Sacrament of Reconciliation for yourself and others. Let Christ the Good Shepherd gather you in his arms and hold you to his heart.
2. *Prepare a way*: We don't have all the answers, but together we can beat a path through for others to walk on — if their world is falling apart; to let people in desperation know that God wants nobody to be lost. Through our prayers and striving to be holy we can make God transparent and present to people today. As a Christian community we can become searchers, disciples, and prophets, like the first Apostles who preached Christ and the Good News of salvation with nothing.
3. *Point others to Jesus* as John the Baptist does. There is no harsh judgement from John, but like the new Elijah in his life and behaviour, John prepares the way for someone more powerful, someone who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit — Jesus the Lord.

Together with Christ can we join with others, walk with them in our search for the way to life!

# Third Sunday of Advent

Isa. 61:1-2a, 10-11    1 Thess. 5:16-24    Jn. 1:6-8, 19-28

Isaiah joyfully proclaims a future messiah who will bring about a year of Jubilee: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me — to bring Good News to the poor, to bind up the broken-hearted, to bring prisoners out of darkness into the light” resulting in shouts of joy and dancing in the streets! Jesus applied this text of Isaiah to the ministry program of his public life. Let’s take one aspect of that program, “The Lord has anointed me to bind up the broken-hearted.”

Have you known someone with a broken heart? Or has your own heart ever 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. Or worst of all, we find it hard to find light at the end of the tunnel. Our suffering seems endless.

Yet Jesus came to bind up the broken-hearted. Through his tender love and his healing power, Jesus wants to restore us and make us whole. 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 dare to open our hearts to him and let him in, see the pain we’re in. And we find that very difficult.

The incident that broke our heart we can remember clearly — the date and the circumstance are rooted in our memory and heart — but to get it out into the open, can also be frightening, embarrassing.

In my own life when my heart was broken, I felt 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 on 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 the 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 Yorkshire mining village, playing among the dirty mountainous slag heaps from the coal mines, the pitch black of the underground tunnels, the grime and 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 till he came to the light.

John describes his mission and identity as making way for the light — to speak for the light, as a

voice calling attention to the only one who is the light for our lives. John claimed no title for himself, only to be a 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, the very thing we are meant to celebrate this Advent. It can be so easy to focus on the dark side of ourselves, the bitterness when we have been hurt, the unforgiveness and the lack of love, that we lose sight of the love Jesus has for us, a love that is active, passionate, and transforming.

As it was for Jesus, so it is for us. God loves to see us act with kindness toward someone who is hurting. He is thrilled when we lift someone else's burden or decide to go the extra mile with them. He loves it when we enter into the nitty gritty of other people's lives showing them the same love that changed us.

With John we are asked to make way for the light, to work quietly on the darkness that hides within, that we may come to truth, forgiveness and 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 Good News to the afflicted? We are called to be Christ's presence right where we are. Through our touch and our words many hurting people may be restored.

Then we can exult for joy and be wrapped around in a robe of salvation, and integrity. Rejoice, then, pray constantly, and for all things give thanks to God as Mary did and continues to do for us this Advent.

## Second Homily

Today is Rejoice Sunday. You hear it in the responsorial psalm in Mary's song as her time is drawing near, and in the second reading of St Paul to the Thessalonians, "Rejoice in the Lord always." We need joy to take us through the dark times, like John the Baptist in prison wondering if he pointed out the wrong guy in Jesus, "Are you the one or should we look for someone else?" And especially when the opposition is asking: "Who are you?" and "Why are you doing the things you do?" Applied to ourselves, they are questions about identity, the meaning and purpose of our lives. Hard questions that we may not know the answers to. We need light.

Coming out of the wilderness John the Baptist clearly states that he is not the light, only the one who points toward the light. At the time that St John's Gospel was written, there was a group of disciples who held that John the Baptist was the messiah. John says quite clearly that he is not the messiah, nor is he Elijah who goes before the Day of the Lord, nor one of the prophets. In fact, faced with the jealousy of his own disciples over Jesus' success in baptising, he said, "The friend of the bridegroom rejoices, because he has come. He must increase, I must decrease." In John's Gospel only Jesus is the light, the light that brings us life. John says three times *I am not*. Jesus, on the other hand, repeatedly speaks of himself as *I am*. I am the way, the truth, and the life.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus takes the words of Isaiah quoted in the first reading and reveals who he is, and why he does the things he is doing. In the synagogue of Nazareth, he took the scroll, unrolled it, and read: "The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me (i) to bring the good news to the poor, (ii) to proclaim liberty to captives and (iii) to bring new sight to the blind, (iv) to set the downtrodden free, (v) to proclaim the Lord's year of favour." These are five counter-balanced statements around the central one, "to bring new sight to the blind". But that central verse is not in Isaiah. It is Jesus who brings us new sight, a new vision; to see another way of living life, another way of relating to people, another way of standing in God's presence without fear.

The basis of that new vision is Jesus standing among us, whom we don't always recognise. John the Baptist came, sent by God as a witness for the light, a witness to speak for the light, so that everyone might believe through him. John questions us not only about who we are and what we do. He questions us about what we believe. To believe is the basic form of that call to repentance John preached. We are challenged to change our minds about God and ourselves, especially when we feel down, things don't seem to be working out, or when tragedy strikes.

Thursday afternoon I was called to Waverley Private Hospital to bless two 20-week-old boys who were stillborn. The family asked me to come and bless their babies. I felt this time of Advent-waiting was meant to break out in joy but was instead a time of deep sorrow. Yet the parents asked for the presence of Christ in the priest to come into their pain. The joy of God's closeness was a power that carried John the Baptist through times of horror, so he did not have to deny the difficulty of his experiences. Times of crisis can be moments to discover ourselves, our relationships anew.

We don't think of John as a man who moves in deep joy. We tend to think of him as a lonesome figure. But John was a magnetic character who intrigued people to seek him out and to follow him. In John's person, people could catch something of God's way (**cf. Denis McBride, *Seasons of the Word*, p. 29**). Yet John was willing to fade out that we may come into the dawn of Christ's presence. He was not despondent but joyful that the Lord was near. The friend of the bridegroom has great joy now that that the bridegroom has come.

It was the nearness of Christ's coming, the witness of the Thessalonian community which did a great deal to make Christ known in the area that was the source of Paul's joy. He tells us to rejoice in the Lord always, pray constantly, and then act to bring that joy to others. John and Paul's closeness to God gave an edge to their preaching, urging others to make ready. It gave them a vision to see through and beyond present danger and disaster; it moved them to draw others into that sense of joy.

Jesus is asking us not to stand outside the Word, looking on. In Luke's Gospel Jesus proclaimed today's reading from Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth and said, as he finished reading, "This

text is being fulfilled today even as you listen” (Lk. 4: 21).

He wants to take away our blindness, to share his vision, his closeness, which can enable us to see things differently and act differently and make us joyful witnesses of the light who is Christ.

## Third Homily

I was typing up carols for a special group of young people at a drug centre where I was counselling, and I came to the realisation why Christmas is a time of joy and has a special sense of God’s presence. It is because as we sing these carols we come to adore, to sing glory to God with the angels, to worship Christ, the incarnate Word. Jesus is coming to make a difference in our lives. Christmas is the redemptive act of God on behalf of all who suffer and are downtrodden. No wonder John the Baptist points beyond himself to one who baptises with Spirit and with power.

Whenever you see, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me” in scripture it’s a sign that God is doing something new. Archbishop Oscar Romero was canonized on 14 October 2014, together with Pope Paul VI, by Pope Francis. Archbishop Romero decided to change from being a safe bishop to one who knew the plight of his people and became the voice of the voiceless and was murdered because of it. That was, and still is, the work of the Spirit even though it took thirty-eight years before his life was acknowledged by a South American Pope, while his killers have not been brought to justice. Becoming vulnerable, being persecuted, should not deter us from our task of preaching the Gospel to the poor, from binding up hearts that are broken, setting captives free. This was the program that Jesus made a reality at the beginning of his public mission. “Today, this day, these words are being fulfilled even as you listen.” Are we pointing beyond ourselves to Jesus?

Don’t stifle the Spirit, nor the prophets among you, otherwise the Church will fall asleep. The declaration of the prophet in the first reading is exciting. He tells us he is ready to celebrate. Do we understand the event we are celebrating? Are there some like the fellow who said, “I had a great Christmas, I can’t remember a thing.”

Advent is a time of heightened awareness. It isn’t the empty stare of the person who doesn’t know what to expect. We need to be prepared for the shape and meaning of things to come. It is an exchange — we give ourselves to God and God gives his self, his divinity to us. We say it at every Mass, as the priest puts the drop of water into the wine in the chalice: “By the mingling of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” May we come to share the joy that Jesus is coming to us, therefore: “Rejoice, he is near.”

In the second reading, Paul takes us into the anticipation of Christ’s final coming. The expectation of the community of Thessalonika for the last coming, the Parousia, was stronger than any Jehovah Witness’ expectation. We need to recapture the dynamism, the urgency Paul wrote of, that Jesus is coming, and the difference that should make to our behaviour. When the French

Underground heard that the Allies were on the outskirts of Paris, they didn't sit back and say, salvation, victory is ours — they worked all the harder to make that victory a reality. So, something needs to happen before this dramatic fulfilment of expectations takes place, something that “God through Jesus Christ wills you to do”.

By analysing the texts, you find it has to do with human relationships:

1. Try to treat one another with kindness — always relating it back to the Lord — for example, cheer the faint-hearted, visit those in prison, point to Jesus simply by our loving presence. In our parish it could be the many sick or older people, widows, widowers who are grieving, lonely, alone and shut in. Could I give two hours a week, that is two visits to a home or hospital or old people's home? And to do this with joy. That's the second point Paul makes.
2. Always be joyful, never give up praying. Thank God, whatever happens.
3. Deeper yet, the final stage of preparation for Jesus' coming has to do with who we are — we are to be holy, body, mind, and spirit, spiritually sound, morally irreproachable. If we are busy keeping up with the latest on snapchat or twitter, not wanting to miss out on the gossip; when do we have time to pray, to wait, and to witness Christ's coming?

The time of waiting during Advent has a purpose. It is productive. God is at work among us during Advent, if we will let him. “He who calls us is trustworthy and he will do it.”

John the Baptist is the last stage of preparation for Jesus' coming to minister among us. John is calling to us: “He must increase. I must decrease.” John knows what he is not — not the messiah, not Elijah, not the Prophet — only a witness to the light. John is a faint reflection — a mirror of what Jesus' coming will do. I baptise with water. He with fire. The difference between us is between water and fire. All our doing is nothing compared with what he will do when he comes. And so, John says — the friend of the bridegroom rejoices to hear the bridegroom's voice — that he is on the way. I am only the voice crying out: Make a straight path for the Lord.

St Therese of Lisieux when she discovered she had terminal tuberculosis from the blood on her handkerchief, said with joy: “It is the sign of the Bridegroom.” What a tremendous way to face suffering or the other struggles in our lives. Let us look for Christ's coming this Advent with joy.



# Fourth Sunday of Advent

2 Sam. 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16

Rom. 16: 25-27

Lk. 1: 26-38

I was just thinking a *woman* should give this Homily. In the first reading you get the man's way — step aside God! says David, as he feels so guilty living in his palace while God remains in a tent. "*I will build you a house,*" a magnificent temple. There are things we want to do for God, but in *our way*, like Frank Sinatra's "I did it *my way*".

God says No! God has other plans that go beyond the externals, no show, no fuss, it comes quietly, achieving results that go beyond our wildest dreams. God says: "I will build you a house, a dynasty, and one who will reign forever." It's God's covenant with David.

In this Gospel we see the woman's way, not just any woman but Mary, who embraces God's plan. Two womanly qualities are exemplified in Mary. Waiting and making space for God. Waiting is not our strong point. Most people equate waiting with a waste of time. One woman likens Advent to pregnancy: "Waiting is an impractical time in our thoughts, good for nothing, but mysteriously necessary to all that is coming. As in pregnancy, nothing of value comes into being without a period of quiet incubation. Not a healthy baby, not a loving relationship, a work of art, and never a transformation."

Mary is our model for Advent which is a season of waiting. Mary had to wait. This was not her doing. It's God's doing. Mary is graced, gifted in a way unsought for, chosen by God for *God's plan*. Yet all hangs on Mary's response. And she did respond. God's plan is being realised quietly. Mary had to wait. Patiently she had to create space for the child in her womb, in her life. She had to wait nine months to look into the face of her Saviour and ours. She had to let it happen.

Only a woman can really empathise with Mary — with all the depth of feeling, turmoil, anxiousness, the experiential impact of pregnancy. A child changes a woman's lifestyle and person. She will never be the same again. And the child that Mary waits for will change not only her lifestyle, *but the lifestyle of all who will follow her Son*. Still, Mary is not servile or passive. She *searches* to understand God's intent — how can this be? And the surrender — Oh, *then let it be*, according to your plan, I am your handmaid, not servile but servant. God's plan becomes her mission — to make space for God, for the work of God in her Son, Jesus.

Michael Mangan imaginatively explored this in ***Waiting for the Child:***

*"Watching and waiting, wondering just why I'm so restless and sleepless, waking in the night. What was promised soon will be here, I am yearning for him. There's a stirring deep inside me, as I'm waiting, waiting for the child.*

*"Longing and lonely, humming lullabies, with arms aching and empty, heart is open wide. Oh, to see him and to touch him and to hold him to me. There's a stirring deep inside me, as I'm*

*waiting, waiting for the child.*

*“Searching and sighing, waiting for the dawn of a new day of promise, Emmanuel come forth. Soon he’ll be here, right before me, I am ready for him. There’s a stirring deep inside me as I’m waiting, waiting for the child.”*

It expresses so well Mary’s waiting and making space for God.

Jean Paul Sartre, the existentialist philosopher, an atheist who at the end, returned to his baptismal faith, was captured by the Nazis in the autumn of 1940, and deported to a prison camp in Germany. Before Christmas, a Jesuit priest asked him to write a play for the French soldiers who were prisoners with him. Sartre writes that he saw “on the face of Mary an anxious wonderment never before seen on a human face. For Christ is her baby, flesh of her flesh, and the fruit of her womb. At other moments when she feels a stranger and she thinks *God is there* — and she finds herself caught by a religious awe before this speechless God, this terrifying infant. All mothers at times are brought up sharp in this way before this fragment of themselves, this baby. They feel themselves in exile from this new life which is now peopled by another’s thoughts. She realises that Christ is her son, her very own baby, and that he is God.”

In putting herself at the disposal of God and his plan, Mary had to form, nurture, educate, but not cling to her Son, not be an obstacle but allow Jesus to follow his Father’s plan and bring it to fulfilment. Mary had to wait as we wait. What do we need to let go of? What needs to grow? Family unity? Friendships? Inner peace? Rushing is the enemy of the spirit as it is of relationships. Like Mary, may we sit quietly in prayer — even in our busyness — and let the Spirit do what she will.

## **Second Homily**

Prayer is often defined as the lifting of the heart and mind to God. But have you prayed when your whole life, your being, your total self is on the line? The sudden diagnosis by your doctor that you have cancer; or in these times of financial downturn, being called into the boss’s office and the door is closed, but everyone else knows that you are getting the chop. Emotions flood in, tears come, anger rises, and fear takes hold, as your life, your family, are all affected. Prayer becomes a struggle for survival, a cry that rises from our depths.

The Jews from Moses, to Esther, to the Holocaust, have known such prayer. And we don’t understand today’s Gospel unless we understand this. Mary, out of a profound, a 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, unbearable, yet mysteriously a call that is heard. Mary cast about in her mind 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, "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 rationalising to keep doing what's 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 is able to 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 16-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 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, 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

We're familiar with paintings of the Annunciation, the angel's message to Mary, with Mary as a mature person, dressed ornately in yards of silk, quite composed albeit disturbed by the meaning of the angel's message. For goodness' sake! She was a teenage girl, fourteen or fifteen, and panic-stricken at the sight of the angel! She knew from the visits of angels to Abraham and Sarah, to Gideon and Anna, the mother of Samson, that God had something in mind for her.

We are here in the presence of something beyond all our reckoning. No matter how gifted we may be, God is calling us out of our usual patterns, facing us with a challenge and inviting us to respond to him. Take David — he was gifted, charming, fearless in battle, as in his fight with Goliath. Everything he turned his hand to he succeeded in brilliantly. He spoke to the prophet Nathan about building God a house, perhaps from feelings of guilt. For here he was living in a cedar house while God still lived in a tent. At first Nathan agreed, but that night the Lord spoke to Nathan and said No! David wasn't used to getting a No! But he let go of his plans. God wanted more from and for David. God's ways confront and soar above our capacity and our giftedness.

David was *settled* in Jerusalem. That word is important. He was settling down, getting comfortable. God, on the other hand, is a God of the tent, in the midst of his people, a God of movement, ready to pack up and move ahead of the people — to where they do not know. There are no solid foundations for a tent; it's weak, collapsible. God accompanied David in all his expeditions from his shepherding days onward. "You will build me a house? No, I will build you a house," meaning a dynasty, which we know finds its fulfillment in the person of Jesus, the God-Man who pitched his tent among us. Where is God to be housed? In the womb of Mary.

Let's come back to Mary. She was full of grace, chosen by God as we all are. She knew as the people in the Bible knew that when God sent an angel to you, some major re-arrangement of your life was in the works, things were going to get more turbulent.

To the disturbing announcement of the angel, Mary said, "Let what you have said be done to me." Those few words carry with them revolutionary significance, something in the universe shifted gear. With those words a spark of new light entered our world as deep within Mary's body a baby began to form; a new universe of obedience to God began. Those words are Mary's response to the call and promise of God.

They represent a willingness to believe what is not immediately apparent, a readiness to be used in risky and even painful ways. They represent obedience and surrender. Surrender is not a word we like to hear because it sounds weak. But when uttered in response to God, it is heroic. Those words changed not only Mary's life but also the life of the world.

Is the mystery of the Annunciation only about Mary or is it also in some profound way about us? Are we willing to obey God when his call comes to us?

Can we say, “I am the servant of the Lord” when we experience a change in our life such as an assignment or job transfer? Can we say, “I am the servant of the Lord” when a spouse is afflicted with Alzheimer’s, or when we discover we have cancer in one of its various forms? Can we say, “I am the servant of the Lord” when our family members have problems and turn to us repeatedly for help? Or when the burdens of age start to weaken our bodies?

This magnificent scene of the Annunciation, where Mary consents to God’s plan, when she submits to a solemn re-ordering of her life is about the supernatural conception of Jesus. To limit it to that is to miss an important dimension of the Annunciation that can apply to all of us. It is also about God coming to us, about God’s entrance into any human life, not through an angel, but in ways we can perceive, comprehend, and embrace. God comes to us through events, people, challenges, responsibilities, and family.

Let’s not domesticate the Annunciation and leave it only as a devotional scene. Let’s release its power and start to see it as a moment that challenges us. Are we willing to surrender to God as Mary did? Are we willing to let God truly be Emmanuel, God with us?

In this season of Advent as we prepare for the coming of the Lord are we really willing to let God come into our life — if he comes with a word of challenge, with a call to commitment? Are we ready to surrender to God as Mary did? We all have lots of plans for our life. Mary had hers. But ultimately there is God’s plan for our life, and his plan makes everything that happens to us coherent.

Are we willing to say: “I am the servant of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me?” If we can, and sometimes it takes a long time to say that and mean it, then we will really be ready for Christmas — the coming of the Lord into our life, making our life not just a series of personal plans, but a dwelling place — a house — of God’s light and love and will. “I am the servant of the Lord. Let what you have said be done to me.” That is Mary’s key to the tremendous peace of Christmas.

# **THE SEASON OF CHRISTMAS**

**Year B**

# Children's Mass, Christmas Eve

## Lk. 2:1-16 enacted

Mary and Joseph, like any young couple, were in their home in Nazareth preparing for the birth of their baby Jesus, when they received a message. It was an order, an edict from Caesar Augustus that Joseph had to be registered at the place of his birth with his wife, Mary. They had to walk eighty miles to Bethlehem, Joseph's and King David's town! Mary was pregnant! Because they were so poor, someone might have loaned them a donkey! They had no Trivago hotel bookings and no money, so they had to search the town for somewhere to stay.

### Let's hear what it was like:

(The Inn Seeking Song):

(Inn-keeper) **"Who knocking be?"**

(Joseph and Mary) **"A poor and very weary pair."**

(Inn-keeper) **"Why come to me?"**

(Mary) **"For lodging for a child I bear."**

**The children** in the Church yell, **"No Room, No Room!"**

(Joseph and Mary) **"By God's grace sir, please, O, let us stay sir. We are weary, weary from the way, sir."**

**The children** in the Church yell **"No Room, No Room!"**

(Joseph and Mary move centre stage)

**2. (Knock, knock) Second inn-keeper, "Who's at my door?"**

(Joseph) **"My wife and she with child, and I."**

(Second inn-keeper) **"What seek you poor?"**

(Joseph and Mary) "Oh, see our plight and heed our cry. Bid us enter, please oh let us rest here."

The children in the Church yell, "No Room, No Room!"

(Joseph and Mary) "God will bless you, let us end our quest here."

(Inn-keeper) "What will you pay?"

(Joseph) "Oh sir, what can a poor man say?"

(Inn-keeper) "Then go away."

(Joseph and Mary) "Oh sir, do let us, let us stay."

(Inn-keeper) "Do not trouble me anymore. Go knock at someone else's door!"

If you take Christ out of Christmas, what have you got? Fancy boxes and bubbles along the streets or shopping centres. What use are they when you've cut your finger or broken an arm? You

don't run to boxes to be comforted, but to mum. If you are having it tough financially, you turn not to bubbles but to parents or grandparents for help, or a doctor when you are ill.

At Christmas we need a person, a personal saviour who knows what's going on inside our minds and hearts. Jesus came to make things new again, if only we open the door he can come in, listen to us as we tell him our heart aches, our dreams. He can help us if we listen to him and believe in him. He can get under our skin because that's what God did, by becoming fully human in Jesus to save us, he was born, was cold, had to be breast-fed, all that little babies go through. Ask Mary and Joseph, they opened their lives for God's Son and his plan.

You would think that God the Father would have his Son born into wealth. But to show his love for us Jesus wanted to be one with us in our misery to set us free. Jesus was born in poverty of poor parents. After a life of giving, he was crucified and buried in a borrowed tomb. Ordinary fathers coming from poverty want to give their children, a new home, a car, an education, and fine clothes, things they missed, but these are external to the person. They don't guarantee that they will be happy.

In Australia, the supposed lucky country, when there's no room for God, you can try to fill up the emptiness with glitter like the empty boxes — but they are empty, they don't create meaningful relationships. Professor Adrian Franklin from the University of South Australia highlighted severe loneliness in Australian men between the ages of 24-46. Loneliness caused by depression from relationship breakdowns, losing one's job, little contact with other men, men trying to become happier by working harder, going on Facebook, turning to drink or drugs, but after all this you are still left with yourself.

The Word became flesh, that's God's plan, his Word for us became real in Jesus. What did he say? "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground, it remains a single grain," — we're left with ourselves, alone — "but if it dies it yields a harvest." What Jesus went through for love of us has changed millions of lives, for he lives and wants a living relationship with us.

Taki Ichii was a brutal murderer in Japan who was awaiting execution. Some Christians tried to speak to him, but he scowled at them. They were able to leave the Word of God, the Bible, with him. On his own in his cell, he picked it up and when he came to the Passion of Jesus, and Jesus forgiving his killers, Taki said that it was as if a five-inch nail had been driven into his heart. He gave his life to Jesus, and Jesus set him free from the prison of his own hatred.

So where was Jesus born? In the smelly, exposed, messy cradle which was the feeding trough for the animals. It was ready to receive Jesus. That's where Jesus wanted to be. We might feel that our heart and soul is not fit for Jesus to come in, but that's precisely where he wants to be. As we share this Mass and Jesus comes to you, knocking on the door of your heart, please, I beg you with Mary and Joseph to open your door, make room for Christ and he will come in and reveal God's plan for you, no matter how your life has been before.



There may be an area of your life into which you want Jesus to enter.

May you be blessed with happiness and joy this Christmas, and the deepest sense of God's loving presence with you throughout this coming year.

May you have the spirit of Christmas which is peace,

The gladness of Christmas which is hope,

The heart of Christmas which is love.

## Second Homily

Hooray! The little star has got her twinkling back! How did she get her twinkling back? It happened when she led poor people, simple people, the shepherds, and rich people, kings, all kinds of people to Jesus. The little star saw the smile on the face of the baby Jesus and glowed with delight. She led them all to the stable at Bethlehem where the ox and the donkey shared their feeding trough, their straw, and made it a crib for the Christ Child.

I met a homeless man on Friday who asked me why all the joy around Christmas? He thought a moment and then said, "It's because God has come to the poor in this tiny baby; has come to people like me." He came back to me yesterday morning, radiant with joy, God had come to him with the gift of a pension, giving him back his dignity. It was the same joy I saw in the faces of the Lee family when told that they had received permanent residence in Australia. God comes when we cry out to him in our need. God became human, eternity entered time.

When we see the Christ Child, his arms open wide wanting us to come to him, it touches something deep inside us. The helplessness of God asks us to receive him. Within each one of us there is a place in the heart where we hold all that is most precious and sacred to us; a deep place where we have been touched, caressed, loved, and valued in a way that is beyond anything we have ever consciously experienced. The image of God inside us is energy, fire, memory; especially the memory of a touch so tender and loving that its goodness and truth becomes the prism through which we see everything. We recognise goodness and truth outside of us precisely because they resonate with something that is already inside of us. When we have become calloused with daily demands, we are invited at Christmas to come let us adore him, make him central again in our lives.

The power of Christmas is that it brings us back home; not home in the sense of your street address, but home in the sense of who you really are, who you were called to be, a home that asks whether you have chosen the right gods to fill your life. Christmas speaks to us, whatever you've become, whatever your motive for coming home, about a God so madly in love with you that this God could not tolerate any distancing but came to dwell among us, took on our human condition and not only taught us how to live by being compassionate, forgiving, and self-sacrificing, but

showed us the way.

Listen to how Mary responds to the mystery of God's Son being born today. "The Lord has exalted me with a great and unheard-of gift, which cannot be explained in any words and can scarcely be understood by the deepest feelings of the heart. And I offer up all the strength of my soul in thanksgiving and praise. In my joy I pour out all my life, all my feeling, all my understanding in contemplating the greatness of him who is without end. My soul rejoices in the eternal divinity of Jesus, my Saviour, whom I conceived in time and bore in my body. 'For he who is all mighty has done great things for me and holy is his name.'"

So, rub shoulders with contentment, make happiness a friend. Run with resolution, round each uncertain bend. Mingle with the optimists whose fervour is for keeps and remember that you are known by the company you keep. May Jesus, Mary and Joseph keep you company, as you get together as family to celebrate your joy in one another and share your presents and your love. Have a truly blessed and wonderful Christmas.

# The Nativity of Our Lord

Isa. 62:1-5

Acts 13:16-17, 22-25

Mt. 1:1-25 or Mt. 1:18-25

Have you noticed the irrepressible sense of joy that surrounds Christmas, the carols, a hearty greeting to the neighbours, a generous gift to people in need? Have you ever wondered where it comes from? It comes from a playful God who has played a joke on himself. G.K. Chesterton called Christmas a sacred jest and wrote, “And on that sacred jest the whole of Christianity doth rest.” A joke on others can be hurtful, but a jest about oneself leads to a good belly laugh. “Angels fly because they know how to take themselves lightly.”

A jest arises from things that seem incongruous and tickle our fancy: a mighty God becomes a weak, helpless baby; a God of untrammelled freedom limits himself to a remote place and time; God who is Spirit takes on corruptible flesh; God who is pure Light has entered our world of darkness and gloom to bring us peace and joy.

“Twas the night before Christmas when all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.” Then God’s mighty Word leapt down ... in silence. God slips quietly into our lives. When we approach the crib at Bethlehem on tip toe (depending how small we are) or on our knees with the shepherds, we gaze in wonder and awe at this event that has come to pass. The mighty Word of God has become flesh in Jesus. God’s Son has become human.

In Jesus, God drew near to us in person, wanting to be in relationship with us. He became one of us. Children teach us that a relationship is not just in the head, in what we know, but is the delight and excitement of being together.

When we were children, we would put two brooms across the chairs or sofas, throw a blanket over the top and then crawl in face to face, sharing stories and lollies, feeling close to each other. John’s Gospel tells us that the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us, to be close and intimate to us. God has come down to earth, not in power or wealth to make us feel inadequate, but in weakness and poverty to lift us up, to discover anew that we are children of God.

Anton Bruckner, the great composer, on Christmas Eve after Midnight Mass, stayed on in the Church praying in front of the crib scene. The next morning, the members of the Church choir, arriving for the dawn Mass found him still kneeling there full of awe in front of the crib. They asked him, “Why are you still here?” Bruckner replied, “I cannot get over the fact that God became man.” We, too, come face to face with the mystery of the incarnation as we celebrate Christmas. Are we as amazed as Anton Bruckner was when he knelt with an open heart before the mystery? Or has it lost all power to move us to awe and wonder a long time ago?

The joy is that God has come to share our life, to restore our wounded humanity, to lead us to be reconciled with one another; to talk through that hurt or misunderstanding we have carried for so long; to help us rise above it, and he comes to show us how.

Malcolm Muggeridge went to interview Mother Teresa of Calcutta in the filth, poverty, and pain of a local hospital. He couldn't take the sights and smells. He rushed back to his flat for a stiff whisky. He said, "I ran away. Mother Teresa moved in and stayed. That was the difference." Her love for Jesus whom she served in the poor showed her how.

It was the same with St Peter Claver, the great Jesuit missionary, who worked in the slave galleys, in the stench of the holds, lovingly tending the African slaves, washing, and comforting them. When he died, they put up a marble statue facing the harbour where he worked. As the wind and the salt turned the statue darker and darker, the slaves nudged each other. "See, he must have been one of us. No white man could have loved us as he loved." That love for Jesus cost him. When he was too old to go down to the ships, the cry "The ships are in", caused him to break out in a great sweat as the memories flooded in from his efforts to save the slaves.

The angels told the shepherds, "I bring you tidings of great joy for all the nations. Today in the town of David the one who comes to save us has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord." This is the reason for the irrepressible joy at Christmas. But how do we make this joy our own? Take the word 'joy' — J.O.Y stands for *Jesus, Others, You*. To know joy in our lives we need to place Jesus first in everything. Secondly, you need to please others before trying to please yourself. This is the recipe for joy, to experience the Christmas peace and joy, how we can convert the Christmas joy into a personal joy in our life, now and always. May this same joy be yours. A blessed and holy Christmas to you all.

## Second Homily

"Christmas is the one time in the long calendar of the year," wrote Dickens, "when people open their shut-in hearts to one another." There's something wonderful about Christmas — it's the spirit of Christmas! Sure, it's commercialised but people 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 that can be de-valued or lost, and hard to regain.

At Christmas we feel that God is very close to us, and very loving towards us. God is with us all the year but at Christmas it's as if God digs us in the ribs or tugs at our sleeves to be recognised.

How close this God draws near to us. When we were kids, we'd push the sofa and chairs together, put a broom across the chair backs, throw two blankets over to make a tent and then crawl in face to face to share stories and lollies in the most intimate way. The Word was made flesh and pitched his tent, to share all our life with us.

Jesus came to exchange more than lollies. The great Christmas bargain is that he took our humanity that we might share his divinity. That's the truth! I've met it again and again that people who can barely cope, have met him in prayer, Word or sacrament, and he has lifted them beyond themselves.

Christmas is a time to reconnect with God if we've been disconnected, trusting that we'll receive nothing but love. If we open our shut-in hearts, we will feel ourselves touched by the divine presence. God tells us that we are God's precious sons and daughters. We are heirs to the kingdom of heaven. Christmas is also a chance to reconnect with others, especially our families, if we've been disconnected from them. That, too, will bring us peace and joy. We need to make the effort, but the peace and joy is God's gift.

We look forward to receiving presents, wondering what the gift is behind the wrapping. We know that the wrapping paper adds nothing to the worth of the gift, but a lot of love has gone into the choice of the present, so carefully wrapped for you. Don't just rip the paper off — thank your mum and dad, your sister or brother. Be present to one another.

God's gift to us is not a thing, but a person chosen specially for you. When God gave us the gift of his Son, his gift didn't come in fancy wrapping. He came wrapped in the cloak of our weak, fragile humanity. In this we see the depth of God's love. Christ brought us a priceless, everlasting gift. If Jesus, our Redeemer, is our brother, he brings us the gift of being God's sons and daughters.

Jesus entered the world on our terms. He wanted to feel the grief of our humanity and show us the greatness of it. He understands our pain but wants to help us go beyond it to the pain of others. We can't do this! But Jesus, closest to the Father's heart, and revealing God's love, he can do it. Jesus is the reason for this season, this time of giving and receiving, of being connected with God and others. Let's not make him a seasonal thing. A merry Christmas to everyone from the parish team.

# Feast of the Holy Family

Gen. 15:1-6, 21:1-3 or Sir. 3:2-6, 12-12      Heb. 11:8, 11-12, 17-19 or Col. 3:12-21  
Lk. 2: 22-40 or Lk. 2:22, 39-40

If you plant a tree in an exposed place, then it becomes very vulnerable. It is at the mercy of every wind that blows. If it survives at all, it will be in a twisted and stunted form, a poor specimen of what it could be. If you want a tree to grow to its full potential, you must plant it in a more sheltered place. You must not plant it on its own. You must plant some other trees with it.

The Feast of the Holy Family is timely when so many winds of propaganda seek to change the very concept of family. With the passing of the same sex marriage bill I find myself having to think carefully and respectfully about other forms of marriage and family, while at the same time needing to uphold my own belief about family. A man and a woman committed in marriage together with their children form a family. Other forms of family relationships also exist, but this is the norm. Family stands for a God-given fact that we grow within relationships, the committed relationship of parents who procreated us through a bond of mutual and life-giving love. Even Jesus grew through the love and life of his family, the love of his mother Mary and the protective action of Joseph when the life of Jesus was threatened. Family life doesn't just happen. It takes a conscious decision to make and protect family. Pope Francis in his encyclical on the family, ***The Joy of Loving***, said that families don't come down from heaven as perfect. We have to work at being a family.

Today's feast offers each of us an occasion to recognise and appreciate the treasure which is family; to prompt us to consider how well we are tending to that treasure. Every day we witness a minor miracle on the playground. A child is hurt and runs to its mother through its tears and pain. A simple kiss and hug from the mother and the child is all smiles again.

Family life is rehearsal for life in society for children, and a way of life rooted in love and self-giving for the parents. In the family we share moral values, we learn to honour and love God, and we learn the limits of freedom. It's in the family that we care for the young and the old, those who are sick or burdened with some handicap, and care for the poor.

The first two readings take us into the Old Testament where we read of families, births, love, and family crises. One is the story of Abram and Sarah yearning for a baby, the promise of God and then having to sacrifice the very thing yearned for. Abram's fatherhood was torn out and turned 360 degrees as he walked up the mountain, when Isaac asked, "Father where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (**Gen. 22: 7**) knowing that his son was the lamb for sacrifice. But God intervened and the promised son was given back; Abram's fatherhood was now rooted in God and given a new generativity. He became father of a great nation. In their crisis if a couple believes the Lord brought them together, the price to pay is never too high when it comes to working harder at staying together.

The thing that kills our togetherness is alienation: I have put my best efforts forward, I've been hurt and I'm not going to try anymore. Reasoning, argument doesn't work. We need to return to our common story or dream and in sharing how we have tried to realise it, despite the hurt, to regain our power and love.

What we need in families today is the prophetic faith of Mary and Joseph who ponder and see what this child is going to be, who create the climate, who wait for the manifestation of the Lord, like Anna and Simeon and when he comes, with sureness and strength, they lift him up and announce him to others. Sometimes it's the grandparents who see something special in a child, especially when parents take the child for granted and don't see their new growth. Prophetic faith doesn't mean living someone else's life for him or her but affirming what you see the Lord doing in his or her life — perhaps telling what you see, but more often pondering and acting on it. Prophecy, to happen, has to be acted upon. Joseph is constantly called to awake from dreaming and to act on that dream.

“God became human; 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. Jesus came into our human family to encourage us, to bring us to mature personhood. Just as Jesus grew as a child, a teenager, and then to mature adulthood, so he becomes for every stage of growth the sign and cause of our maturing.

But it is a growth within relationships. What makes a family, or a community, is not so much the number as the quality of the relationships between the members. It's not a matter of counting heads as fostering the right spirit between parents, brothers, and sisters and ourselves. Pray to see the best in one another.

## Second Homily

When I was studying in the United States, I noticed how important family get-togethers were at Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. People would travel all over the country to come home. I was invited to the homes of Croatian, Polish and Hispanic families at these times and I also noticed the small rituals over food and family that they practised. Coming together, coming home was important, but it was more important not only to eat the meal, but to ritualise their being together. The children soak in this sense of togetherness, not just the presents or the food, but how it's done.

The Church does that today with the celebration of the Feast of the Holy Family. Jesus grew to maturity in a human family as a child, a teenager, and then adult, so he becomes for every stage of our lives the sign and cause of our maturing. But it's a growth within relationships. We need others for our development as Jesus needed Mary and Joseph for his development.

St Paul gives the ideal in Colossians, teaching us how to grow in relationships, by being

compassionate, kind, humble, gentle, and patient, bearing one another's burdens, forgiving as the Lord has forgiven us, and loving in an atmosphere of prayer and gratitude. We need each other to be affirmed without feeling guilty at falling short. "Our eyes will always see far beyond where our feet will actually carry us." It's this ability to see far ahead that describes the relationship of children to parents right up to frail old age, and the blessing that will flow back to children for their caring.

I saw this with my own father who near his death gave a blessing to my sister and brother for all their caring of him, and said, "Thank you my wee daughter/son for all that you have done for me." I was beside dad at his deathbed before going to America, but I still desired to have my father's blessing. I did receive his blessing later while on retreat and meditating on, and identifying with Simon, carrying the cross behind Jesus all the way to Calvary. When we reached the top and fell in the dust, our heads facing each other, Jesus said to me in the voice of my father, "Thank you my wee son for all that you have done for me."

The Gospel presents us with far-seeing prophetic faith; the faith of Mary and Joseph who ponder and see what this child is going to be, who create the climate and wait for the manifestation of the Lord. In Simeon and Anna, we see the gift of older people, who wait and see and when he comes, with sureness and strength, they lift him up and announce him to others. Prophetic faith doesn't mean living someone else's life for him or her but affirming what you see the Lord doing in them, perhaps telling what you see, but more often pondering and acting on it.

The thing that opposes this is alienation, the lack of recognition, acknowledgment, and affirmation from parents. "I've put my best efforts forward; I've been hurt and I'm not going to try anymore." There's a story in Alice Walker's book, *Meridien*, about a young girl playing in the dirt and discovering a bar of gold. She runs to her mother with it and plonks it on the table. The mother yells, "Take that off the table, can't you see I'm getting the meal ready." She runs with it to her father, who says behind the newspaper, "Look, I'm reading my paper." So, the girl took the bar of gold and hid it near a tree and soon forgot about the gold altogether (*Meridien, Orion Publishing Group, 2004*).

The ancients held that forgetfulness was the source of all sin. We must always remember that we are children of God, made in God's image, that we have a tremendous dignity and therefore there are certain things we must simply never do or say or take part in that would defile that image. Otherwise, we fall for the lie, told over and over, that we are just a commodity, a lump of clay, a solitary atom with no past, no future, no connection with God or others.

We belong to a family, a community that has a history of goodness and fidelity to the Gospel. We are related to those who went before us, and who linked their faith to those who went before them. And therefore, the older ones amongst must remember, remember the promise, and prophetically tell it again and again. We belong to the family of God. We belong to the Holy Family.



## Third Homily

Unless Christmas is in our hearts, we will not find it under the tree; by this I mean, unless we personally meet Christ, all the presents and material things will not really satisfy.

We are invited this Christmas to make Christ not the spare tyre, but the driving wheel of our lives — not waiting till a flat tyre, a breakdown when we call on him, but make Christ the direction, the pole star in our thinking, acting, and relating to other.

Jesus 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 that Christian television ad, is 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".

If there were things about human nature he did not take, they would not be healed. There was nothing about us that appalled Christ. He became our brother!

He comes to encourage, to bring us to mature personhood. Just as Jesus grew, as a child, a teenager to mature adulthood. He is the sign and cause of our growth to maturity. But it is a growth within relationships — what makes a family or a community is not the numbers, it is the *quality of the relationship* between the members.

It's interesting that all the readings deal with relationships, especially of children and their parents; the care of Joseph and Mary for Jesus in difficult times — as refugees to Egypt, waiting in the queues for amnesty to return home — deciding where it was safest to bring this child up — and in this way realising God's plan for them.

Paul's beautiful passage from Colossians teaches us how to grow in relationships — to be compassionate, kind, humble, gentle, and patient; bearing one another's burden, forgiving, and loving in an atmosphere of prayer and gratitude. This is true for the relationship between husbands and wives, and to the children.

All this is implied when you enter the Novitiate of the Holy Family — we want to come under their tutelage. Nazareth is a sign and cause, but it's not automatic. We learn and grow into our full humanity. It's not a humanity that becomes spiritualised out of existence, it is question and challenge. How have I grown in my humanity? Before I can witness as a Christian, people must experience me a 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 acknowledge and channel love with care and service to others. This is the way Mary and Joseph grew in their dedication to Jesus — aware of mystery, even as they correct, and guide the young Jesus through his growing years. May this Christmas be not just about gifts, but the gift of ourselves in loving human and divine ways.

# Feast of the Innocents

1 Jn. 1:5-2:2

Mt. 2:13-18

We grow through relationships, a process that begins with the family. Jesus was born into a human family and experienced every stage of growth, as a child, teenager and mature adult. He is a model and a cause for our maturing, if we let him.

All the readings deal with relationships — the ongoing relationship of children to parent's right up to frail old age. When we were younger it was easier to give assent to parents. Later, the struggle for independence, to realize our self, lead to a mature interdependence as adult to adult, with reverence towards parents as we remember what they did and continue to do for us. You see it in the Gospel, the care of Joseph and Mary for Jesus in critical times — as refugees fleeing to Egypt, then waiting in the queues for amnesty to return home, deciding where it was safest to bring the child up, and in this way fulfilling God's plan for the family. To embrace this child is to embrace suffering. Joseph is constantly called to awake from dreaming and act on the dream that the Lord had given.

The concern of parents may not be as dramatic as Joseph and Mary's, but there is the worry about providing, making ends meet, and the day-to-day guiding of their children. In the tension of their children wanting to break loose from restrictions of family, parents are constantly aware and concerned about those who are like King Herod and seek to ensnare or destroy their children. Take the letters **HEROD**: **H** stands for King Heroin, the drug culture inviting the young to take drugs for kicks, an experiment which can only lead to kick-backs, the deaths of many who drive under its influence, or the mental, social and physical effects of drug-taking. **E** stands for King Erotic, sex presented as recreational, not relational as God meant it to be. This King claims 42 per cent single mothers, children who are fatherless, thousands aborted. **R** stands for King Rage, the violence we live with daily, and incessantly presented and glorified in the media. Physical and moral violence. Crime in the streets. Crime in the home. **O** stands for King Only. Only my clan, my tribe, my colour, my way. Others are suspect. Hate and racism flourish where this King reigns. **D** stands for King Divorce, arguably the most common form of child abuse.

It is in our family that ideally we grow. On the children's side is the obligation to resolve and lay to rest any hurt between siblings and parents, especially when parents are getting older, otherwise we carry hurt and resentment with us as a dog buried alive and still kicking in us. Paul in Colossians presents us with down-to-earth Christian virtues that promote relationships: being compassionate, kind, humble, gentle, and patient, bearing one another's burdens and especially being forgiving as the Lord has forgiven us, and loving in an atmosphere of prayer and gratitude.

Like Joseph, parents have one thing that gives them courage in facing and outwitting the King Herods in their lives: they have their dreams. They have in fact three dreams for their children:

*Word dreams, Will dreams and Worship dreams.*

**Word dreams.** They are determined to get to their children first and say, “We can make our children’s lives happier; we can keep our family strong; we can offer reassurance, support, and concern. From the beginning we will use words like, ‘please’, ‘thank you’, ‘I’m sorry’ and ‘I love you’ over and over until they catch our children’s souls.”

**Will dreams.** Dreaming of a good education for my children means that I will attend parent-teacher meetings. I will see that homework is done. I will monitor TV. Dreaming of a better neighbourhood, I will recycle, I will keep the property clean, I will not litter. Dreaming of closer family ties means that I will put the family ahead of a career, material gain, and social climbing. I will give them the most precious gift: time.

**Worship dreams.** I will pray. I will teach them to pray. I will take my children to Church from the beginning to let them know they belong to a larger faith community, that there is something more to life. Someone more to life. I will let them know of their privileged lives that they must share with the children of the world who go to bed hungry each night and many of whom do not wake up the next morning.

Such dreams will overcome and outwit King Herod. Dreams inspired by God, carried by an angel, and fulfilled by those who dare to cherish and live by them. You are dreamers — dream boldly, dream openly, dream loudly. May God bless you and your family.

(I am indebted to William Bausch for the Herod and dream themes.)

## Second Homily

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Innocents, the patronal feast of divine innocence and of all Christian groups that oppose abortion, violence, and oppression of the poor and weak, and the human agony of women driven to seek abortion for any number of reasons and left alone to cope with their grief.

The cry of Rachel weeping for her children contrasts strangely with the silence of our society regarding the millions of aborted children and the hidden suffering that results from it.

We could contrast Herod with those who promote abortions:

- A grown man afraid of a tiny child
- The systematic elimination of others to get rid of the one that threatens him
- An absolute King in terror of a poor and powerless king.

Who is this King? What is his kingdom? It is Jesus, who proclaimed a kingdom for and of the poor — the poor, lame, blind, lepers — people deprived of life and yet moral subjects, members of Christ’s kingdom, each of whom have rights, dignity and worth.

Jesus came to proclaim Good News to the poor. The poor refers not only to aborted children, but to mothers in desperate need of our help, those who assist in pregnancy counselling, foster care, or broken families.

Christ also stood up for and denounced those who trampled, put down and destroyed the poor. He confronted sin, the evil of the situation, but not a denunciation out of self-righteousness; he was in solidarity with the poor.

— Who was it that he mixed with, ate at table with and led them to experience God's Love in his dealings with them?

— He died as one of them. The attack of Herod was only a small sign of the constant attacks that recurred right to the end. Yet joyfully he went to the cross for the new resurrected life that he would gain for us.

In prayer and in action we acknowledge that we are weak; we seek union with God, and to be in solidarity with all, creating a community that grows through the Word.

# The Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

**Num. 6:22-27**

**Gal. 4:4-7**

**Lk. 2:16-21**

Sr Joan Chittister wrote: “New Year’s resolutions are a waste of time. What we really need are New Year’s questions — those issues that we intend this year to study, read about and discuss with others, so that our hearts may be broken open and our souls engaged in the real business of life.”

As we begin the New Year, the Gospel presents Mary to us as such a model whose response to what God wanted of her was, “How can this be?” She wrestled with that question and came through with her generous, “Yes! Let it be done, according to your Word and will.” We see that Mary was prepared to do something to realise God’s plan for her in two instances, the coming of the shepherds at the message of the angels, and the finding of Jesus in the temple.

The scriptures tell us 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 found the Word of God both in divine revelation (the angel’s words to the shepherds) and in her own experience (her encounter with her Son in the temple). What was happening in her life was a great mystery to be discovered little by little.

Although the child lying in the manger looks like all children in the world, at the same time he is totally different; he is Son of God, truly God and truly human.

This mystery — the Incarnation of the Word and the divine Motherhood of Mary — is the central mystery of the Christian faith; it is indispensable if we are to have a solid hope for salvation and eternal life.

At Christmas we celebrated the birth of Christ. The Church now turns our attention to the mother. Indeed, this was the process in history over the first four centuries. Only after the divinity of Christ was proclaimed in the early Councils of the Church, did attention then turn to Mary. The Council of Ephesus in 431 devoted much attention to the subject of how the Son of God was given birth to, humanly.

What made the bishops at Ephesus do that, was not a need to honour Mary, but to resolve a question about Jesus. The issue was the two natures of Jesus. If Mary just gave birth to the humanity of Jesus, you lose his divinity, he’s no longer our Saviour; we need God to save us. But if you keep his divinity, but lose his humanity, he’s no longer our Saviour, no longer God-with-us: we’re back to God far away.

It was then that the Church gave Mary one of the oldest titles: Mary was Theotokos, which

literally means God-bearer. To affirm that the Son of God had a human birth, the Fathers proclaimed that Mary was Theotokos: she bore him in her womb and gave birth to him like any mother. But it was not a passive surrogacy.

Mary was actively involved with God in the birthing process. Ambrose and Augustine taught that Mary conceived first through faith and then in the womb — *'Prius in mente quam in ventre'*. It was a faith-conceiving that miraculously led to the birth of the Son of God become human in Jesus in the womb of Mary. The Son of God in the person of Jesus, together with Mary, had to go through all the human processes from birth, crying from hunger or cold, through childhood, adolescence, maturity, grieving the death of Joseph, supporting his widowed mother, setting off in his life mission and dying on the Cross. He became one of us to save us, and Mary was instrumental in that happening, by her 'yes' to God that she held on to all her life.

This mystery is great and certainly far from easy to understand with the human mind alone. By learning from Mary, we can understand with our hearts what our eyes and minds are unable to perceive. It is only through faith that we accept it, while not entirely understanding it. In this journey of faith, Mary comes to meet us as our support and guide. Following Mary, we can penetrate the mystery of a God who became human out of love, and who calls us to follow him on the path of love; a love to be expressed daily by generous service to others.

What questions do you and I need to ponder? Questions that require reading, heart study, discussion with others to enrich your mind and heart this New Year.

May you have some time during the holidays to switch off the television and other social media outlets, to be alone in silence. Take time to read a good book, take in a thoughtful film, do a retreat, in order to think more deeply about your life before God. Have a great New Year. Let's wish it to the people round about you — Happy New Year!

## Second Homily

By her 'yes', Mary is 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. The Greeks called Mary, Theotokos, God-bearer. But she is no carrier of someone else's child, like a surrogate mother. Jesus of Nazareth is both God's Son and Mary's son.

In his play, *Barjona*, Sartre writes about this mystery: "There are rapid, fleeting moments when Mary realises at once that Christ is her son, her very own baby, and that he is God. She looks at him and thinks: 'This God is my baby. This divine flesh is my flesh. He is made from me. He has my eyes, and the curve of his mouth is the curve of mine. He is like me. He is God and he is like me.'"

We sang, "pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel." Our God is with us. By her 'yes', Mary makes God's face shine on us and gives us peace.

Fittingly then, she stands at the entrance, the threshold of each New Year, a year that marks us with the sign of God's covenant, names us, and invites us to say yes to God's plan for us. The Romans called the first month of the year, January, after the god Janus, a god with two faces, one face looking back at the past and the other looking forward to the future, and they marked that beginning with riotous celebration. At this juncture do we face the past with regret and the future with foreboding because of health issues, or financial, or family worries? Do we dispense with the past with wild abandon, or do we take time to reflect, as Mary does, on the past to learn how the Spirit is leading us into the future?

A man and a woman were marooned on a deserted island for years. One day a ship spotted their smoke signal and sent a lifeboat. But instead of rescuing them, the lifeboat crew handed them several newspapers, saying, "The captain wants you to see what's going on in the world before you decide you want to return to it." There may be times when we feel like fleeing to a deserted island. But we know we can't. 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.

The resolutions we make are to make the world a better place. Not to let the losses of the past year make us bitter, but to choose how we are going to respond to them. Think of Sadako, a little Japanese girl caught in the bombing of Hiroshima. She was two-years-old when she was blasted out of the window. Her mother rushed out and found her alive, seemingly unhurt. She herself had severe radiation burns. At the age of ten she broke out in purple swellings, leukemia. Her father told her the legend that if she made one thousand cranes, she could have a wish. She was in hospital essentially waiting to die. The children's novel, ***Sadako and the 1,000 Paper Cranes***, wrote that instead of bemoaning her lot, she said: "This can never happen again to people. People cannot be this cruel to one another. So, each day I am going to cut out and make a white crane, and I'm going to send it to somebody and ask them to be a disciple of peace."

By the end of August 1955 Sadako had made thirteen hundred cranes. She died at the age of twelve. And those who knew this little girl had their choice, either to retaliate and hit back, or pick up on what she had started. In 1958, a statue of Sadako holding a golden paper crane was unveiled in the Hiroshima Peace memorial Park. At the foot of the statue is a plaque which reads: "This our cry. This is our prayer. Peace in the World." Japan celebrates 6 August as annual peace day. Sadako's brother wrote a book, ***The Complete Story of Sadako Sasaki***, and with artist Sue DiCicco founded the *Peace Crane Project* to connect students around the world in a vision of peace. Her message is needed now as Japan is thinking of redrafting its pacifist policy and re-arming because of fear of its volatile neighbours, like North Korea, China and Russia; right now, America and Iran are facing down each other in the Straits of Hormuz over oil lanes.

Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. It seems weak compared with all the sabre-rattling going on around us. We realise, however, that Mary is not passive before God's



plan, but constantly ponders God's plan in order to respond at each stage of her life. The shepherds pondered, took time to approach the mystery and wondrously saw Mary and Joseph and the child. "Once they saw, they understood." They became disciples after seeing the child. Contemplation leads to action. Ghandi in his struggle against the British seemed to be inactive a long time. He took time to reflect and then he set out on his march against the British salt tax. He changed his disciples' hearts to not retaliate to violence but to confront it, and this last action ultimately brought about Indian independence.

Mary gave birth to God's own Son by faith's burning love and brought Christ to birth in others by a faith that works through love. Faith is the basis of the Church's cooperation in the work of salvation, just as it was the basis of Mary's cooperation in the mystery of human salvation at the Incarnation — for then she brought forth the salvation of the world through the operation of her faith. She constantly appears in places, prior to violent war, to change our hearts toward peace.

If we fully enter into the revelation of Christmas, if we truly savour it and savour the lives we've been gifted with, we may find ourselves joining the long march of witnesses, sent at 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 looks kindly upon you and give you peace."

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

## Third Homily

If we stop at the nativity scene, Mary giving birth and placing the baby in the manger, a nativity scene played out repeatedly in Church and kindergarten into which any newborn baby can be placed; to leave Christmas with Mary's motherhood and the birth of the babe at Bethlehem, is to leave out the essential message of Christmas.

This child is not any child; this child is singular. His name, Jesus, the name given by the angel at the Annunciation, means "Yahweh saves", "Yeshiva Joshua Jesus". In Jesus, Yahweh the utterly transcendent God has come among us. The message of the angels to the shepherds indicates Jesus as Saviour and Lord. "A saviour has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord." The fundamental message of Christmas to the shepherds and to us is that Jesus is Lord, "There is no other name by which we will be saved."

This unique person, Jesus is the Son, the Word who was born of Mary, who took on our weak human nature to save us from the inside out. Mary cooperated fully with God, opening herself totally to God's plan and became Mother of God. Just as Jesus only fully realised his destiny as Son and Saviour through the cross and resurrection — in his humanity bringing about the salvation of us all, so Mary nurturing that human life, let it go, surrendering and following him in faith to the

cross and resurrection — only then did she realise her destiny as the Mother of God.

Jesus born of Mary, born under the law, circumcised and identified with his people who carried the promise of the Messiah, is the messiah and Saviour of Jew and Gentile, enabling us to be children of God, something we experience through the spontaneous prayer of Jesus; rising in us — Abba, Father which is Jesus' prayer and relationship to God as Son.

The Jewish people in the first reading, placed themselves under the name of Yahweh — that name meant protection, blessing, grace and peace. As Christians, we place ourselves under the name of the Lord Jesus and receive the blessing, “the grace and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus be with you all”. Do we place our lives under the name, the Lordship of Jesus? What place does Christ occupy in our life? Do we recognise his full right over us, hand the reins of our life over him?

Times in the family when an unexpected visitor is coming, we quickly close the doors on a room that's cluttered; a bed unmade and take our visitor to the most welcoming part of the house. With Jesus the exact opposite must be done — we must open to him our life's messy, disordered rooms and above all the room of our intentions.

Rather than making a New Year intention, let him into the rooms and intentions of our own lives and minds and hearts. Mary can help us to let Christ enter in and start this year anew under the Lordship of Jesus.

Every blessing of the New Year to each and every one of you.

## Fourth 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 — mothering 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. 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.

When the Shepherds came to Bethlehem 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 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 in 2014 is asking us to think FAMILY, not self-interest — to work to build the basic cell of the Christian Church and of society, and to counter the negative pressures that break up the family. 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.

We can operate in age-segregated patterns that split mum or dad, obliged to drive different children to their sport or we can develop activities in the parish or the area that encourage, empower and affirm families, like camping, worship and family ministry. 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. But how can we say 'Yes' to God, if our life is negative in so many other ways? We say 'Yes' to God in the New Year by *saying 'yes' to life*, to people, to situations. Saying 'yes' to life means that my life doesn't fall apart because I have a headache or a problem. It means opening the report card from school when I haven't done so well and showing it to mum and dad. It means not saying I didn't want to be born but saying 'yes' to life, and what life has done to me.

*Say 'Yes' to people:* Don't avoid someone I don't like, don't cross the street, or look in a shop window till they pass and then go on my way. Say 'yes' when dad asks me to wash the car or help mum with the shopping and do it before I am asked. Think about the people around you, say 'yes' and help them.

*Say 'Yes' to situations:* Stand up and try and change negativity. God by becoming man has committed himself definitively to life, to people and to every situation.

This 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) in Christ. Jesus' life was a lived 'Yes'. St Paul in **2 Cor. 1: 19** says that Jesus always said 'Yes', even in negative situations. And when that negativity and sin slammed Jesus against the tree Jesus could have said — 'You can all go to hell, I came to heal and love, and help and you nailed me to a tree,' but instead he said, 'Father forgive them, they know not what they are doing.' Jesus changed the negativity and opened up every situation to the powerful grace of God, what we call the Redemption.

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 after the outbreak of World War II in 1939, gave his New Year's speech quoting 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.

# Epiphany

Isa. 60:1-6

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

Mt. 2:1-12

In 1921, T.S. Eliot wrote the poem, *The Journey of a Magi*, perhaps to describe his own intellectual and spiritual struggle, to move from agnosticism to becoming a Christian and receiving Baptism. “A cold coming we had of it,” one of the Magi recalls years later, “Just the worst time of year for a journey, and what a journey, the ways deep and the weather sharp, the very dead of winter ... A hard time we had of it. At the end we preferred to travel all night, sleeping in snatches, with the voices singing in our ears that this was all folly. There was no information, and so we continued and arrived at evening, not a moment too soon. Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory ... All this a long time ago, I remember, and I would do it again.”

We tend to think the Magi had it easy, guided by a star all the way. But a closer reading of the Gospel says that they saw the star “as it rose”. It says nothing about the star guiding them. The star was a sign that something unusual had happened, that someone special had been born. The next time the star is mentioned was when they were on the road to Bethlehem, that is, when they neared the end of their journey. The text says: “There in front of them was the star they had seen rising.” From this we conclude that in between they travelled in darkness, finding their way.

Their journey was neither simple nor easy. They encountered difficulties, doubts and dangers. Yet in spite of these they persevered in their quest and were rewarded when they finally found Christ. Their story has relevance for us. When we start out on some road (whether it be following the Christian vocation or some other vocation of profession) we too are attracted by something bright — an ideal, vision or hope. But the initial star doesn't forever remain in our sky. It grows dim. Clouds get in the way and deprive us of light.

The Feast of the Epiphany is the manifestation of the Christ Child to the non-Jewish world, he is our star, someone our heart yearns for despite the push and pull of forces in our life. The essence of conversion for Eliot was change, intellectual struggle and spiritual growth that pushes the soul into conflict between its old life of sin and its new life of grace. This is exactly what this feast day is about — change, transformation. Our spiritual life can never be stagnant, but must always be moving, always be seeking, always be striving for that most intimate experience of Christ. As Eliot depicts it, it is not easy. There's a struggle between the old life the Magi came from and the new life he was living in his present situation — the old pulling us back and the new pulling us forward. The Magi are transformed by the revelation at the end of their journey — living a new life among people clinging to the old, like we experience today. It is a spiritual tension we have to live with.

Just recently we made our New Year's resolutions. Wouldn't it be wonderful if our New Year's resolutions would be to be transformed in Christ. That we would walk through life with the adoration of Christ at the centre of our lives. If we're honest our resolutions are often superficial, —

losing weight, getting more exercise, giving more time to study or other things. But imagine if we set out on a journey that ends in such a deep experience of Christ that, like the Magi, we go away transformed.

This requires serious change. Usually, we don't want to change and so we don't. Some suggestions:

Spend more time in prayer: not just a quick hello as we climb out of bed or a quick goodnight as our head hits the pillow. Imagine if those few minutes were all we gave to other relationships, they wouldn't last long. To grow our relationship with God we need to spend time in formal or personal prayer — the rosary; praying with the sacred scripture each day through a disciplined daily reading of a paragraph or a chapter of the Bible, especially one of the books of the New Testament. Take the Gospel of Mark, study it and pray with it for each Sunday reading.

Maybe learn more about our faith, take a topic from the Catholic catechism and read that section over a period of time. It's divided into paragraphs that might take only a few minutes each. Take twenty minutes each day to do spiritual reading to deepen your understanding of prayer, scripture, teachings of the faith, the lives of the saints. If you are thinking of getting married, prepare for your marriage by forming a group with older married couples in a program called **Smart Loving**.

When we find Christ, our hearts are awakened and burst into life. When we find Christ and offer our lives to him, he will help us open the treasures of goodness that lie buried inside us so that we can offer gifts to our brothers and sisters who are poor as Christ was. Having worshipped Christ, the Magi returned to their own country by another route. This suggests not just a new geographical route but a new mentality. Having met Christ and been transformed by him we too will go through life by a different route. We will have different attitudes, different values, different goals. Walk through life with the adoration of Christ at the heart of your life.

## Second Homily

The Magi symbolise 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 were 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 reached Jerusalem, what strikes me is their candour and openness. Almost naïve, they seem to anticipate no difficulty in enquiring of King Herod 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. 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 search

needs the scriptures to lead them to Christ. The Magi are guided by God. It was first a star in the east, then a text from the prophet Micah that led them to their goal.

These strange outsiders do not stumble onto 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. Philosopher Bertrand Russell rejected all religion and God's existence. After Russell's death, his daughter Katherine Tait said it was impossible to raise the question of God's existence with her father. 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." In contrast to the joy of the Magi is this poignant passage where 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."

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, "merry Christmas, Gentiles!" 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 Jesus.

The central figure of this passage is Jesus who says and does nothing. But in Christ, God has come to all people. 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, she mused on the Magi: "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." (**William J Bausch, *Story Telling the Word*, Twenty Third Publications, Mystic Connecticut, 1996, p. 140**).

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

## Third Homily

Tragic pictures and pleas for help coming to us from television, radio and newsprint are of people searching, lost, grieving and hopeless, looking for loved ones among the ruins, the pile-up of debris and wreckage after the tsunami that struck the Indian Ocean on 26 December 2004, taking almost 228,000 lives. Our hearts go out to them. And yet, unless it touches us personally, we are still, to some extent, spectators.

Tourists went to areas that were hit by the tsunami for a holiday, a good time enjoying the surf, sun and sandy beaches, luxuriating in top class hotels. It took just minutes for everything to be washed away. Others were going about their ordinary occupations, men at work, mothers feeding babies; struggling Aceh was almost exterminated more ruthlessly than by any repressive regime.

Even if we are totally secular, living for this world only; (how flimsy it is before nature's onslaught), when death looms there is an umbilical cord in us 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, at least by our prayers for the dead, and any help or assistance we can give.

It happened after Christmas on the eve of the Epiphany. The Magi had come searching for meaning and they found shepherds, the dregs of the earth, conniving thieves; they found not Christmas-card cut-outs of Mary and Joseph but a young couple, poor peasants of the countryside who wore travel-worn, dusty, dirty clothes. And they found the child in a feeding trough. They found God among human existence, with its limitation, flaws and devastation. It was a potent and palpable sign of God's desire to embrace our brokenness. 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."*

As this child grew he didn't change one bit. He was criticized for mixing with outcasts,



prostitutes, for touching lepers and he died between two thieves who were probably shepherds. 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.

Dostoevsky, the famous Russian writer, 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 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 was 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.”

Where is love among the ruins? In Tamil Tigers working side by side with the military. With police and medics working among the dead trying to identify and bring them home. The outbursts of charity from nations. Aceh opened to receive aid. The whole world is involved — tourists and relatives; the poor who cannot come home to some comfort. And we must not forget Darfur where at this time more than 800,000 face extermination.

# Baptism of the Lord

Isa. 55:1-11

1 Jn. 5:1-9

Mk. 1:7-11

As we end the Christmas season, the liturgy presents us with the Gospel of Mark. Mark is the first Christian writer to invent the Gospel form to tell us the Good News about Jesus. Mark's first words are: "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

To understand Mark's intent in writing, we need to understand the time and the situation of the people for whom he wrote. The Christian community in Rome, at the time of Nero, lived under the threat of persecution. There was also fear that the unrest in Palestine would adversely affect the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome. Fear and confusion grip people facing persecution. They can either hide or run. If the Christians stay, they need clear motives such as identification with Christ, in order to stand for what Christ stood. It is in the crucified and risen Jesus that Mark and his community find the source of hope and strength to live as Jesus did.

The baptism event encapsulates the whole Gospel. Mark's Gospel constantly relates the end to the beginning, in the sense that it is the end that gives the motive to begin again. Yet the end gets its meaning from Jesus' decision at Jordon, to submit to the Father's will. The end shows that the outcome of Jesus' decision despite suffering is victory. The beginning of the Good News is Christ's victory through his death and resurrection. The Gospel about the Son of God takes us to the Cross where in the terrible darkness and the death cry of Jesus, a pagan Roman Centurion declares: "Truly this man is God's Son." Jesus is more than a man. This is God suffering for us and with us. The tearing open of the heavens at the baptism and the descent of the dove — directs us to the tearing of the temple veil from top to bottom as Jesus gives up his spirit. The Holy of Holies, God's presence, is now accessible to us all.

As Jesus was empowered for his saving mission by the Spirit, so we are empowered by the same spirit to live as sons and daughters of God. The words of the Father are repeated daily to us — "you are my beloved child, in you I am well-pleased". Jesus' self-esteem, his unshakeable sense of his identity and purpose were based on an all-encompassing awareness of being loved by his Father. Jesus did not have to achieve to gain his Father's acceptance. He was accepted and this was his mainstay, even though he was gradually stripped of disciples, of success, of achievement and hung naked on the Cross.

Ronald Rolheiser tells of a young man who came to him visibly shaken yet moved by Ronald's words in his preaching. He was going to jail but had never heard his father say — 'In you I am well-pleased'. He had never experienced a glance of esteem from his father, or a blessing from his parents. There's much more in our baptism than we can fathom. The promise of God the Father is there, an opportunity to know the Father's love, and experience the empowering of the Spirit who gives us the strength to stand against forces that can attempt to destroy us.

One last thing. In calling his Gospel a proclamation of Good News, Mark committed a subversive act, according to Ched Myers. He challenged the culture of emperor worship in Rome, where the birth or victory of the emperor (supposedly god) was proclaimed to the people as Good News. For Mark and for his Christian community in Rome, only Jesus is the Good News, in him alone is our victory. It was the same cry of Paul — not Caesar is Lord, but only Jesus is Lord. This inner conviction enables individuals to face any political power.

## Second Homily

“The voice of the Lord on the water, the voice of the Lord full of power!” For Jesus, that voice and 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. Like a thunder-clap, the Father’s voice announced over Jesus, “This is my beloved Son. In him is all my delight”. It was a moment of decision, Jesus consciously took up his mission to save us.

Peter Marshall working in the steel works in Coatbridge near Glasgow, was walking home over the moor after work one night, when he heard his name called: “Peter!” He walked on, but the voice became more insistent, “Peter!” He got down on his hands and knees and felt his way forward, and found he was on the edge of a quarry. It changed the direction of his life. He knew he had a strong call from God, studied for the ministry in the Presbyterian Church, and became a famous preacher in America.

I don’t know when Mahatma Gandhi received his call, but in the troubles in South Africa he was influenced by Newman’s words: “I do not ask to see the distant scene, one step is enough for me.” Gandhi was not a Christian, yet he was one of the most Christ-like persons of the last century. He opposed India’s caste system, and especially abhorred the treatment meted out to the untouchables, who had no status and were outcasts from society. On his journeys through India, Gandhi was warmly welcomed by people. When he entered a village, the head of the village would invite him to stay in his house for the night, where he would be assured of a bath, good food and a decent night’s rest. But Gandhi politely refused the offer. He asked, “Where are your untouchables, I will stay with them.” And he did, even though this shocked the village leaders.

Gandhi went among the untouchables in their hovels on the outskirts of the village. They welcomed him with open arms. He touched them, ate with them, and played with their children. He once said, “I have no wish to be reborn. But if this should happen, then I want to be reborn among the untouchables so that I might succeed in liberating them and myself from their wretched condition.”

When Jesus joined the queue of sinners waiting to be baptised by John, it was a mighty act of identification. He was identifying with the kind of people he came to save, namely sinners. Not just sinners but the poor and downtrodden, which were most of the people of Palestine.

What Jesus did that day at the Jordan River was to serve as a model for his public ministry. What motivated him was compassion. He was God's servant sent to bring Good News to the poor. And God was well-pleased with him and with the mission on which he was about to embark.

At a deeper level, God's Son came as servant in Jesus. He did not shy away from being totally human. Receiving John's baptism, which was a baptism of repentance, Jesus, though sinless, took on our sin and fought to set us free from the inside, taking our weak humanity to himself, into the saving waters of the Jordan, and ultimately to the cross and resurrection. He brought all human history before God for purification. Anyone else would disapprove of the Son taking on human weakness and frailty. But not God. 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.

The baptism of Jesus in the Jordan is an epiphany, a manifestation of who Jesus is, and who we can become through him. His baptism is an experience of God, of his Spirit, of freedom, bursting out of the heart of human existence. In our baptism, Jesus empowers us to bring that humanity to its fullness in God. What happened at the river Jordan remains the Father's stamp of approval on Jesus and on you.

## Third Homily

The baptism of Jesus is an epiphany, a revealing of Jesus not just to us, but in us. You can hear it in the responsorial psalm, "The voice of the Lord over the waters ... the voice of the Lord full of power", almost like getting caught in a thunderstorm while swimming in the river or in the sea. That's what the Father's voice above Jesus in the Jordan was like.

Yet the baptism for Jesus, and for us, is the manifestation of God's power in the simple and the ordinary. We don't remember our baptism, but what happened at the baptism in the river Jordan signified the Father's stamp of approval on Jesus. Our own baptism into Jesus, into this mystery that envelops Jesus, is likewise God's stamp of approval on us.

In the early Church when a person wanted to be a Christian, he or she was handed the Gospel. If you take away the nativity passages in Matthew and Luke, all the Gospels begin with the baptism of Jesus. Jesus came from the hidden years of Nazareth to the Jordan to be baptised by John the Baptist. You never hear of any miracles in those years, but the Spirit was building in him like a mighty reservoir ready to burst forth in his outstanding ministry. For Jesus it was a Kairos moment, a moment of decision, the Father calling him to begin his work of redemption. When he came up out of the water the heavens were torn open, and the Spirit descended on him like a dove. The Spirit comes upon Jesus to empower him for his mission and then the Father's voice of approval was heard. What happened to Jesus is meant to happen to us.

Peter Marshall was walking home across the moors at night, after work at the Coatbridge Steel

Mills near Glasgow. He heard his name called, "Peter!" He stopped, looked around, and was ready to move on, but heard his name called more insistently, "Peter!" He got down on his knees and felt his way forward. He was right on the edge of a quarry. It changed the whole course of his life. He studied for the Presbyterian ministry and became a famous preacher in America.

St Peter, speaking to Cornelius, highlights the dramatic nature of Jesus' baptism. "You must have heard of the recent happenings in Judaea; about Jesus of Nazareth after John had been preaching baptism. God had anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power. And because God was with him, he went about doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the devil." Not only was it an "It's Time" moment, but a momentous "Abba Experience." An experience of his God as Abba that stayed with him all his life right to the end, in the Garden of Gethsemane where he prayed in his agony "Abba, Father. Let this cup pass from me, but thy will, not mine be done;" and in the dereliction of the cross.

For Jesus the descent of the dove was a moment of seeing and hearing in which he recognised in a deeper, clearer recognition, his own role both as Son of God and suffering servant. Mark took the suffering servant passage, "Here is my servant ... in whom my soul delights," (**Isaiah 42:1**), and changed it to: "You are my Beloved Son, with you I am well pleased" (**Mk. 1:11**), to express Jesus' experience of God as Abba. He has his Father's approval, no matter the seeming failure of his mission at the end. He doesn't have to prove himself. It is the conscious taking up of his mission to save us. He descends into our condition, enters John's baptism of repentance, to identify with us even though he was without sin, to show us how to really live.

If you have a car that stalls on railway crossings and at busy intersections and you can't find what's wrong — it's dangerous driving; it can endanger your life. The mechanic one day comes up from under the car and says, "I've got bad news you need a new fuel pump." That's not bad news; it's good news, for now you can fix it. It's good news to get our lives working right. And the Father approves — live the way my Son lives.

Baptism is more than a social event it is the means by which we get the Spirit — the fuel injection. We need to get our lives going right. It's a real initiation into the new life of Jesus as lived in this Christian community. Baptism means the heavens are torn open and the Father is pouring out his love on us, unconditionally accepting us in Christ, embracing us as "my beloved son or daughter". When was the last time we expected Jesus to act in our lives as a powerful changing agent? When was the last time we spoke to people with problems and brought Jesus in as the real solution? It's when we become aware of Jesus that we get our Christian mission.

Find the date of your own baptism — hear God calling your name to let Jesus change the direction of your life. Share Jesus' Abba experience and live it.

# **SUNDAYS IN ORDINARY TIME**

**Year B**

# Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

**1 Sam. 3:3b-10, 191**

**Cor. 6:13c-15a**

**Jn. 1:35-42**

The first reading and the Gospel focus is on discipleship, God's call to Samuel and to Andrew and Peter, but I want to focus on the second reading because fornication can lead us away from commitment. It's only when we have a living relationship with Jesus that we can get the strength to bring our sexuality into right order. Mother Teresa was invited to speak at Harvard University. She surprised the students by talking about chastity. It sent them scrambling for their dictionaries. They had never heard the word. Sex education is chastity education. We live in a culture strongly conditioned by the effects of the far-reaching wave of sexual revolution — sex as recreational, no moral restraints and no responsibility for the other. It's mainly the family that creates a favourable climate for sex education; where parents love one another and are committed to the best for their children, preparing them for a life of love.

Chastity is the right ordering of our sexual drives, according to God's plan for our state of life. Fornication is the reduction of sexuality to the merely instinctual dimension and has favoured, in its extreme and lowest manifestations, the spread of pornography and sexual violence. Chastity is love's defender.

Our sexuality is a God-given relational power, which draws us out of ourselves to interpersonal bonds and commitments. It's a fundamental component of who we are as a person. It is the physical and physiological grounding for our capacity to love. Sexuality comprises three dimensions: genital, affective and spiritual. The genital is the physical attraction we feel strongly for the opposite sex. men are usually aroused more intensely by visual stimuli or by touch. For women it is more the promise of relational intimacy that will stimulate arousal. We can't use the other for pleasure, like smoking and then just chuck the packet away.

The affective dimension includes emotional attraction and energy for relational intimacy. The genital and affective dimensions of our sexuality are the raw material for a genuine sexual act. But for a truly human sexual act that speaks of truth and love, it must be governed by the spiritual dimension (a mind geared for truth) and a will (geared toward love). It speaks of truth if we are true to ourselves, true to the other person and true to God. It speaks of love if there is a mutual, self-giving permanent union of the couple established by the marriage bond. Without this, it is less than human.

Sexual acts are not just biological acts. The body is me; it's me playing the piano, not just my fingers. Sexual acts involve the innermost being of the human person. Sexual acts are an integral part of the love by which a man and a woman commit themselves totally to one another unto death. Sexual acts outside of this context are very damaging to those involved. People talk about safe sex, as if a condom can bring this. Whether there is a condom or not, sexual intercourse

outside of marriage is not safe; it is destructive to the dignity of the persons involved.

Fornication is living a lie. It expresses a promise that we cannot keep. Does sex outside of marriage express a committed relationship? If so, why are there so many single mothers left holding the baby? Why the abuse and death of children mainly from de facto relationships? It's not love that makes the marriage go, so much as marriage which safeguards and enables love to be renewed because of the commitment made.

St Augustine in his Confessions is very modern and speaks to young people today. At the age of 17 he arrived in Carthage, North Africa, to study at the university. Like most of the other students he quickly became sexually active. He said, "Love and lust together settled within me. In my youth they swept me away and plunged me away into a whirlpool of sin." Together with other young men he bragged of his sexual exploits. To satisfy his cravings he took a mistress for fifteen years. Augustine was hooked on sex for erotic pleasure. He said: "I was a prisoner of habit, suffering cruel torments through trying to satisfy a lust that could never be sated." He never broke from the Church but saw it as irrelevant. His prayer at that time was, "Lord, make me chaste but not yet."

Augustine became a highly regarded academic who taught in Rome and Milan. There he came under the influence of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, whose preaching and exposition of scripture influenced Augustine deeply. He was beginning to be converted by the power of the word being proclaimed in the Spirit. At age thirty-three he was more and more drawn to the scriptures. He was intellectually convinced of the Christian message, but his life was far from it. He had heard how others turned to God. He also wanted to be free. "I longed to do the same, but I was held fast, not by fetters of iron, but by my own will which had the strength of iron chains. For my will was perverse and lust had grown in it, and when I gave into lust, habit was born, and when I did not resist the habit, it became a necessity." Then one day he heard about St Anthony of the desert and how many young men had followed him into the desert because they wanted a full life in God.

He cried out to his friend Alypius, "What's the matter with us? These men have not had our schooling, yet they stand up and storm the gates of heaven while we for all our learning, lie here grovelling in this world of flesh and blood." In despair he went out into the garden. There he heard the unexpected voice of a child singing: 'Take and read'. He picked up the scriptures he had thrown down and opened it at **Romans 13: 12 -14**: "Let us cast off 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." In that instant, Augustine received the grace of God and all his doubt was dispelled.

As with Augustine, the virtue of chastity can only grow in us under the grace of the Holy Spirit. No amount of gritting one's teeth, the exertion of will power, or ascetical practice will succeed without the grace of God. It is the Holy Spirit who fosters within us a habit of the heart which enables us to gain self-mastery. Our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in us. Let's use our body for the glory of God (**1 Cor. 6:20**).



## Second Homily

What are you looking for? It's none of your business! But really, what are *you* looking for? What are your basic heart wishes? To be happy? But happiness is the result of finding your purpose in life. To excel in what I'm doing sport, study, to make big money? And you recall Hans Becker after winning the Grand Slam asking himself, "Is this all there is?" For love? Catrina, a beautiful girl of nineteen, said to me, "Don't talk to me about love. I've met too many who try to take advantage of me, saying they love me." She wanted desperately to know that the feelings in her for truth, goodness, beauty, and dedication were not illusory. Love helps us break through to our real, honest, loving self. I believe young people want a real experience of Jesus, instead of the incessant demands to indulge, to experience the good life.

Remember Thomas More's reply to Meg, his favourite daughter, when she pleaded with him in the Tower, "In reason's name haven't you done enough!" His reply was that "in the last analysis it's not a matter of reason but of love". If you indulge the body, you compromise your heart, it's so easy for reason to justify what you give in to. Love is the delight of God who calls you and when you respond, "Lord, I'm listening."

I have often meditated on this passage from St John. When Michael and I joined the Pallottines, I saw Jesus' love for brothers, Andrew and Peter, and I heard his question to me: What are you looking for? I had no great notion of myself. I simply wanted to serve. Notice how Jesus looks hard at John and Andrew and Simon. He saw potential, not problems. He loves us, right here right now, he doesn't look at past mistakes. He loves us unconditionally. What drew me was the community that Jesus drew us into with the words, "Come and See." John, an old man when he wrote the Gospel could still remember that day, that they stayed with him till four in the afternoon.

Love takes us into the experience of Jesus who calls each one of us. Every life is a call, a vocation, an invocation, a cry beyond us to the one who calls back to us, "You are loved, special, called by me." But do we respond to God, to Jesus? Samuel needed the wisdom of the old priest Eli to discern the call and to really listen.

If you see life as a call it takes the compartments out of life — between religion and life, one's love and work, home, school, university, office, shop, out on the job. If you respond to God's call on your life, your life takes on a different complexion, takes a different direction. God sends you to say and do the truth; it's no longer a matter of like or dislike — it's the conviction of being sent in answer to a call. God's call in Jesus tells us who we are and who God is. That call puts us in touch with the mind of God. God has a plan for each of our lives and is working to realise that plan in Jesus. And as we respond to that call, conviction, belief and purpose grow.

The truth of Christianity is not first and foremost a creed, a doctrine. Initially it's an experience of God; of a call above and beyond us, which if we are faithful to it, will lead to the meaning of our lives. Every life is a vocation whether single, married, sister, brother, priest, separated, widowed,

young person. The call is not once and for all. We receive repeated calls, which if we listen give our lives different turns. God has the timing and the initiative — we have to listen to him and act when he tells us to. That may not be an inner voice, but it can be a conviction that grows when different experiences come together and urge us to respond.

The initiative is God's. We've forgotten this and lost our nerve. We've made our life in every sphere a human enterprise. But Paul interrupts and tells us, "You have been purchased at a price. Your life is not your own." You are empowered by the Spirit who dwells within you. But we have to have encounter Jesus for that to have an impact on our lives. Enthusiasm means 'to be in God' (en theou), to have a living relationship with God that leads us to commit our lives to what God wants of us. Non-commitment is destructive of our lives, meandering is a refusal of life. We often want to stay where we are. Jesus calls us, as he called Peter, into the heart of his mystery.

Vocations don't come out of the sky. They come because someone is calling you, like I am calling you, and the need is great. If you are interested, you can test out a vocation in a group or by living in a lay or religious community or as a lay missionary. We also have to call forth ordained leadership. Organic incorporation is growing into a vocation through involvement in the life of the community, while continuing your study or work. Think and pray about it and listen to God's call.

## Third Homily

They saw where Jesus lived. There was a congruence between his words and his lifestyle that made a deep impression on Andrew. It was not just his words, but where and how Jesus lived. Andrew told his brother, Peter, "we have found the Messiah", and brought him to Jesus. John, too, was an old man when he wrote the Gospel but could still remember the place and the day that he and Andrew stayed with him till four in the afternoon.

The readings this day and place are about discipleship. They focus on the *dynamics*, the *dignity* and the *drama* of being a follower of Christ (**cf. S. Joseph Krempa, *Captured Fire, St Pauls*, p. 78**).

Samuel was called by God in the middle of the night but needed the wisdom of the old priest Eli to help discern his call, turn to God, and really listen. The usual dynamic, though, is a person like Andrew in your life, who inspires you, walks with you and leads you to Jesus. It was true in my own case. My twin brother, Michael, called me into the Pallottines. It was the pull of brotherly love, but I still had to make up my own mind. In your own life was there an Andrew — a parent, teacher, priest or friend — who encouraged you to follow Christ in whatever vocation you chose? We, in turn, can be an Andrew to others. There's the dynamic of discipleship!

The dignity of being a disciple is often not our doing but Christ's. Notice how Jesus drew John and Andrew into community with the words, "Come and see," and when Andrew brought his brother, Jesus looked hard at Simon and gave him a new name, Cephas, Peter, Rock. That name signalled a new task. In the penetrating gaze of Jesus he took them in, saw their potential beyond

the rough fisherman exterior. It's the same with us. Jesus loves us, right here right now; he doesn't look at past mistakes. He loves us unconditionally. There can be hesitancy in us at first, but it's love that takes us into the experience of Jesus who calls each one of us. Every life is a vocation, an invocation, a cry beyond ourselves to the one who calls back to us, "You are loved, special, called by me."

The drama is how do we respond to God, to Jesus? If you see life as a call, it takes the compartments out of life, between religion and life, no matter who you are — single, married, sister, brother, priest, separated, widowed or a young person. Christianity is an experience of God; creed, doctrine flows from that, which if we are faithful to it, gives meaning to our lives. Our life takes on a different complexion, takes a different direction. As we respond to that call, conviction, belief, and purpose grows.

We receive repeated calls which, listened to give our lives different turns. It may not be a voice heard like Samuel, or even an inner voice, but it can be a conviction that grows when different experiences come together and urge us to respond.

It is a call in the context of today's culture. Years ago, I gave a Homily on the second reading on Paul's teaching regarding fornication, sexual intercourse outside of marriage. One angry young man challenged me, saying, "You, the Church is always preoccupied about sex." But, in fact, it's society that's preoccupied about sex. Sex is the subject of gossip, entertainment, novels, movies, advertising, and media. Just turn on the television. The proliferation of "experts" on matters of sex and books about so-called "sexual liberation" have all left a society in shambles and families broken apart. Bishops, teachers, parents face court if they even dare to advise their children about sexuality, and there's the aggressive calling out of people who go against what's politically correct.

Despite being on the back foot after the results of the Royal Commission, the Church still has the task to speak out with St Paul, "You have been purchased at a price. Your life is not our own" (**1 Cor. 6:20**). You are empowered by the Spirit who dwells within you. And to witness that the sexual expression of love belongs to those who have made a lifelong commitment to each other that we call marriage.

Today, society holds out the illusion that sex without responsibility, sex without commitment, sex without marriage is somehow a key to happiness. Maturity comes not from sexual experience alone but from the commitment, the fidelity, the loyalty, the family life it was designed by God to imply.

As disciples of Christ, we bring a message of hope and respect for sexuality. We believe our bodies are more than biological units. They are temples of the Holy Spirit. We can glorify God by our bodies by how we live (**Krempa p. 82**). The dignity and drama of our discipleship is not to settle for what society holds out, but to look to what each of us can become in Christ.

All my life I have worked in the areas of lay ministry, discipleship, and the collaboration of all, but

I know I also have to call forth ordained leadership. Who from our parish is willing to take up this call to serve as priest, brother, sister or lay person? Vocations don't come out of the sky. They come because someone is calling you, like I am calling you, and the need is great. Come and talk, old Eli can help you discern your call. Come and see where we live, and like Andrew, go and call others.

# The Feast of Saint Vincent Pallotti

Is. 58:6-8, 10-11

1 Cor. 13:1-8

Lk. 10:1-10

Today we celebrate the feast day of the founder of the Pallottines, St Vincent Pallotti. Since 1961 St Christopher's, Syndal, has been in the care of the Pallottines, very much in his spirit of priests, religious and lay people working together (which is the common heritage of Vatican II).

Vincent Pallotti treasured the collaboration between priest and people and fostered the initiatives and responsibility of the laity. But he also wanted to get the theology right and gain acknowledgement from the Church for his work, although his thinking was ahead of the Church of his time. In Vincent's day only the Pope and the clergy claimed the title '*apostle*'. Vincent argued that everyone could be an apostle, if in their daily life they intended to further the mission of Jesus. It was the common priesthood of the baptised; discipleship put into action.

Today the issue is not with apostolate so much as with the notion of ministry. For Catholics, however, the word 'ministry' after the Council was fresh and seemed to capture the Council's vision. It enabled a fundamental point to be made: that the laity share in Christ's mission not by way of exception, but by virtue of their baptism. (Before Vatican II lay people needed the bishop's mandate for certain apostolates.)

In the ***Vatican Document on the Church (Lumen Gentium chapter 2, par 9)***, it was stated clearly that the Church is not to be equated with the clergy alone. The Church was first and foremost the People of God. By baptism all believers were incorporated into the People of God, into the community with its thrust outward, in a mission to the world. Different roles within the Church make sense only after we recognise the unity of all the baptized, members of Christ's Body.

Rather than being in competition, we are to be one, with a common mission of service to others. So together there's a need to recognise and respond to a diversity of ministries within the community.

Paragraph 31 of the ***Document on the Church*** stated: "to be secular is the special characteristic of the laity" ... it was a description of the usual sphere of lay people. Such an approach affirms the value of activity in the world, a world created good by a loving God. It offers a way to encourage lay people to take their Christian faith into the marketplace, into their homes and families, into their work and politics. But it's not exclusive. Priests are involved in secular jobs and thousands of lay people work full-time in the Church. The divide of the sacred belonging to the clergy and the secular to the laity does not fit the reality. The thrust of the Church is as one people of God in the service of the world. God knows the needs that are there. When different members of the Church with their different gifts come together to answer specific needs of people, their mission finds different shapes as ministries.

In stressing the priesthood of the laity, it doesn't mean taking over the role of the priest. These

two priesthoods differ essentially because they refer to two different dimensions of the Christian life — the discipleship of all, and the ministry of the ordained. It's not a put down of lay person or priest.

The common priesthood is the primary category, for it refers to our common discipleship from Baptism which is the ground and basis for all ministry in the Church. The ordained priest receives a unique empowerment for ministry through the Sacrament of Orders, but his priesthood is always seen in the light of, and at the service of, the more fundamental priesthood of all the baptised. The priest is ordained for servant-leadership, part of the community he serves.

Vincent Pallotti was a priest, an apostle and a mystic. He had the gift of bi-location, levitation while saying Mass; the ability to read souls and to heal. Vincent Pallotti recognised the dignity and basic equality of all believers and the diversity of their gifts and roles. He proclaimed that everyone is called and has something to offer the Church's mission; that they could merit the term apostle if they acted with an apostolic intention. This is the common priesthood or the discipleship of all.

He saw the power of community action; the work of one is short-lived. If people compete against one another, if there is a lack of love, it destroys the work for God.

He gave everyone a right in the apostolate. But essentially, he stressed there needed to be holiness — a renewal of faith and practical charity among Catholics for the Church to be effective in mission. Finally, he was obedient to the Pope and bishops in their role of pastoring and oversight — even when they had a different vision from his. Like Hildegard of Bingen who said, "I am like a feather, carried on the breath of God and blown where God wills", so Pallotti trusted in God's will. Pope John Paul II said Vincent Pallotti had intuited the ecclesiology of Vatican II, he was 130 years ahead of his time.

## Second Homily

The death of Prince Philip brought an outpouring of love from the British people. The news of Vincent Pallotti's death brought a similar cry from the people of Rome. "The father of the poor has died." Deaths and birthdays are times to retell stories and rekindle memories.

When the Vikings raided Saxon villages the first people they killed were the village storytellers. They knew that to take out the storytellers was to remove the story of the people. Rupturing the people's links with the stories that animated their common and personal life was to deliver a mortal blow to the memory of the village. Where there was no memory, neither could there be a future (**cf. David Ranson**).

In celebrating Vincent Pallotti's birthday 226 years ago, we retell our originating story to recall our memory as Pallottines, you and me together. When I visited Rome in September 2008, I heard stories about Vincent I had never heard before and places I had not been to. I walked the streets with Pallottine sisters, priests and lay people, who retold their stories at each place where Vincent

worked all over Rome. We went to San Lorenzo in Damaso where Vincent was baptised the day after his birth on 21 April 1795 to Peter Paul Pallotti and Maria Rossi, born at home, 150 Via del Pellegrino in the old quarter of Rome. He was baptised Vincent Aloysius Francis; Vincent was named after an uncle on his father's side.

We stopped at Castel Sant'Angelo, the prison, where Vincent led a group of lay people to pray and fast for condemned prisoners, and then take their bodies for proper burial. The Sisters told stories at the orphanage for girls, Pia Casa Di Carita that is still very alive with Vincent's spirit and memory. On the roof of the Generalate with a view of the Tiber, Fr Daniel Rochetti pointed out the distances Vincent walked; there were few bridges across the Tiber in his day. We visited Propaganda College one of the five seminaries where Vincent was Spiritual Director to students from all over the world. He paid the fees for poor students and tended them when they were ill or dying. Already as a seminarian he ran retreats for young people, poor and rich; at Santa Galla, a hospice for hay carters and homeless men, he taught catechism and involved others to teach literacy, maths and other skills.

Vincent Pallotti was ordained priest in 1818. He had a double doctorate in philosophy and theology and was asked to be tutor at Sapienza University to seminarians. For ten years he organised debates and discussions not at the podium but in the midst of the students. That's how he lived, close to the people, not above them but with them.

At forty, Vincent, praying and agonising about the vast needs facing the Church, yet feeling unworthy, God prepared him in 1835 to found the Union of Catholic Apostolate. He saw that it required the collaboration of everyone; to unlock the vast potential of the laity and release maximum energy when priests, religious and lay people all work together for a common goal. That goal was Church renewal in the total sense, Catholic Apostolate. Officials were suspicious, "You are taking over the Church." But Pallotti said the UAC is at the service of the Church in creative down-to-earth ways and said to all the members of the Union: "If you are sick or old you can pray for the mission of the Church. You can crochet, paint, write. Artisans can create religious works for the missions. Teachers can help at night schools for young workers. People can help at the orphanages, in hospitals, with prisoners, in the army." They were all the areas he was involved in. He called on everyone to respond to local needs, run soup kitchens during the cholera epidemic in 1837; help in the two orphanages for girls, and respond to the needs of missions and the Church worldwide.

Pallotti was not understood in his time. His charisma the UAC was taken away at his death and only returned in 1947. With the Second Vatican Council and the canonisation of Pallotti in 1963, the dangerous memory of Vincent Pallotti was understood and let loose.

We visited the Council for the Laity where Pallotti's charisma, the Union of Catholic Apostolate was finally approved for the universal Church in August 2008. Now that the Church has officially

approved his charism for each diocese, we are challenged how to effect it in our parishes in new and creative ways, the readings show us how.

The first reading (**Acts 2:1-4**) highlights the Cenacle where Mary, Queen of Apostles surrounded by the Apostles and two women, is model and vindication of all called by the Spirit to move out to spread the Gospel in word and practical charity. The second reading (**Acts 9:36 -41**) about Dorcas a lay apostle, shows that happening in small dynamic communities which respond to the basic needs of people. And the Gospel, (**Jn. 14: 23-26, 12-13**) loved by Vincent, points to Jesus' teaching that if we believe in him and grow in his likeness, we can do great things through him.

At the death of Vincent Pallotti on 22 January 1850, the residents in one part of Rome wanted to put up a plaque to keep alive his memory, in gratitude for his work. The civil council objected. "We don't want his memory connected with this area." The people said, "You tell us an area that is not connected with his memory?" The plaque went up. His memory continues. We have a future.



# Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

1 Cor. 7:29-31

Mk. 1:14-20

There's quite a difference between the call of Jonah and the call of the disciples. Jonah, a folk tale with a theological point, tells the story of a reluctant prophet who runs away to Spain when God called him to preach repentance to the traditional enemies of Israel, the Assyrian people of Nineveh. The disciples, on the other hand, respond immediately when Jesus called them. They leave their nets and follow him. God told Jonah to preach that in forty days Nineveh will be destroyed, but he suspects that God will change his mind and forgive. What does he have to leave behind? His prejudice, his reputation as a prophet, and the failure of his message. He's sorry for a shady plant that brought him temporary relief from the burning sun, instead of being sorry for the plight of the ignorant Ninevite people.

What do the disciples leave? Their nets, their livelihood and their family. They are called to become fishers of people. For that to happen they must first be caught into a living relationship with Jesus, must feel what it's like to be in the net before they can be disciples who are reliable witnesses. For we know that at the arrest of Jesus they leave him behind, run away, only to be brought back by Jesus' forgiving message of peace. It's then that they become effective fishers.

The message then and now is the same: "The Kingdom of God is close at hand, Repent and believe the Good News." When the Kingdom becomes personalised in the form of Jesus, the Kingdom is no longer abstract, it's within our reach, right here. To live as Jesus lived is the Kingdom's value. Jesus is the unique and world-shaking example of what happens to people who dare expose themselves to God's love and the effect this has on their life and on the lives of others. Love, God's love had its way in Jesus — it enabled him not only to listen to people, to care for them, but to enter into their lives, to heal and cure them, restore them to wholeness, and even raise them from the dead; for there's nothing that can resist the power of uncreated love, not even death itself.

This way of living began with the call of the disciples. Jesus is calling us in our time. He wants followers, not just admirers. Today he says to us: "Follow me and I will make you fishers of my people." Somehow there has to be a disengaging, a leaving. Peter and Andrew gave up their business; James and John left their father and boat and followed. What is he asking us to leave in order to make ourselves available for him and the work he has for us?

Jesus didn't come to detail the way we ought to love God and our neighbour. He gave us the power to do it. He is calling each one of us to be a disciple and he's giving us the power to be a disciple, to let God be God in us, to allow God to act as God in us. He calls us in the place where we are. Mary Glowrey, born in 1887 in Birregurra, just past Anglesea and Colac, became an eye and ear specialist, and had a successful practice by 1914. In 1915 she went to Mass at St Patrick's Cathedral,

picked up a pamphlet about the appalling death rate of babies in India, and the need there for medical missionaries. She fell to her knees and knew that God, whose will she had constantly sought to do since an early age, was calling her to a life of medical mission work in India. She went there in 1920 after the First World War, until her death in 1957. She may soon be our second Australian saint.

“To do God’s will from an early age”: who inspired that in her — parents, teachers, the Church? It prepared her to respond to God’s call when it came in St Patrick’s Cathedral. There’s a surge to do great things that come on young people between thirteen and seventeen years, that does not come again. If we have everything and don’t have to struggle, then a vital grace is lost.

Pain and need and vulnerability, oftentimes are the very things that make us effective fishers, willing to set up nets to catch people who would otherwise fall through. We need a community; we need prayer to get to the God of our heart and the heart of our God.

We may feel tempted like Jonah when faced with our society’s many layers of human brokenness to run away. But Jesus calls us back and asks that we be fishers of his people and find ways to help and love them as he has loved us.

## Second Homily

When things get bigger than life itself, when trivia or preoccupations are filling up our screens, we need the revolution of which Jesus speaks. The Kingdom is God’s revolution. It’s what happens to a man, a woman, a young person, when God reigns as God, when God’s will is done, when God’s holiness is reflected in his or her life. “Thy Kingdom come in me;” “Let God reign in me, rule my life,” puts us at the heart of that prayer. It is Jesus-affirming and world-affirming.

But it might mean that we start switching off things that conflict with the kingdom which is ushered in, in Jesus, in his birth, his baptism and public ministry, and ultimately in his death-Resurrection event. Jesus is the unique and world-shaking example of what happens to a man who dares expose himself to God’s love and the effect this has on his human life and on the lives of others. Love, God’s love had its way in Jesus — it enabled him not only to listen to people, to care for them, but to enter into their lives, to heal and cure them, restore them to wholeness, and even raise them from the dead: for there’s nothing that can resist the power of uncreated love, not even death itself.

When the kingdom becomes personalised in the person of Jesus, the kingdom is no longer abstract, it’s within our reach, right here. When the risen Jesus meets Paul on the road to Damascus, the kingdom reality in Jesus blazes forth and blinds him. Reluctantly he is led and baptised; the scales fall from his eyes, he receives a new vision, a panorama, the vision of the risen Christ in his Christians gathered in community, the concrete reality of the kingdom being lived here among us. It totally blew Paul’s mind and sent him to bring this vision of the risen Jesus in

community to all; made him apostle to the Gentiles.

This way of living began with the call of the disciples. Don't just look on as Jesus calls the disciples. You are disciples. Put yourself in the Gospel. Jesus is speaking to you and me, today. He wants you to take hold of the kingdom, to let his whole-hearted commitment to the kingdom, happen to you. "Repent" means to let God's revolution take effect in your heart, your thinking and doing. The burning questions for us are the same as for Paul: "Who are you, Lord?" "What must I do?" Not firstly, "How do I love God," but "How do I let God's love into my life?"

Jesus didn't come to detail the way we ought to love God and our neighbour. He gave us the power to do it. He is calling each one of us to be a disciple and he's giving us the power to be a disciple, to let God be God in us, to allow God to act as God in us. He calls us in the place where we are. Jesus called an old minister in the Glasgow slum while he was peeling potatoes at the sink; spoke to another at the turn of the stair to the pulpit as he went to preach. In the face of worry and concern about jobs, share prices dropping and the financial gloom that create undue tension and human hardship, we still need to trust in God. Since Mother Teresa, no-one can say that the care of the poor is an impossible task.

Charles Wesley, in an age of moral and financial chaos in England, secular historians tell us, was the most influential person at that time in Britain's history. The social as well as the spiritual climate of Britain was changed because of his preaching. In him God visited the nation. Jesus is calling us in our time. He wants followers, not just admirers. Today he says to us, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of my people." Somehow there has to be a disengaging, a leaving. Peter and Andrew gave up their business; James and John left father and boat and followed. What is he asking us to leave to make ourselves available for him and the work he has for us?

# Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deut. 18:15-20

1 Cor. 7: 32-35

Mk. 1:21-28

When nature shows its real power like floods and bushfires, we realise how powerless we are. Despite the sandbags and levies, burn-offs and other precautions, water or fire finds its way past our defences and destroys everything in its path. The elemental power of nature can easily disable our technology, disrupt the schedules and systems we create, and throw our lives into chaos. We like to think we are in control. But before certain forces, like the forces of nature, we aren't.

That can give us a glimpse into the heart and mind of the man who came to Jesus in today's Gospel. We can only imagine what his life must have been like, to have this demon within you, ruling your life, destroying everything you hold dear. Maybe he tried to fight it off but to no avail. Maybe each morning he thought the day would be different, but it wasn't. The demon's power was too great for him. It controlled him and his actions.

Then one day he came to the synagogue and he met the power of Jesus because this man did not need ideas, but the grace and power of God to set him free. Jesus looked at the man and addressing the demon said, "Quiet! Come out of him." And he was set free.

There are forces and demons in our life, forces of evil outside of us and forces of evil inside of us that can control our life. Sometimes we think that if we just have the right ideas, read a little bit more and get more information then we can somehow think ourselves into spiritual freedom, when what we really need is the power and grace of God.

The battle lines are drawn at the beginning of Mark's Gospel, as Jesus the strong man confronts demonic power with a different power and authority, "He orders evil spirits and they obey him." Where Matthew introduces Jesus' ministry with the Beatitudes, and Luke with Jesus' statement, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, he has sent me to bring good news to the poor," Jesus' agenda in Mark is his response to the demon. Jesus has come to destroy Satan's power and set us free.

There are powers and people that want to control our life and rob us of our freedom. They can be small and very personal, or they can be vast forces that keep people bound and oppressed, such as world poverty. Of the seven billion people who live on our planet, two billion live on \$2 a day; one billion on \$1 a day, in what is described as extreme poverty. Education is a luxury many families in developing countries cannot afford while they are caught in a cycle of poverty. The World Bank estimates that across the globe more than one hundred million primary age children are not in school, let alone being able to go to high school.

To exorcise such a demon requires a new way of seeing. One example is David Bussau, brought up in an orphanage in New Zealand, he came to Australia in 1966. At age fifteen and with a few dollars he set up his hot dog stand at a local football ground. By thirty-five he was a multi-millionaire and the owner of a highly successful business in Sydney. But the moment of metanoia

came when, almost at the conclusion of a contract to restore Kerry Packer's Bellevue Hill mansion, involving building gun cases and cocktail cabinets, David got a phone call in spicy language telling him to get to Packer's place immediately. Packer was having a cocktail party that evening and was embarrassed that the beautiful cocktail cabinet would not close.

David was indignant that Packer had that kind of power over him. He realised he wasn't in this world to pamper the rich and famous. He wound down his business, then went to Darwin to help with construction after Cyclone Tracey. In the Church he was in, he volunteered to help rebuild a small village in Indonesia devastated by earthquake. The village had about one thousand people, most of whom were tenant rice farmers. It was there that David hit on the idea of micro-finance. One of the rice farmers told him that his wife was expecting her third child, but that his first two children, aged about six and seven, had already been mortgaged to loan sharks to work in a carpet factory or cigarette factory to pay the loan. It was bondage, a forced slavery.

David asked what skills the farmer and his wife had. She could sew. David offered the farmer a loan to buy a sewing machine and the farmer's wife went to work. Within nine months they had bought a second sewing machine and employed another person from the village to work for them. Within eighteen months, the rice farmer had repaid all the money he had borrowed from the loan shark and could redeem his children. The family had been set free from bondage; a demon had been exorcised.

In 1979, David founded Opportunity International with a like-minded counterpart in USA. It started from helping one family in a small village. Now thirty years later, Opportunity International has 1.25 million loans to people in 28 countries averaging \$220 per loan. The organisation employs 9800 people in 28 countries around the world, but they also create a job every 30 seconds of the day. They have a 97.5 per cent repayment rate.

What is the lesson to be learnt from the synagogue at Capernaum? It is within our power, through the grace of Jesus, to help set the downtrodden and oppressed free.

## Second Homily

Jesus was an unknown rising star when he walked into the synagogue at Capernaum. As he proclaimed the Kingdom of God requiring repentance and belief, his preaching brought a shout from an unclean spirit in a possessed man: "Oy! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are! The Holy One of God?" The contest was on! With a rebuke he expelled the unclean spirit, and like a thunder-clap, ushered in the kingdom. Jesus' teaching, not mere words, makes freedom happen with an authority and power that comes from God. His words and actions are exorcisms bringing about God's original intent, a new order that heals and liberates humanity from the hold of Satan who rendered the man bound.

The people are astounded. Unlike the scribes who merely interpret the law, Jesus teaches with

authority and with power; even the evil spirits obey him. The entire episode serves notice that here in this synagogue, where the scribes had for years chipped ineffectively away at Satan's rule, a new era has dawned. That same question was mine years ago. I had conducted camps and retreats for eleven years with young people, but in the last three years I began discipleship camps for 16- to 22-year-olds. At the last one, on the first night we committed ourselves to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, and evil spirits manifested themselves in two young people who were delivered. I asked myself why this had happened now and not in previous camps that many of these same young people had attended. I realised, as in this Gospel, that when the Word is preached and faith is intensified and Jesus is lifted up as Lord, then evil has to come out into the open. Surrender in faith makes God's holiness visible.

Here Jesus, the Holy One, the Word incarnate, is powerfully present. Satan cannot hide; he is a defeated spirit but a showman. He wants to divert attention away from Jesus with shouts and convulsions. But with authority Jesus commands, "Be quiet, come out of him," and the man was set free.

The people were so astonished that they started asking each other: "What does this mean? A completely new teaching in a spirit of authority. He gives orders to unclean spirits, and they obey him." The Greek word for being astonished also has the note, not just of incredulity, but a kind of panic associated with the disruption of the assumed order of things. The struggle with the demon makes it clear that this is not a momentary struggle but is part of a wider conflict of which this is but a single phase, the conflict between the rule of Satan and the incoming reign of God. It highlights the political nature of what is going on.

The demon in the synagogue becomes representative of the scribal establishment whose authority undergirds the dominant Jewish social order. The scribes' power and teaching authority is being put in question. From now on, more than from the Pharisees, the scribes work in opposition to Jesus and ultimately try to get rid of him. I see this incident as representative of what's going on in the present political situation and in some bills that are being pushed through, that I think undermine our Christian moorings.

Just take one example. I think that the Safe Schools program, which is implemented in all government schools affecting our children, has elements of the demonic, in that it creates confusion in the minds of the young. Nowhere in the program is there any mention of bullying, the supposed reason for it to be introduced. The sexual left's agenda is neo-Marxist, working to implement a radical form of sex education focusing on homosexuality; it is radical social engineering that promotes a fluid gender identity, (not biological gender), and starts with children as young as three. Key to their thinking is that every child is an entity of itself. No matter what their age they can choose their sexual orientation, how they dress, have access to toilets and change-rooms. Once children experiment sexually the secular left will have them, and they become part of the revolution.

The result is confusion in the young about their sexual identity and gender dysphoria, that is, unhappiness about their gender. The follow on is *The Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Bill 2020*, which has passed the Victorian Lower House without any political party opposing it and it began in Victoria on 17 February 2022.

It will ban experts from helping kids and punish those who do. The UK High Court, as in the *Quincy Bell v Tavistok Clinic* case, has ruled that children under sixteen are unlikely to be able to give informed consent to receive puberty blocking drugs and other irreversible or damaging treatments, treatments which are as yet innovative and experimental.

This Bill prohibits parents, siblings, relatives, pastors, doctors, psychologists, and every other expert from open discussions with the child struggling with the difficult questions around sexual identity — even if the child asks for help **(cf. Pastor Peter Stevens, Family Voice Australia Inc)**.

# Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Job 7:1-4, 6-7

1 Cor. 9:16-19, 22-23

Mk. 1:29-39

Why do bad things happen to good people? Widespread suffering racks the lives of nations as well as of individuals. Simply turn on the television to see the extent of suffering on innocent people, especially the poor.

Today we witness the first day of Jesus' Galilean ministry, moving out from Peter's house in Capernaum. It is the realisation of the opening words of Mark's Gospel, "Here begins the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Good News not in words only, but in deeds of power that set people free through healing and exorcism.

The two words go together, because some illnesses and behaviours are so deep seated, are experienced as evils burdening good people, and which don't seem to give way to repentance and will power, that it needs Christ's power to unseat and remove them. Job's lament describes the condition of such people, subject to endless suffering and sleepless nights.

What was Jesus' answer to the problem of suffering? He did not accept the view that suffering was a punishment from God. God does not do evil. God does good. What we see in the Gospel is not so much an answer to the question "why suffering?" as Jesus' response to actual suffering.

That response was a very practical one — as we see from today's Gospel. Here we see Jesus surrounded by throngs of physically and mentally sick people. And he gives himself to each of them, healing them one by one. He didn't insulate himself from human pain. He made himself totally vulnerable before the wounded and the sick.

Jesus did not preach resignation, as we often do. Suffering was one of the evils he came to fight. He had compassion for sufferers and made them well. He cast out the demons of guilt, fear, shame, despair that held people bound. Our culture has made suffering *the* only evil.

But sometimes suffering has to be borne, like a stubbed toe, or a broken relationship. The Catholic approach is to offer it up, which is not a passive acceptance but a deliberate will to unite our sufferings with those of Jesus. Not to make up for the sufferings of Christ as if his sacrifice was incomplete, but to allow Jesus to transform that suffering to be redemptive for oneself and others. It is redemptive suffering. Paul in Col. 1:24 was happy to offer his suffering to do what he could for the Body of Christ, the Church. Nobody wants to be sick, and we must do all we can to be healed.

Henri Nouwen in his last book *Adam, God's Beloved* describes the impact of a young man, Adam, in L'Arche Daybreak Community, Toronto, who for thirty-three years couldn't talk, walk, feed or wash himself. Nouwen left a busy life of writing and lecturing as a professor and theologian at Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard to care for Adam's every need. It was a healing time for Henri to leave behind the accolades and fame to be with God's beloved, totally dependent, who was



grateful for all that was done for him.

Cathie, a rich widow living in Manhattan, totally depressed, no psychiatrist could help her, feeling worthless, came to see Henri Nouwen. He asked her to feed Adam at lunch-time. Adam changed her completely. He seemingly had nothing, but simply radiated peace and acceptance and love, and healed others.

Henri was spurred to write a book about Adam, after he died. He finished it a few weeks before his own death in Holland on 21 September 1996. In Adam, Henri discovered a way to write about his own understanding of today's Gospel message, holding the pain and questions in one's heart, able to stand in solitude until the Lord heals, compassionately reaching out to the other, and accepting each other in community. Henri, summed up all his years of writing, "By giving words to these experiences I can make my life available to others."

## Second Homily

The first reading and the Gospel are meant to relate to each other. You wonder at first, how Job relates to Mark's Gospel. And then you realise that Job is a brilliant example of the anguish and bewilderment of a rich man suddenly reduced by disease, disaster and depression, and none of it his fault. And then you see Jesus at the heart of a seething mass of suffering humanity. So, Job's story establishes a human context within which Jesus gives our life meaning.

Overall, we don't have the same crushing poverty or physical sickness. But we do have the depression, the deep feeling of loss, pain touching everything. We suffer a lack of purpose and direction expressed in those words of Job at night, "When is it going to be morning?" ... or when we're up, "I'm so tired, when is it going to be night?" ... "How long till the weekend?" ... Monday morning, "Oh God, another week." We've never had it better and never had so much unhappiness. The question comes to my mind: "Why do unhappy situations produce happy people?" Because people facing death begin to fight to live, need each other to get through.

In our time we have plenty of people with high IQs. You see it on school boards promoting the school with the number of VCE high scorers. IQ = Intelligence Quotient. We are not so high on EQ, Emotional Quotient. But what we need today is more AQ. What is it? Adversity Quotient. It is the capacity to resist, endure, to overcome all problems with creativity. You see it in Paul in the second reading oozing energy and vitality for his work. He has fought the good fight, run the race to the finish.

The terrible anguish of Job was that in the middle of his disaster his friends left him, there was no-one waiting for him, even on the other side of death. That can be part of our sickness. There's no one waiting because I haven't made time for friendship, for essential relationships.

Jonathan Sacks, Britain's chief rabbi, speaking on the topic *Has Europe Lost its Soul?* among said: "It's not adversity that is the real trial, but affluence. Affluence makes you complacent. You no

longer have the moral and mental energy to make the sacrifices necessary for the defence of freedom. Inequalities grow. The rich become self-indulgent. The poor feel excluded. We lose our social solidarity." Living for self, for now, for me, there's no context to get things into perspective. Material things don't satisfy in the long run. I need something to live and die for, invest my whole self in.

The Judaeo-Christian ethic based on justice, compassion and respect for human dignity took moral restraint from "out there" to "in here." Good conduct was not dependent on governments, civil courts and legal penalties. It was dependent on the still, small voice of God within the human heart. It became part of character, virtue, and an internalised sense of obligation.

Pope Francis and Pope Benedict are asking us to renew our faith in Jesus, because when there is faith, it enables us to get up and serve, as happened in Peter's house when Jesus took Peter's mother-in-law by the hand and raised her up. Immediately she got up and served.

We don't have to be completely on top of things before we feel right to help others. It's precisely our struggle with our own weaknesses that becomes a stimulus for us to do something. The idea of the wounded healer comes in here. He or she is one who, though undergoing considerable pain or crisis can still take time to bind up another's wound. It avoids preoccupation with self that suffering can sometimes trigger. It helps us realise we are not alone in our pain as we reach out to others.

When you're lonely, make friends; hurt, stretch out to forgive. Jesus is at the heart of all our woundedness and works from within us to heal us. As we respond to his grace, he rejoices over us in love. To share out of our own weakness and struggle in what we're going through, to clarify our own experience and speak it out, and to speak out our faith within difficult situations, that's the genius of the Jews and the Irish — story-telling and laughter and song within a context of hope. That's where our AQ, our Adversity Quotient, comes into play. We also should allow those who are suffering in our community to pray like the lamenting Job with the realisation that complaining to God is a deep form of faith. For at the end of the Book of Job, God was more pleased with Job than with his three pious self-righteous comforters.

Another reason for our weariness is that much of life is like a freeway. Once you're on, you speed up, get into your lane, set your eyes straight ahead, don't waver and get there before all the cars around you. It's as though we're competing in a race of some kind. It's necessary at times to get off the freeway. This is difficult to do since there are so many demands made of us and they're constant.

Yet Christ was also on a freeway, the last three years of his life so busy, at times he didn't even have time to eat. Yet regularly as we see in today's Gospel he retired to a quiet spot and prayed in secret to his Father. The quiet spot is within us, often it's the only quiet spot. Outside is too hectic. We need the healing that comes from quiet, inner prayer. That's the source of our Adversity

Quotient. And that is your quota for today.

# Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lev. 13:1-2, 44-46

1 Cor. 10:31-11:1

Mk. 1:40-45

A mother met a close friend from her student days who reminded her of how she worried even before she married, about having a child with an intellectual disability. She had forgotten this; but she did know that her motherhood was long awaited, and her children prayerfully requested. She had lost a six-year-old in Geneva, but her beloved son Joachim was born some 14 months later. 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.'" What is it that you fear most, that challenges you?

"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 can, can you cure me?" Was his "if you can," 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 have 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. With a deep sigh he was angry, not at this man, but at his 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 became unclean according to Mosaic Law. Jesus should have contracted the contagion, but he didn't; instead, the leper became clean. Jesus deliberately went against the purity laws that were entrenched in his society, controlling every aspect of people's lives. Touching the leper was a symbolic act that not only healed the leper but that overturned an oppressive symbolic system controlled by the priests.

Jesus is on the offensive. He challenges the man to show his healing to the priests as evidence *against* them, not just the priests as such, but an action directed against the system itself. His liberation immediately provokes conflict. Mark says that Jesus had to go to the outskirts of the towns. Jesus was regarded as a leper by the religious authorities: he became a marked man.

Fr Damien 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 in the Hawaiian State Capital. It was the head of Damien, with his hat and glasses, placed

on top of a body shaped as a coffin.

I flew out to Molokai, in 1986, on my way to America to see where Fr Damien 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 of the person and work of Fr Damien.

When I arrived in America, the issue of HIV/Aids was at fever pitch. The comparison with leprosy was very real. People were seeing AIDS as a punishment from God, just as leprosy was seen in Jesus' day.

There were two responses to such a situation: a personal one such as St Francis's conversion when he descended from his horse and kissed a leper, fighting against his own inner revulsion. But he willed himself to embrace the leper, then wash and care for groups of lepers. Dorothy Day said that she did not realise the courage that Francis' action took until one day an old lady in her House of Welcome was leaving. She wanted to kiss Dorothy to say goodbye. She had cancer of the mouth and gave Dorothy a full kiss on the mouth. Or Helen Kubler Ross who set up a farm for infected children and was ostracised by the community around her.

The second response was a systemic one such as Martin Luther King Jr. kneeling and praying with his fellow marchers in the face of police dogs and water cannons. It wasn't only a pious action, but a symbolic action directed at segregation in southern USA. Jesus touching the leper was symbolic directed against physical purity that did not result in moral purity and deeper compassion. Either response is a small 'yes' that grows to bigger 'yesses'.

"I am what you fear most." What is it that you fear most that challenges you to say yes to?

## Second Homily

He touched me! What the leper felt beforehand we will never really know. Torn away from family because of his dreaded disease, having to wear deliberately torn clothing, hair unkempt and his appearance dishevelled, crying out "unclean, unclean", with his hand over his mouth to prevent contagion, and everyone keeping far away from him. No wonder the word, "If". The uncertainty, Will Jesus do it? and the desperate action as he breaks taboos and throws himself at Jesus' feet. "If you will, you have the power to make me clean." For leprosy was not simply a physical disease, it reduced the person to nothing, to dirt, it made them physically and spiritually unclean. It was a living death. Will Jesus do it?

I went to Molokai, one of the islands of Hawaii, because I have a great devotion to St Damien, the leper priest, who gave his life for the lepers and died as a leper. The lepers, men and women, were dumped on the island, a beautiful island, with no shelter or support. Damien washed and cared for them. Developers are trying to get rid of any trace of lepers or of Fr Damien de Veuster,

but in the capital, Honolulu, there is a statue to him. His body is a coffin with his head, glasses and hat on top, symbol of the living death of leprosy.

Martin Luther King Jnr. willed himself to go to Memphis, Tennessee in April 1968, to support the striking sanitation workers he had seen on the television, the long lines of African American men walking single file through the city with the same billboard which read: "I am a man." In other words, I am a human being.

What prompted the strike was the death of two of their number sheltering from the rain at the back of a self-compacting truck with faulty mechanism which went off and crushed them to death. Their families had no money to pay for their funeral. In fact, most of the workers needed to get food tickets to supplement their meagre wages. They had maggots on their clothes from handling the garbage, so they were not allowed on the buses and had to walk home after working a ten-hour day. King willed himself to go to Memphis where he would face opposition for daring to organise a non-violent protest march through Memphis and ultimately die. His presence touched the striking workers. Dr King is here. Here was someone who heard their plea.

Jesus heard the leper's plea. "Of course, I will it; be clean," and he touched him. Moved by compassion, some would say 'stirred to anger' by a realistic but heartless social custom that alienated and isolated these hopeless people, precisely when their self-esteem was so battered; it made Jesus react with utter compassion. Almost recklessly he touched the leper with his own hands. Hang the cost! To touch a leper was to become unclean, contaminated oneself, but that did not happen; power came from Jesus which cleansed the man immediately. Jesus commands the man to keep quiet, but he shouts out to all what Jesus did for him. If people heard what Jesus did, he would be shunned and become like a leper himself. Mark says, "Jesus could no longer enter a town but stayed outside in deserted places; still people came to him."

Jesus treats the man with personal dignity that no-one else is game to display. Jesus stands up for him against the system. He puts his own life on the line for the leper's sake. In fact, Mark has an interesting remark, the man is meant to show himself to the priest and make an offering for his cleansing. But he has nothing. The Greek word for showing, however, means show yourself as a witness against them, that is, confronting an ideological system that keeps people isolated and diminished.

Jesus had come to see with clarity the ways of his society. He saw much of what was occurring was unjust. Brought up in the scriptures, he could see that what was happening was no longer the kingdom of God and he would challenge what was wrong with everything he had.

By his lifestyle he would demonstrate God's kingdom where all could find their deepest dignity and be treated with their rightful sacredness. He simply would not tolerate a social system that marginalised and diminished persons. Any society that excluded the unfortunate had nothing in common with the Father he had come to know. Jesus chose to act according to his heart and to

challenge head-on the sinful, depersonalising ways of his day. In doing this he became increasingly prepared to pay the price.

What are the issues we experience, that isolate and depersonalise? It can be as simple and deadly as cyber-bullying that causes a young girl to commit suicide; or people with a handicap, or homosexuals. Jesus could be angry at situations of oppression, and at people whose hard-heartedness put others down. He did not condone evil. He refused to be manipulated by one side or the other. At the same time, he was seeking openings to bring them to a change of thinking and a change of heart. He was concerned always for the inner core of the person, whether friend or enemy.

Who are today's lepers? Think for a moment of the lepers that you and I are aware of. How do we stand up for them as Jesus did?

## Third Homily

He was torn from his family and community and further degraded, having to wear deliberately torn clothing, hair unkempt and his appearance dishevelled, crying out "unclean, unclean", with his hand over his mouth to prevent contagion, and everyone keeping far away from him. All because of this dreaded disease that had fastened on him. Falling foul of the regulations, like refugees at Manus Island, he may have been a professional or a manager of a business, but now was locked away because someone reported him. No wonder the word, "If." The uncertainty, "Will Jesus do it?" and the desperate action as he breaks taboos and throws himself at Jesus' feet. "If you will, you have the power to make me clean." For leprosy was not simply a physical disease, it reduced the person to nothing, to dirt, physically and spiritually unclean. It was a living death. Will Jesus do it?

The touch of Jesus was so much more than a healing, it was a liberation, a restoration. "Of course, I will it; be clean," and he touched him. Stirred to anger by a realistic but heartless social custom that alienated and isolated these hopeless people, precisely when their self-esteem was so battered; it made Jesus react with utter compassion. Almost recklessly he touched the leper with his own hands. Hang the cost! To touch a leper was to become unclean, contaminated oneself, but that did not happen; power came from Jesus which cleansed the man immediately.

Jesus commands the man to keep quiet, but he shouts out to everyone what Jesus had done for him. If people heard what Jesus did, Jesus would be shunned and become like a leper himself. Mark says, "Jesus could no longer enter a town but stayed outside in deserted places; still people came to him."

Today five of our RCIA community are touched by Jesus when we anoint them with the oil of catechumens and welcome them into the Order of Catechumens. Three adults are from Hong Kong, one born Muslim is from Pakistan. A further three candidates from Sri Lanka, members of

our RCIA community, are already baptised and confirmed as Anglicans and wish to become full members of the Catholic Church. They receive the warm welcome from Jesus, the hand of fellowship through us. Please pray for them next Sunday when they take part in the service for the Elect and prepare for Baptism and Eucharist. It is a courageous step they take joyfully; they need our support and our prayer.

The Sri Lankan community rejoices at this time as Saint Joseph Vaz was canonized by Pope Francis on 14 January 2015 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Saint Joseph Vaz is the first saint to have been canonised in Sri Lanka, and the first saint of Sri Lanka (having died there); he originally came from Goa, India. He was an Oratorian; he came from Goa when the Dutch expelled Portuguese priests and forcibly promoted Calvinism. Saint Joseph Vaz dressed as a mendicant and a sunyasi; he created huts for small confraternities to revive faith among the Catholics.

Like Jesus in today's Gospel, Saint Joseph Vas chose to act according to his heart and to challenge head-on the sinful, depersonalising ways of his day. In doing this he became increasingly prepared to pay the price. He did not condone evil. He refused to be manipulated by one side or the other. He sought unity in the Church and the renewal of faith in Sri Lanka. Who are today's lepers? Think for a moment of the lepers that you and I are aware of. How do we stand up for them as Jesus did?



# Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lv. 19:1-2, 17-8

1 Cor. 3: 16-23

Mt. 5: 38-48

The man being lowered by ropes through the roof was a problem, a social problem that would not go away — a paralytic, one of the helpless, teeming mass of humanity. All eyes are on him as he descends.

Below is Jesus facing the circle of scribes of the Pharisaic party who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea. There is tension in the air. What will Jesus do? The word and practice of the Pharisee is to be separate from such problems as is being lowered from above. The energy of these separated ones is focused on external behaviour, staying clean and remaining within the bounds of law.

They knew this Jesus as one who is not separate, distant, but draws near to people in need, clean or unclean — he touched the leper; he helps even if it breaks through the tangle of legal prescriptions, he healed on the Sabbath. Jesus does so, almost unconsciously, but quite deliberately, because this is what his compassionate Father would do. Jesus works to bring about the kind of world his Father wants.

The scribes are ready to pounce on the slightest word or action of Jesus that would offend their religious sensibilities. The opposition is strong, but the problem will not go away. It is getting closer. Those lowering will not be put off by the crowds blocking the door nor by the scribes within. They lower the paralytic right there between Jesus and the scribes.

There was no dispute about Jesus' power to heal in the Gospel. The crowds waiting for his return to Capernaum, after Jesus' ministry in the surrounding towns and villages, was evidence of that. The house was soon packed to the doors by people jostling to hear Jesus' powerful Word. No-one was willing to lose their place by making room for the paralysed man on the stretcher. He found friends, however, who were determined to get him to Jesus. They climbed the outside stairs, made a hole in the roof and lowered the man right in front of Jesus. Despite the falling dust and debris, Jesus was impressed by the faith of these men.

There's a lovely line in the Bible, "We judge by appearances, but God looks right into our hearts." Without a word spoken, Jesus looks into the heart of this man and sees what cripples him — not only the social convention that says sickness is the result of sin, that kept him bound; but Jesus also sees the unresolved guilt that sapped the man's emotional energy as he sought to hide it and which rendered him crippled, unable to attend to things he did so easily beforehand with energy and passion. Jesus also knew the unspoken thoughts of the scribes, when he spoke those courageous words out of deep compassion, which unleashed the anger of the scribes. With tenderness Jesus spoke, "my child, your sins are forgiven." To forgive equates this man, Jesus, with divinity. The scribes are shocked: "Only God can forgive." In Jesus, Son of Man, we meet incarnation

spirituality which gives evidence of his concern to heal the whole person — to offer spiritual and physical healing.

To the scribes' condemning thoughts, "Blasphemy! No man can forgive sins but God alone", Jesus challenges back, "Which is easier to say, your sins are forgiven" — to counter what is anti-Christian in the culture, and work for the religious dimension of the person or nation, or to say "Get up and walk" — to promote educational and charitable activities. Both go together.

Forgiveness is not only from on high, not only from the priest, but forgiveness is in the human situation where we touch the body of Christ. The man let down from the roof touched the body of Christ, not only in Jesus, but also in the community of friends who saw his need and helped him. And the paralysed man was helped in a way that neither he nor his friends expected. Certainly, God forgives but God wishes us to be the bearers and agents of the forgiveness that is divine.

When there has been a fight at home, your anger and frustration boils over, words go flying and so does the coffee cup in your hand, as you storm out and slam the door. The next day, your pride still hurt, but feeling foolish, you come down and find the rest of the family having breakfast round the table. You pick up your coffee cup that didn't break and sit down at table. You are touching the Body of Christ, even though not a word may be spoken about the incident. Not only God forgives, but the human family forgives, the Christian community forgives.

We believe that God forgives whenever, however, and wherever we turn Godward with a sincere and repentant heart. We don't have to wait to go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation before we receive forgiveness.

In our Catholic tradition we know that there are many forms of forgiveness — forgiveness occurs at Baptism where we are cleansed and become a new creation in Christ; also, at the Eucharist where we take the cup of reconciliation, and at the Anointing of the Sick which not only heals the body but also forgives our sin.

Where does that leave the Sacrament of Reconciliation that is in disarray today? The sacrament is changing — it has changed many times in the past, but we need both the communal dimensions and the individual dimension — the confessing, the telling of our sins, and the human word of assurance that our sins are forgiven.

When you consider the woman who had a haemorrhage for twelve years, and who touched the hem of Jesus secretly. Not only did she touch the body of Christ, but she responded personally to Jesus' question: "Who touched me?" As she spoke out her story, her fears, frustration, tears and hurt, deeper healing occurred in her.

In the sacrament well-celebrated we realise that our most secret sin has somehow damaged the whole Body of Christ that is the Church community, the family. We go to be reconciled to the community through the official representative of the community, but also when we speak to the person we've hurt and say, "I am sorry", it releases sin's power over us. To ask pardon from one who

has been abused without rationalising the guilt away, is essential for the healing of the abused person. The Church has to do this: but government has also to do this to Aboriginal people.

The word of apology is an essential element in reconciliation. Sin disrupts, destroys communities and ravages the Body of Christ; and reconciliation is not without some personal pain. A student, who was devout as a child, went to university and seemed to have lost the God of his youth so he went to Rabbi Herschel, who said to the student: "What makes you think that God wanted your former peace but does not want your present pain!"

## Second Homily

Crowds of people are present at the miracle today. There's Jesus and, of course, the paralysed man, the scribes of the Pharisaic party always watching to criticize Jesus, and many people we don't know by name. They could be divided into two groups: the carriers and the barriers. In Kinglake and Marysville during the bushfires of Black Saturday, you see the carriers, firemen, police, Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul Society, priests and ministers, doctors, counsellors and volunteers. But you also see those who just come for a look and get in the way of essential work that has to be done.

In the Gospel there are the carriers, the four friends who carried the paralysed man up an outside stair, cut a hole in the roof and lowered the man in front of Jesus. Seeing their faith Jesus said to the man, "Your sins are forgiven." Then, later, "Get up and walk." Seeing their faith, Jesus healed the man.

Because of the faith of a few good friends, Jesus healed the man and taught us the power of the prayer of intercession. If we truly love someone, we want far more for them than we are able to give them, just as these four friends wanted a healing for the man that they themselves could not give. The prayer of intercession is a way of loving others. When we move from the prayer of petition to a prayer of intercession for others, we shift our centre from our own needs to the needs and concerns of others. That's what our Prayers of the Faithful are, prayers of intercession offered for those badly affected by the bushfires and for others.

The man in the Gospel was paralysed in soul and body. There are many who have become paralysed spiritually, traumatized by what they have been through, the loss of home and loved ones, the memories of all they struggled for, photos, and family mementoes. But there are people who have damaged their lives through sin as they surrendered to temptation.

Temptations have always been around. But today temptation has become an industry. Temptation has gone corporate, has gone hi-tech, digital; it fills cyberspace.

People who give in to these temptations can seriously damage their lives, their marriages, and their faith. People can become spiritually paralysed. They see nothing wrong with lying, looting, having sex outside of marriage, and destroying life through abortion. Their conscience is

anesthetized. Physical paralysis is very dangerous not only because it eliminates movement, but it eliminates feeling. The feeling of pain — that something is wrong, something is attacking, and something is infested — is a natural warning signal that is gone in the area of paralysis.

Pain is a survival mechanism that alerts us that something is wrong. Conscience is a spiritual survival mechanism that alerts us that we are doing something that violates our nature and God's will and endangers our eternal destiny. People who have lost all sense of right and wrong are spiritually paralysed and they cannot bring themselves to the Lord. Like the man in the Gospel, they need carriers, they need intercessors.

Our prayer, in the name of Jesus, can bring back to Church those who have been far away from the Church. We bring them in prayer and, like the carriers in the Gospel, we can bring them before the Lord. Through the prayer of intercession, we become deeply involved in the wellbeing of others, not only of the living but also those who have died. In the face of death, illness, problems and sin, we are not powerless. We have the prayer of intercession. When I get up through the night, I pray for all who have asked for prayer and whom I carry with me. I'm sure we all do. We can be carriers of people to Christ. But there's the other group who blocked the paralysed man's access to Jesus. They were barriers to Christ, so intent on themselves, they didn't make room for the paralysed man.

As much as we can be carriers who bring people to Christ, we can also be barriers. Our past, our indifference, our sin, our departure from Gospel living can block people from coming to Christ through us. We need to ask ourselves: are we carriers or barriers? Do we carry people to Christ or prevent them from approaching the Lord?

Choose someone each week or month, one of the pictures of the bushfire victims, and become his or her intercessor. Or it could be a friend or an enemy, a public person like the President or the Prime Minister, a neighbour, and bring that person before the Lord in prayer. And keep in mind the very graphic picture of the four friends bringing the paralysed man before Christ. We can do that for others. The paralysed man stood up from his stretcher and began a new day in his life. His old world was folded up with his mat and a new one was begun. It all happened because of the faith of a few friends. Someone cared enough to carry him to Christ. We can do the same.

# Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Is. 49:14-15

1. Cor. 4:1-5

Mt. 6: 24-34

The readings for this Sunday have a nuptial theme. Hoseah, prophet to the Northern Kingdom, is sent to Israel (God's virgin daughter) to warn of future catastrophe unless they return and keep God's covenant; and Jesus the Bridegroom who celebrates the wedding banquet of the messianic times which he is initiating and to which he is inviting all.

Hoseah's mission to Israel is seen through the lens of his own marriage. Just as in the reign of Jeroboam II, which began well, prospered, but then reverted to pagan worship, so Hoseah compares his own marriage to his young wife which began in love but breaks down because of his wife's infidelity. Yet God will not give up his people easily, as Hosea seeks to woo his wife and bring her back, after the model of the Covenant made with Israel in the desert at the time of the Exodus. There, God spoke to the heart of his people whom he had chosen. God's covenant with his people is described as a marriage. Like any Christian marriage, it is not just 50-50, but if the wife or husband is ill often it can be 90-10. As distinct from a contract, where if the partners don't live up to the agreement, the partnership is over; a covenant is a gratuitous choice by God of the other. God will do everything possible to make of the relationship a betrothal made for ever.

When Jesus is questioned why he didn't fast like the disciples of John the Baptist or of the Pharisees, his reply takes us into God's wedding banquet where he is the Bridegroom. The wedding feast is always potentially a figure of the Kingdom of God which Jesus is bringing in. If the Kingdom means God reigning as God in Jesus, then the Kingdom grows as more and more people believe in Jesus. Therefore joy, not fasting, is the natural response at the wedding. The tragedy for Hoseah is that despite his constant reaching out to his bride in love, she will still be unfaithful, Israel will not return to covenant fidelity. And Jesus hints similarly that a time will come when the bridegroom is taken away in death, and then his disciples will fast.

In the second reading Paul talks about a covenant created by Christ's death and resurrection and written not on stone tablets but on the tablets of our living hearts. We are meant to be administrators of that covenant which is the work of the Holy Spirit.

I am concerned at the breakdown in our society of the *sacramental aspects of marriage*. Couples living together without the powerful presence of Jesus in their marriage. And if they do not have a sacramental marriage, it is likely that the children will not receive the sacrament of Baptism. "The mystery of the Christian family can be fully understood only in the light of the Father's infinite love revealed in Christ, who gave himself up for our sake and who continues to dwell in our midst ... the living Christ who is at the heart of so many love stories, and I invoke the fire of the Holy Spirit upon all the world's families" (***Amoris Laetitia - The Joy of Loving par. 59***).

We dress up for a wedding to honour the bridal couple and share in their joy with a good glass

of wine. Jesus uses another image which challenges the rigidity of practices of John's and the Pharisees' disciples that hinder the coming of the Kingdom. Jesus states there is a new ferment of the Kingdom that can't be pushed into old leather wine casks that will split and lose the new wine. The structures are no longer flexible to receive the dynamic reality of the Kingdom.

The Second Vatican Council called the Church to be the sacrament of Christ's saving presence to the world but is facing a similar challenge to which Jesus refers. At this time in Australia the Church is preparing for a Plenary Council. The Church is the whole people of God, that is all the baptized who are called to live out what it means to be the Church to the world.

In response to the Royal Commission's critique of Church governance (over the child abuse crisis), the Australian bishops and religious instituted an advisory group which in turn created the Governance Review Project Team. This team after one year presented a 200-page document to the bishops and religious.

The project takes as its starting point Pope Francis's call for a synodal Church, one marked by *the imperatives of co-responsibility, collaboration, and genuine consultation between Church leaders (bishops and others) and the lay faithful*. The leaders, however, have held the document to themselves for their prior deliberation, instead of collaboration and genuine consultation from the beginning. But the document was leaked and has created a ferment among priests and lay people who desire a Church renewed in line with Vatican II, which will entail a critical look at structures and greater involvement from the laity, especially women. If we want to walk together, leaders and people, then a good look is necessary at the culture, structures and accountability required of bishops, priests, and lay people.

A careful, brief, yet thoughtful presentation of the document is in the Australian National Council of Priests periodical, ***The Swag*, Spring 2020, pp 10-14**, with an analysis by Catholic lay theologian from Boston College, Professor Richard R. Gaillardetz. Let's listen, pray and be open to the leading of the Spirit in the Australian Church in our time that God will renew the Church to be a saving sacrament to us and to all people.

# **THE SEASON OF LENT**

**Year B**

# Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:12-18

2 Cor. 5:20-6:2

Mt. 6:1-6, 16-18

What do you notice about the Church today? No flowers, purple — it's all stripped down; if you are going swimming or doing sport, you strip down. When you join the netball, soccer or footy team you get your uniform and wear it with pride. The ashes we wear today with pride are the sign of the new start we are going to make. 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 made our wants into needs, and 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, electricity 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? Too many smokes; gossip on the phone; backsliding; avoiding people; the TV program *Revenge* whose sole plot is people wanting to get back at others because of perceived or imaginary hurt from others — what a waste of a life! Jealousy; resentment; over-eating or drinking; deaf to the plight of the poor — here and in Third World countries. We need to face these compulsions and be free from them, 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." His grandchildren asked: "Which wolf is going to win?" The old chief replied, "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 Covid pandemic 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.”

A real penance can be to set aside time to pray every day, go to confession, cultivate love — look for opportunities to do something for the family or your neighbours, visit someone who is sick, help people in need, the homeless, as the Smith Family, Vincent de Paul, Caritas do on a local and international level. A mother decided to go to early Mass each morning. She said, “I would have given up if it hadn’t been for my nine-year old daughter who was up and dressed every morning, waiting for me.”

Lent is getting ready for the Bridegroom, the Messiah, a joyful looking forward to having Jesus with us at Easter. The real test of Lent in the end 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?

## Second Homily

Today we are marked with a cross. But why ashes? A reminder that one day we will die, and we’ve got to live right before God. Lent is knowing that we are created and how good God is.

Lent is a commitment, like walking your friend home in the dark, we want to walk with Jesus through this time of Lent, right through the cross to Easter rising.

Lent is a fresh start. Some seeds only grow after a bushfire, and you see the shoots of green coming out of the ashes. Lent is about growing.

It is about turning to God in a special way: three ways are mentioned in the Gospel. What are they? Doing good deeds, praying, fasting. But it is the way we do these things: Look at the Pharisees in the Gospel. Who do they want to see them doing good deeds, praying or fasting? It’s all for show.

Who does Jesus want to see him fasting, praying, helping? God his Father! How does that make a difference? We do this for someone greater, who is the Father of the poor, the sick and the needy. We treat others the way God would — with reverence.

I’ve noticed that people don’t say ‘please’ or ‘thank you’ anymore. It’s just me, me, when asked who wants a biscuit or a drink? It’s not just what goes into our mouth but what comes out of our mouth — swear words and dirty talk. Prayers, and how we talk to God is how we are to talk to one other.

Doing without food can turn us in on ourselves; we stuff ourselves. But it’s meant to turn us out to others who don’t have the things we have and take for granted. How many things do you have, clothes hanging the cupboard you never wear, toys, books, pencils that are just lying around?

How much time do you spend at the computer, playing games, or texting, turning us off from listening to mum or dad, or others?

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 Eastertime. Lord, oil all the hinges of our heart's doors that they swing gently and easily to welcome your coming.

### **Penitential Rite: Dialogue**

A) We seek you day after day, Lord,

We long to know your ways,

Like a nation that acts with integrity

And not ignore the law of its God.

B) Look, you do business on your fast days

You oppress all your workmen;

Look, you quarrel and squabble when you fast

And strike the poor man with your fist.

#### ***Lord have mercy***

A) We ask you for laws that are just,

We long for God to draw near;

[Why should we fast if you never see it.](#)

why do penance if you never notice?

B) Fasting like yours today

Will never make your voice heard on high.

Is that the sort of fast that pleases me,

A truly penitential day for all?

Hanging your head like a reed,

Lying down on sackcloth and  
ashes?

Is that what you call fasting,

A day acceptable to the Lord?

#### ***Christ have mercy***

This is the sort of fast that  
pleases me

To break unjust fetters, and  
undo the chains

To let the oppressed go free And  
break every yoke

To share your bread with the  
hungry

And shelter the homeless poor

To clothe man you see to be  
naked

And not to turn away from  
people in need

Then will your light shine like the  
dawn

You will cry and the Lord will  
answer, "I am here."

#### ***Lord have mercy***

# First Sunday of Lent

**Gen. 9:8-15**

**1 Pet. 3:18-22**

**Mk. 1:12-15**

This Lent begins with a rainbow, a bond, a covenant between God, and the whole human family, and with our world. It is a new beginning, starting with us.

Lent is not so much giving up things; it's a time to fall in love again with Jesus and follow him, just as he loves the Father and follows the Father. He had the Father's words ringing in his ears as he came up out of the water, "This is my beloved Son." The Spirit drove him into the desert as he wrestled with what it meant to be God's Son, to fight for us for God. Jesus steps into the ring during a forty days' contest with Satan and the wild beasts, and wins. God in the person of the angels was with him. It is a fresh start for humanity that will only be complete through Christ's redeeming death-resurrection. A fresh start is what the story of Noah is all about. The eight people in the ark, the Second Letter of Peter says, stands for the eighth day, the Resurrection Day, the first day of the new creation, for our Baptism that lets us know both our identity and task as Christians in and for the world.

To be known as Christian, in Mark's community in Rome, was a death sentence. In 64CE Nero, to divert attention from the economic collapse of Rome, burnt half the city. The Christians were blamed, taken to the stadium to face burning as human torches and to be thrown to the wild beasts for the diversion of the citizens at the expense of innocent people. Baptism was no mere social event. It was an entry into an apocalyptic struggle between the forces of evil and the forces for good.

Written for his community about 71CE, Christians were invited to identify with Jesus, driven by the Spirit into the wilderness and there to contend with the wild beasts and engage in an epic struggle with Satan. When John the Baptist is arrested Jesus steps forward to proclaim God's rule and reign, and himself as the real Good News for all who follow him.

The temptation of Jesus that marks the beginning of our Lent is a time of testing the mettle we're made of. Temptation is not sin, it's like a crisis one goes through, and it is the first inducement to consent to evil. Temptation is the crucible in which freedom is refined, purified, and gains its quality. It is Jesus (the man's) inner struggle which leads to his freely uttered 'yes' to his Father. Temptation refers to those situations in which being faithful to what we want to do with our life is involved.

The temptation of Jesus is not a copy of what we go through. It is a decisive event, because Jesus knew that his life project was to bring about God's kingdom. But Satan's kingdom was in possession — the temptation of Jesus expresses the battle of two kingdoms in deadly combat — whoever wins, God or Satan, stands to control the destiny of nations.

Trials and tests run throughout Jesus' whole life, trying to divert him from doing his Father's will.

The Greek word Mark uses for temptation means the tugging and sharp pulling of cloth to test the strength of its fabric, its quality. When the Dutch were reclaiming land from the sea, while the big metal shutters were far apart, the water could easily come and go. It was the last few inches when the shutters were closing that the water pressure was at its greatest. It was at Jesus' last great temptation at Gethsemane and the Cross, with a loud cry and tears, that he won the Kingdom for all of us and for the Father. He was totally emptied, obedient and tested yet he was the stronger one who bound up Satan.

Christ has won, but like the Christians of Mark's community we have to step forward and continue Christ's work. The struggle still goes on, for example, there's the vociferous outrage over live baiting of greyhounds and yet our Victorian law aborting innocent children right up to birth and beyond, raises not a comment. To be a Catholic it seems cuts us out of the debate.

Temptation puts to the test what we know God wants us to do with our lives. It challenges our identity and our mission. The Saxon word 'Lent' means spring, inviting us to get to the springs of our own life, our resources for living and motivation. These forty days are a time of renewal for us through almsgiving, prayer and fasting.

Lent begins with a rainbow, a bond, a covenant of solidarity with all living things. The rainbow is a promise that life is here to stay. The new beginning for Noah came after forty days and nights. As God hung his warrior bow in the sky, a new era of peace came. In the Gospel, after forty days, Jesus ushers in a new Kingdom of peace and justice and love; he is the living Covenant. The eight on the ark became the beginning of a new people. They represent Easter, our Baptism as Christians, to be a rainbow, a living covenant with Christ to everyone we meet. Will we be known as a Christian today? But a question still lingers for us. Where are the others who used to be in the ark with us? Are they trying to swim the waters by themselves?

## Second Homily

This Lent begins with a rainbow, a bond, a covenant between God and all the members of the human family. The rainbow is a promise that life is here to stay — God doesn't want to obliterate and start over again. God the warrior has promised to hang up his bow of war in the sky. And God expects us to help him keep it up there. God's covenant is a two-way promise. When we accept God's promise to us in Christ, we reciprocate by agreeing to share God's vision for life on earth as well as in heaven. To continue to help in the long run takes conversion, the rending of our hearts, and it flows out of our baptismal commitment.

During these forty days of Lent, we try to go back to basics, to breathe new life into our Christian identity: it's like a fresh start. A fresh start is what the story of Noah is all about. The eight people in the ark, the Second Letter of Peter says, stands for the eighth day, the Resurrection Day, the first day of the new creation, and the sacrament of Baptism. Baptism makes us responsible for

the new creation, for you, me, our world.

If the great flood happened once, and floods continue today, they are not 'acts of God' but acts of greed and uncaring attitudes that wreak such devastation on the lives of the poor. It's not God who devastates our earth; humans do the logging, the deforestation and global warming. We have our part to play in defusing the frustration of our poorer brothers and sisters which is the trigger of violence.

Young families also feel helpless in the face of the global financial downturn, the threat of losing one's job and how those impact on the family, life and education. Angry at those in power who can terminate jobs or expect people to resettle somewhere else and receive huge bonuses for such decisions.

It's difficult to raise a family today, to stay true to our values, to sustain a marriage vow. Like Noah we have been given an ark, the Church, the community of faith into which we were baptised and which is supportive of us in our difficulties. Our rainbow sign is the Eucharist, the abiding sign that God is always faithful to us in any storm, to help us stay on course above the difficult waters.

But a question still lingers for us. Are we still in the ark? That's what Lent is all about. Lent is not about God's fidelity but about our own. Lent is a time to revive our Christian life and see whether we are still in the ark or trying to swim the waters all by ourselves.

We have the example of Jesus. If we think we are being sorely tested, Jesus' Baptism and the testing in the wilderness was no mere social event. It was an entry into an apocalyptic struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. God was starting over in the person of Jesus. The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness for this confrontation with Satan. Jesus the innocent one contended against the wild beasts and yet he was not alone, the angels were protecting him. In Jesus the man we witness the inner struggle which leads to his freely uttered yes to his Father and helps us in the situations where our faithfulness to our life project is involved.

The traditional practices of Lent: prayer, fasting and alms-giving invite us to look at our own lifestyle and measure it against the poorer members of our global family, and those in bushfire areas. **Some suggestions to get right with ourselves:**

Choose a form of fasting — one major meal a day; no snacks in between; cut our beer, wine or whisky intake — in order to see ourselves clearly in relation to God.

Limit personal TV watching.

Set aside a part of a day to be alone and pray.

Make that dentist or doctor appointment you've been putting off.

Find a person to help you deal with the major problems that burden you.

**Suggestions to get right with your brothers and sisters, and with nature:**

take time to give to others

enjoy nature

look at your use of petrol, water, electricity

don't dump rubbish anywhere.

Traditionally Lent has been a time for study, for renewal of faith. The whole Church, with those preparing for Baptism, rethought their faith in a life-changing way. Truth, especially spiritual truth, can be lost if we don't seek it, if we're locked into our comfort and social rounds — our friends dictate the level of our faith and our giving. Through prayer and fasting God wants to take prominence in our lives and awaken us to our brothers and sisters.

# Second Sunday of Lent

**Gen. 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18**

**Rom. 8:31b-34**

**Mk. 9:2-10**

The readings of this Sunday tell us of three transformations, born out of terrible suffering and anxiety, the worry and uncertainty of what is to come. Abraham had put his faith in God's promise of a son to Sarah and himself, in spite of old age and Sarah's barrenness. God was true to his promise; Sarah gave birth to Isaac.

"But what's God up to?" Abraham must have thought: What kind of a test is this? He now asks me to sacrifice my only son on whom I set all my hopes. No! He commands me to offer my son as a burnt offering, the son who was to be the promise of a great nation. With a terrified heart, anxiously seeking to understand, I obeyed this awesome God. I got two of the young men to cut the wood, load it on the donkey. Isaac and I walked beside them to Mount Moriah. At the foot of the mountain, I told them to stay right there with the donkey while Isaac and I would go on to worship.

Abraham laid the wood on to Isaac; he carried the fire and the knife. Isaac's question tore at Abraham's heart, "Father, the fire and the wood are here but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" was the trusting enquiry of a child to his father. Abraham's fatherhood was severely tested. If only he could plunge the knife into his own heart, how much he yearned to save his son, protect him, run away with him, but he could not. Isaac carrying the wood is seen as a reflection of Christ carrying the cross, with the Father's anguished concern accompanying his Son.

As Abraham trussed up his son and laid him on the wood with his knife poised to kill, his fatherhood was torn from its natural roots. When the angel stayed his hand and the ram was found, Abraham's fatherhood underwent a 360-degree turn, and was now totally transformed and grounded in God. Now God could make him the father of many nations. With this first transformation came the realisation of God as Yahweh the one true God, who commanded the end to human sacrifice to false gods.

In the second reading, in contrast to God sparing Abraham's son, we read that God did not spare his own Son but handed him over for the sake of us all. Before this reading we are told that Jesus is the firstborn of many brothers and sisters whom he has redeemed through his death and resurrection. It's the dilemma of any father whose son, seeking to please him, faces unseen dangers which he cannot prevent.

I'm sure it's the joy and fear of parents as they watch their children compete in the Winter Olympics doing incredible feats of aerial acrobatics, one lapse of concentration and they can only sit and watch with their heart in their mouths. That was Jesus, beloved Son of the Father, sent to bring about the kind of world his Father wanted even though it would result in his death. It's not a case of the Father not sparing his own Son, not a heartless God but one hoping against hope and

anguishing with his Son as he did the incredible feat of bringing about the salvation of us all.

The Gospel today comes six days after Peter's profession of faith in Jesus as the long-awaited messiah. What Peter and the other disciples hoped for was a powerful king who would drive out the Romans and re-establish the Jewish kingdom. What he did not expect and totally rejected was Jesus telling him that he would undergo great suffering and rejection, that his was a different sort of messiah, God's suffering servant.

Jesus leads Peter, James and John to the mountain top, Mount Tabor today where the second transformation takes place before their eyes. Transfiguration isn't simply Jesus revealing his divinity. It didn't just happen as he prayed to his Father. The transformation is the result of a union of wills — Jesus' human will and God's will being perfectly one. We only understand what that union of wills cost Jesus by seeing his struggle in Gethsemane, where Jesus' decision was reached through sweat and blood. Jesus allowed his close friends to witness his transfiguration before Gethsemane, to enable them to cope with his passion, a hidden transformation that would only be seen at Easter when the risen Christ explodes into their lives.

The Gospel is mid-point and a low point in Mark's Gospel, a time of terrible discouragement for Jesus and a time of decision. With Jesus are Elijah and Moses who likewise experienced great discouragement but, on the mountain, received a glimpse of God to impel them back into the struggle. When neither his disciples nor his people understood him or his mission, Jesus heard his Father's voice, "My Beloved," and it sustained him. The voice of God is God's affirmation of him heard at those moments, the Baptism, the transfiguration and the cross where Jesus obediently enters into the depths of our human condition and is revealed as messiah and suffering servant. Here is God's Son fully one with us in the struggles we go through but facing him was a fireball of evil out to destroy him. That to me is the situation facing Jesus. The whole of hell is pitted against him, to exterminate him. Jesus is totally abandoned to his Father who sustains him with his power.

There may be people here who are struggling with God's will and need to know that they are beloved of God. That is the thing that transforms us and sustains us. We only need to see Jesus the God-Man who embraces our human condition fully and strengthens us in our critical times.

## Second Homily

Last Sunday we had the testing, the temptation of Jesus in the desert. Why in this second Sunday of Lent do we have the Transfiguration? To encourage us in our own testing, in our struggle with our personal and social breakdowns, and to help us make the breakthrough into transformation, which is the goal of Lent.

This Sunday is often called the Sunday of the three mountains, Mt Moriah, Mt Calvary and Mt Tabor. In the Bible the mountain is the place of encounter with God, where we are challenged and where we experience a breakthrough, if only small. It was on the mountain, we read in the Gospel,



that we meet Elijah the prophet who challenged his people, “If God be God follow him, but if Baal be your god then follow him and go to hell.” We meet Moses also who, with the Ten Commandments, gave us the way to follow God.

What was the breakthrough on Mt Moriah? In his old age, Abraham was called by God to leave the people of the Chaldeans and go to a place God intended. Abraham followed. Several years ago, some excavations in the area of the Chaldeans revealed the awful discovery that the Chaldeans were involved in child sacrifice. In light of this, Abraham’s climbing Mt Moriah to sacrifice his son loses some of its puzzlement. But, as someone exclaimed in our RCIA group, “What kind of a God is that?”

God called Abraham up the mountain to teach him in a very dramatic way that human sacrifice would never be part of fidelity to the God of life. At the top of Mt Moriah, Abraham finally and completely left all the old gods of the Chaldeans behind (**cf. Joseph Krempa, *Captured Fire*, p. 35**).

You can see why the early Christian writers saw in Isaac carrying the wood, an image of Christ carrying the cross of his sacrifice — not the ram, but the Lamb who took away the sins of the world. Therefore, Paul could say on Mt of Calvary: If he died for us while we were caught up in sin, in addiction, in self-destructive behaviour, how much more does he want to give us now that we are made right with God? Paul says to us: Hang in there, stay the course in your journey towards transformation.

In that second reading, although God spared Abraham’s son, he did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all. The one in our RCIA group who exclaimed, “What kind of a God is that?” even more forcibly said, “It shows how much God loves us.” Does that seem a contradiction? When you look at it closely, if Jesus is God’s son, and is God, then it means that God did not spare God. The pagan view of God was of a terrifying, punishing God who required sacrifice, human or animal, so that he could be placated. But here in Jesus, is God, absorbing like a sponge all the hatred, violence and sin we could throw at him, not striking back, but hanging on the cross, revealing the true nature of God as love. God shares our weakness but gives us the power to meet and cope with all that life throws at us.

On Mt Moriah the breakthrough was that God did not want human sacrifice; on Mt Calvary, Christ in God revealed once and for all the sacrifice that makes us right with God. But what is the breakthrough on Mt Tabor? For the disciples it gave them a glimpse of the true nature of this suffering messiah whom they reluctantly followed to Jerusalem. Peter is ecstatic and wants to make permanent the high he is experiencing; but says the text, he didn’t know what he was talking about. Would that glimpse sustain the disciples during the hard times? It didn’t seem to. It was only when Christ’s divinity shone out in the mystery of the Resurrection that it did.

## Third Homily

What's the significance of the remarkable change we see in Jesus in the Gospel? What's it got to do with Lent? If the readings during Lent are intended for people who are becoming Christians; and for us, a return to a deeper Christian life, then the Gospel is an invitation to experience the explosive effects of a simple formula: **w + W = S**, my **w**ill aligned to God's **W**ill produces **S**anctity, radiant holiness.

We might say: We're not saints! We identify more with the words heard on Ash Wednesday, that "We are dust." But today's Gospel insists that the dust of our frail humanity is shot through with the light of God. Transfiguration isn't just Jesus being lit up, revealing his divinity. It didn't just happen! It is the effect of a union of wills — Jesus' human will and God's will being perfectly one. We only understand what that union of wills cost Jesus by seeing his struggle in Gethsemane, where Jesus' decision was reached through sweat and blood. Jesus allowed his close friends to witness his transfiguration before Gethsemane to be able to cope with his passion.

Jesus had come to a new stage in his mission. He knew that being true to his Father's will to bring about a world of justice and peace would lead to the Cross. His enemies were already plotting that! In this most painful realization, he aligned his will with the will of his Father. When neither his disciples nor his people understood him and his mission, Jesus on the mountain heard his Father's word, "My beloved" and it sustained him.

I got a glimpse of this meaning of the Transfiguration — the radiance that comes from a union of wills, by reading accounts of Fr Maximilian Kolbe, the Franciscan priest who took the place of a condemned prisoner and died in a starvation bunker in Auschwitz. Kolbe and thousands of others were in hell, graphically portrayed in the film, *Schindler's List*, adapted from the book, **Schindler's Ark** by Thomas Kenneally where Schindler used his business of making ammunition to employ many Jews and helped them escape. Many prisoners sought to get out of the hell they were in by throwing themselves on to the electric fences and died.

Kolbe talked with many, such as Alexander D'Ouba and calmed them. He said Kolbe had such heroic trust in God that he saw God's finger in every event. He himself was totally abandoned to God. He said, "don't fear death, only sin." A young priest sent to Auschwitz expressed something similar: "In this hell of the greatest suffering and cruelty, to me he was like the flash of a brilliant light of God and beauty." And when finally, he volunteered to take the place of Francis Gajowniczek in the starvation bunker, far from defeating him, this would become a tabernacle in this cruellest part of Auschwitz, as if hidden in the heart of this humble Franciscan, God snuck into hell.

The change in Jesus, and after him, Maximilian Kolbe, was the result of living out what God wanted even in the face of hell. On each side of that mountain that peak experience called the transfiguration is life, the acquiring and living out of that union of wills.

Do you think Jesus relished death? Jesus knew the probable outcome of his life and mission and the forces arraigned against him. He tried to warn and prepare his disciples; ambition and fear prevented them from understanding what he was saying. Yet something happened on that mountain that changed their relationship to Jesus forever.

In April 1968, as Martin Luther King Jnr. held a non-violent protest march with striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, it turned violent with gun shots all around him. He was visibly shaken, terribly afraid; you could see it on the film. He spent the night wrestling in prayer. His friends noticed the change in him next day as he spoke to the strikers with the words: "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 ..." The next day at 6.01pm, standing on the balcony of his room at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis he was killed by a sniper's bullet.

Is that what makes the difference? "I just want to do God's will." Am I willing to do God's will, to align my will to God's without knowing what will happen to me if I do go God's way? On our part, we're so used to hearing the prediction of Jesus' death that it touches us very little. And after all he's going to rise again in three days. I don't think, humanly Jesus knew he would rise again. That was a post-Easter realisation added to the text.

But Jesus did know that he had to be faithful to the mission the Father had entrusted to him. He was "Beloved Son" who trusted his Father. And the Father would have the last word. One example, during a fire in a high-rise building, a boy on the top storey yelled out to his father for help, as the smoke and fire billowed from roof and windows. The father rushed up the stairs which are crashing behind him. He reached his son, threw open the window and held him outside, the flame and smoke almost engulfing him. The father told his son, "Let go." The son trusted his father and let go seemingly into fire and death. He fell from a dizzy height into the safety net below held by the firemen, which the boy had not known about. Jesus trusted his Father even as he was going toward death.

We are taken to the mountain top today. When neither his disciples nor his people understood him or his mission, Jesus heard his Father's voice, "My beloved," and it sustained him. The voice of God is heard at the moments of his Baptism, Transfiguration and the cross where Jesus obediently enters into the depths of our human condition, fully one with us in the struggles we go through. The whole of hell is pitted against him, to exterminate him. Yet Jesus is totally abandoned to his Father who sustains him with his power; so that he can strengthen us in our critical times if we hold on to our loving Father as his beloved son or daughter.

# Third Sunday of Lent

Ex. 20:1-17 or Ex. 20:1-3, 7-8, 12-17

1 Cor. 1:22-25

Jn. 2:13-25

If you've been to Lourdes, Rome, or any place of pilgrimage, the procession of peddlers who inevitably follow pilgrims, haggling and pushing cheap religious articles on to them, can demean the sacred character of the place.

As a devout Jew, Jesus often came on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He knew the prophetic teaching, that God's house was to be a place of prayer for all nations. Instead, it had become a den of thieves, sanctioned by the temple authorities. Zeal for his Father's house consumed Jesus (**Ps. 69:9**). The cleansing was aimed not at the temple and its worship, but at extortionate practices, the official exchange of secular money into temple coinage, the selling of animals and birds, that went on in the Court of the Gentiles (the outer court) that prevented Gentiles worshipping; as well as taking advantage of poorer pilgrims. Perhaps Jesus recalled stories from Mary and Joseph that accounts for his words to the pigeon sellers.

The cleansing out of the temple was a prophetic action to highlight the gulf between belief and behaviour. The holiness of the temple demanded the renewal of the people of God. There was an urgency in Jesus' action. He thought that the end was near, that he had to bring about God's Kingdom in a decisive and definitive way. Jesus wanted to turn his people back to God, renewing them within and in their dealings with others.

The cleansing was a prophetic act perceived by people and the authorities as a political one, which would ultimately lead to his arrest and crucifixion. For Jesus, it was an action in line with the great prophets. He put no trust in people's expectation of him. His whole being was committed to his mission from his Father: to bring a consecrated people back to God.

The cleansing-out was a kind of exorcism. The anger, the aggression of Jesus, was not negative or destructive. The Latin word *aggredere* means to move forward. Jesus' aggression moved against whatever was stopping people from being free: sin, disease, illness, possession, or possessiveness in any form, and removing it. His work of chucking out, of exorcism, was a work of passionate liberation, a manifesto of human freedom. Jesus struck out against anything that made human beings helpless, hostile and impotent.

Lent comes from a Saxon word meaning *spring*. What Jesus did was a form of spring cleaning. Stuff that we store up in our cupboards, thinking we'll use it some day; the hurts and hates we store inside that we haven't or won't let go of.

"Just as the cupboard and the Temple became cluttered, our lives get cluttered in ways we never planned. How many of us live overextended lives? Do we still have time for the children and for prayer? There are merchants and money-changers that need to be driven out of the Temple of our lives. Are there personal failings that have grown into sins; small omissions that became major

areas of neglect; personal preoccupations that ripened into indifference to others; temptations that became sinful behaviours? Lent calls us to do some spring cleaning” (**S. Joseph Krempa, *Captured Fire*, p. 39**).

Jesus’ ultimate act of spring cleaning, of exorcism, was the cross. Nailed to a cross, Jesus faced everything that was demonic about human life: pain, loss, despair, hopelessness, rebellion, hostility, suffering. The sacrifice of animals was no longer effective. Jesus in his death absorbed the violence and hatred of the world without striking back. By becoming death’s slave on the cross, Jesus rose as a liberator of a new humanity. St Augustine has a wonderful phrase, “What hung upon the cross if not our humanity which he had taken from us? ... Christ nailed our weakness on to the cross ... where our old self was crucified with him ...” (**E. J. Dwyer, *Divine Office II*, Sydney, 1974, p. 128**).

Jesus exorcised death by allowing himself to become its captive. Through death, Jesus has become the totally free person, totally open to God’s will and way. “Destroy this temple” — his body, meant that Jesus, the risen Lord was to become the place of encounter with God. Not the temple, but Jesus himself, the disciples remembered, meant that only in experiencing the effects of a new living relationship through Jesus to the Father, after Easter, did they fully understand.

For the next three Sundays of Lent, at Mass, our catechumens will prepare for Baptism; our children for reconciliation and First Communion. They and we are asked to scrutinise our behaviour. The first reading gives us a mirror text to check ourselves and our behaviour against: The Ten Commandments; like looking at ourselves in a mirror, seeing things we don’t like and would like to improve or change. Then naming those tendencies in us for which we need forgiveness, healing and freedom, to be brought to the Lord in confession.

We are not simply to look on and do nothing; we are challenged by our catechumens and children and by the Church, to be renewed ourselves and to go forward with them to Easter.

## Second Homily

Lent has spiritual warfare as one of its prime purposes — to die with Christ, that is, to gain control of those areas of our lives in which the enemy has gained a foothold, and to fight to put the purpose, plan and values of Jesus first in our lives. Lent is a spiritual program, fostering the new life of Christ in us, going for greatness, loving and serving God and others. Lent is our decision to bring about the reign of God.

We’ve lost this a lot. Two young friends shared with me their struggle to come off heroin, the white plague that’s right through our world. They knew that heroin addiction was a dead-end, going nowhere, yet their feelings brought them down and an easy release was drug-taking.

This sense of futility, of a void in lives leading to avoidance of life, is very real today. It is values, especially Christ’s values, that give us a lever on our world, that establishes reference points which give direction, enabling us to hold on when the going’s rough. There’s a need to get back to Jesus.

Just being Catholic isn't enough if it doesn't have much effect on our lives.

How many of us are reading the Bulletin when this Homily is being given, come in twenty minutes late for Mass and never hear the Gospel? Yet the core message of the Gospel contains a truth that none of us has yet fully made true. Real listening means nothing less than the constant willingness to confess that we haven't yet realised what we profess to believe. Who wants to hear that those who are poor, who mourn, who are hungry, thirsty and persecuted are called happy, when we are well-off, self-content, well-fed, praised and admired by all our friends? Who wants to hear love your enemies when your boss is a S.O.B. or your son is a good-for-nothing tramp? If we are willing to listen and let the message of the Gospel really come through, we might come to an insight that we are not eager to take. The Gospel is radical, goes to the root of our lives, and can bring freedom. But we are afraid to face the truth in all its directness and simplicity; our only defence often is irritation and anger.

Imagine if Jesus was here today, whip in hand, his gaze burning deep into our souls, we would be running for cover! The prophetic action of Jesus in the Gospel is not simply the cleansing of the temple. It is the beginning of a new world order. The other Gospel writers have this action of Jesus at the end of their Gospel heralding the end of this existing world and the birth of a new one. John has it at the beginning of his Gospel.

The temple was the religious and financial hub of Jerusalem, the most sacred place on earth for the Jew. But it was exclusive; of the four inner courts, the Gentiles were in the outside court. Only the high priest could enter the most sacred space in the temple where God dwelt and only on the Day of Atonement. All who were unclean or disabled, like the cripple at the Golden Gate, had to stay outside the temple altogether. Jesus' action was a protest against worship that had become narrow, nationalistic and exclusive. Israel had failed to fulfil her universal mission to humankind. It was God's intention that the temple should be a house of prayer for all the nations.

Jesus replaces the temple and its worship with the temple of his own Body and with spiritual worship, whereby all believers could enter into God's presence through him and call God, Father. John's Gospel shows the risen Jesus creating this new world order through the Spirit, replacing Jewish institutions with sources of new life, especially through the giving of himself in Eucharist, creating a community of love and service, washing each other's feet, and facing death as a way into his resurrected life. The divine presence lives, no longer dwells in a building made by hands; it now dwells in the humanity of Jesus. We are to be his body for all the nations; to bring about God's reign. We cannot say thy kingdom come until we also say my kingdom go.

The Ten Commandments were a map of life for a people who enjoyed a special relationship with God. They were to be seen as a gift, not a burden. Jesus brought a more exacting law, the law of love, but it's used so much it loses its punch.

Read Matthew's Beatitudes and the rest that follows, where Jesus takes them and, in his own

name, refines them, “You have heard ... but I now say to you...” He gets us to look at the intentions of our hearts. The first commandment asks us to put God first, to let our other gods go; don’t take God’s name in vain, pray and praise God as Father; let the first day of the week be special. This is the day Jesus broke the chains of death and rose triumphant from the grave.

Love and respect your parents; love your enemies, do not let resentment smoulder and lead to violence; love them, pray for them imitate the Catholics and Christians in Nigeria, Egypt, Pakistan who face the hatred of extremists and local governments and confront them non-violently. Love your marriage partner as you would yourself; do not covet your neighbour’s wife — which can apply to lustful thoughts and actions fed by X-rated movies, porn, human trafficking of women who could be your wife or sister.

Don’t steal, give to those in need, don’t pile up and hoard goods you do not need; don’t slander your neighbours or bear false witness against them. If we could take Jesus’ message to heart we could create a new world order, not one where we are compromised.

# Fourth Sunday of Lent

2 Chron. 36: 14-16, 19-23

Eph. 2:4-10

Jn. 3:14-21

One of the most emotional made-for-television movies I ever saw was the true story entitled *Go towards the light*. In the closing scene, a young mother holds her eight-year-old son in her arms. He is dying of AIDS. They had often spoken of the light as a divine welcome on the other side of this life, and she whispers to him: “Go, go towards the light.” The dying boy knew what the urging meant. The love of his mother released him from her heart-grip, and he went peacefully through death toward the welcoming light.

The Church on this Sunday wants baptismal candidates and all of us to go towards the light that is Jesus and to examine ourselves against this light — how we are living as Jesus wants us to live. Facing Jesus on the cross, we get an insight into who God is and who we are. We may have a negative view of God from our early education or upbringing, or from the hand of cards that life has dealt out to us. We may see God as one who punishes or condemns. We might live under self-condemnation.

But this Gospel tells us that God is love, light and truth. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, not to condemn the world, but so that through him it might be saved.” “Light has come into the world.” “The one who lives by the truth comes into the light.”

In developing the idea of Jesus as love, light and truth, John the evangelist employs the image of the bronze serpent and compares it with Jesus crucified. Three sets of words stand out in the comparison: “lifted up”; “to gaze upon”, and “to be saved or healed”. The image of the bronze serpent comes from the Book of Numbers, chapter 21. The Jewish people rebelled, sinned against God, constantly murmuring against God and Moses, and wanting to go back to slavery in Egypt. God sent fiery serpents whose bite brought death. But God relented, told Moses to make a bronze serpent and to lift it upon a pole. Those who gazed upon the uplifted serpent would be healed.

John takes this image and applies it to Jesus. If we who have sinned look upon, believe in the suffering Jesus on the Cross, we can be saved. Only the Son lifted up can reveal the things of God, precisely because he has descended from above, in the incarnation, into the very depths of our sinful human condition, in order to reveal the glory and power of God through suffering that lifts up the whole of humanity and creation and gives it a new dignity. Our God is a loving, healing God.

The bronze serpent and Jesus lifted up in crucifixion can tell us something about ourselves. There is an important psychological truth here. In the bronze serpent — a replica of the deadly serpents — the Jewish people had to face the consequences of their sin, to really see, face it squarely and experience the deadly effect on themselves and others and inwardly feel compelled to repent and come back to God, then they could be healed.

We’ve lost the sense of sin and have to rediscover it in its social impact. Perhaps when we see



the effect of our own selfish behaviours on others we might wake up and admit guilt. When we face the ravages our sin has caused as we see, gaze upon Jesus, savagely crucified, — “Oh my God, what have I done! Can you ever forgive me?” — come face-to-face with the reality of Jesus then there may be a sincere desire to change, believe, and be saved.

It is not God who condemns. God hungers for our love. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” God wants us to turn to Jesus and *see in faith* and believe in him. If we do not, it is not God who condemns. Our condemnation comes from within ourselves, because facing the light we continue to favour darkness and the furtive deeds that are done in the dark.

What God wants is that we live in the light, that we live by the truth. It’s possible to live a lie, to stay in the dark because we are afraid of what the light can reveal. To face the light means we have to confront our own behaviour — the light exposes our deeds.

I conducted a prayer session for young addicts in a Catholic rehabilitation centre for drug addicts in the Bronx, New York. In a time of silence, one of the young men began to be very agitated. I asked later why he was disturbed. He said, “In the silence, I am afraid to go within and face the things I’ve done or what others have done to me.”

God wants us to see ourselves and to allow God to help us become his work of art. Works of art should not be left to rot in the dark, neglected and unseen. If they have been abandoned for a long time, they will need sensitive restoration to be saved and brought to life again. Lent gives us the opportunity to think again about the task of restoration. Like all restorers, God needs light to do his work. Who knows, we might value God’s work of art that we are and see more of God’s work of art in other people **(cf. Denis McBride, *ibid.*, p.93).**

### **A prayer before turning off the light — a prayer before sleep**

Dear Lord when I am lonely and perhaps I feel despair

Let not my ailing heart forget that you hear every prayer.

Remind me that, no matter what I do, or fail to do,

There is still hope for me as long as I have faith in you.

Help me to regret my wrongs, put my fears upon a shelf, and

In the future never to feel sorry for myself:

Give me the restful sleep I need before another dawn, and

Bless me in the morning with the courage to go on.

# Fifth Sunday of Lent

**Jer. 31:31-34**

**Heb. 5:7-9**

**Jn. 12:20-33**

The second reading and the Gospel thrust us into the Garden of Gethsemane. The new covenant of which Jeremiah speaks, a covenant open to the whole world, symbolised by the coming of the Greeks to see and believe in Jesus, is won at great personal cost to Jesus himself. The authorities hear that the Greeks want to see Jesus and in despairing tones declare, "The whole world has gone after him." Their worst fears are being realised. For them it's a matter of life or death: Jesus has to be got rid of; and for Jesus his worst fears come to the surface as he begins to face his death and the absolute rejection of the Good News that he was sent to bring.

Jesus talks about his hour, the special moment of time, a critical time, his impending death. But it wasn't just his death. Jesus' friends and enemies had been warning Jesus, if you go on like this, loving people, all kinds of people, reaching out to people on the margins, putting people before laws and practices, they're going to kill you. But Jesus went on. His death was the culmination of his life, being obedient to what God his Father wanted him to do. Through these troubles Jesus would receive glory which, for Jesus, meant being obedient to his Father right to the end.

There are no powerful guns or legions to protect him. He stands alone before the authorities and against the raw, brutal power of Satan who is the force behind the human agents. No defences; simply in the authority and integrity of his own person. We're mistaken if we think that real heroes don't experience fear. Like Jesus, they know paralysing fear but still go on.

Martin Luther King Jnr. was thrust into the leadership of the civil rights movement. One night a bomb exploded on the porch of his house near the bedroom where his wife was nursing her baby. In fear he knelt at the kitchen table and prayed, not knowing what to do. He had reached rock bottom. He felt he could not go on. He was tired of the insults and injuries. In this state of exhaustion and despair, he knelt and prayed: "Lord I have taken a stand for what I believe is right. But now I'm afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership. If I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. But I'm at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I can't face it any longer."

He said at that moment he experienced the presence of God in a way he had never experienced it before. That experience enabled him to continue the struggle. He wasn't made of stone. When we meet someone who is hesitant, reluctant and fearful, we find that person much more believable. We love to see the man behind the hero.

Jesus faces death and allows us a glimpse of the agony he is undergoing, "My soul is troubled, Father save me from this hour, but it was for this very reason that I have come to this hour", the hour of his redemptive death. The Letter to the Hebrews captures that moment, "aloud and in silent tears, he entreated and prayed to his Father to save him from death."

In the deaths that we ourselves go through, what comfort we gain from Jesus who, Son of God though he was, submitted so humbly that his prayer was heard. But his prayer wasn't heard this side of death. Only in the resurrection, the full maturing in Jesus of a new humanity, fully free from sin and death, does all the suffering find meaning.

In some respects, the agony in the garden is the most comforting part of the Gospel because it shows Jesus at his most human. From where did Jesus get the strength to face death? From prayer and therefore from God. Someone defined courage as "fear that has said its prayers". Solzhenitsyn said, "A person without fear is no hero; the person who overcomes fear is."

The ancients tell the story of an old woman who ran through the streets shouting "Power, greed and corruption ... Power, greed and corruption." One day a child stopped her saying, "Old woman, no one is listening to you. Why do you keep on shouting?" And the old woman said, "Oh, my child, I don't shout in order to change them. I shout so that they can't change me."

Jesus accepts death as well as the consequences of that death, which is the harvest that only comes from the grain falling into the earth and dying. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground it remains a single grain, but if it dies it brings forth a harvest." And the Father validates Jesus' courage; it is obedience through suffering that is the cause of our salvation, overthrowing Satan's rule as prince of this world. But Jesus wants us to follow him in his service to God and for the world. And when we are unable by our resources to keep going, to keep the covenant, Jesus promises to put his Spirit within us, to enable us to truly live, follow him and serve.

## Second Homily

The Greek Gentiles came because they wanted to see Jesus. They had heard about him; his name and deeds were known to them, but they were not tourists. They wanted an ongoing living relationship with Jesus, to really know him, to engage in a life-giving exchange that would change their lives. They may have known that he cleansed the Court of the Gentiles of buyers and sellers and said, "My Father's house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations." When you're in a new country you want to find someone who speaks your own language. The Greeks found Philip, a Greek name; he probably spoke Greek and like Andrew was very approachable. Together, Philip and Andrew, introduced the Gentiles to Jesus.

Why do the Gentiles appear at this point in the Gospel? And why does Jesus then talk about his death? Had they asked for a sign? To his critics, Jesus used Jonah as the only sign they would be given. As you know Jonah ran away from doing God's will and after three days in the belly of the whale was spat out back from where he started.

The Aussie-Rules footballer Jim Stynes ran away after his mistake robbed Melbourne footy team of its hopes of reaching the Grand Final. He was going back to Dublin, Ireland, from where he had been recruited, but met someone in the metro Paris, who asked "Aren't you the fellow who ran

across the mark and gave Hawthorn a fifteen-metre advantage for goal?" He realised he couldn't hide and had to face the music. "When you are younger and chasing your dreams, you want to shine". But he failed. A crisis does not create character but reveals it. Jimmy became not just a champion footballer, but also a champion citizen, dying of cancer at the age of 45.

Jesus' character is revealed, not by the sign of Jonah, but by the sign of the grain of wheat going into obscurity, into the earth, the grave, and dying. The death of Jesus would result in a great harvest — the bringing of everyone to God — the Gentiles and the Jews are the first signs of the harvest. Jesus talks about his hour, the special moment of time, a critical time, his impending death. But it wasn't just his death. Jesus' friends and enemies had been warning Jesus, if you go on like this, loving people, all kinds of people, reaching out to people on the margins, putting people before laws and practices, they're going to kill you. But Jesus went on. His death was the culmination of his life, being obedient to what God his Father wanted him to do. Through these troubles Jesus would receive glory which, for Jesus, meant being obedient to his Father right to the end.

In John's Passion, there is no agony in the garden there, but you find it here, "Now is my soul troubled ... Father save me from this hour." The Christian hero is not one who stoically goes into death unfeeling. But one who does feel and yet faithfully continues, like Jim Stynes with his cancer. Knowing that Jesus has gone through suffering and gives life to us, gives us the strength to face the difficulties. You see it graphically in the Letter to the Hebrews, "With a loud cry and tears, Jesus prayed to the one who had power to save him out of death, and he submitted so humbly that his prayer was heard." But Jesus died! The fruit of that death of the Son who learned to obey through suffering was he became the source of eternal salvation for all of us.

Jesus knew that he was sent as Saviour of the world; as man he knows what we go through, as God, he can help us. The young braves asked the old Indian chief why he was always talking about Jesus. He made a circle of leaves and twigs, put a caterpillar in the middle of it and lit the twigs. As the flames crept closer to the caterpillar, the old chief put his finger in the middle of the fire and the caterpillar crawled to safety. "That's what Jesus did for me, and for everyone who calls out to him." Jesus had to contend with the prince of this world and overthrow him; and draw all people to himself through his death which was his key moment of glory.

To describe his death which would honour God and save everyone, Jesus used two examples: first, the grain of wheat. He knew he had to die and be buried for new life to be released for all; and second, to lose one's life. If I have two ice blocks and try to save them, wrap them up in a serviette and put them in my pocket I will lose them. But if I put them in a glass of water, they are used and not lost. When we give our lives to help others, we are like the ice cube in the glass. We can help others in many ways: speak to the lonely, shy, or hurting; visit the elderly, the sick, people on their own. It can be hard to do this, but something happens to us, we find the Spirit of Jesus helping us. If we wish to follow Jesus, we want to give ourselves, to be useful, to share in bringing about the

harvest.

# **HOLY WEEK**

**Year B**

# Passion Sunday, Palm Sunday

[Isa. 50:4-7](#)

[Phil. 2:6-11](#)

[Mk 14:1-15:47](#) or [Mk. 15:1-39](#)

When I visited Berlin in 1975, before the wall had come down (1989), I saw it towering above East Berlin, proudly built, the show-piece of an atheistic regime. It was the tall, slim TV tower complete with a revolving restaurant at the top. Yet each morning as the sun shone on it, it reflected back a magnificent cross in all directions. The East German Government tried every way of covering the cross, but still the image of the cross persisted.

As we begin Holy Week, this Sunday, awkward as it may strike us, we cannot paper over the Passion. Like the sun which continues to shine whether clouds cover it or whether it is night, it, otherwise it wouldn't be the sun; so the Cross of Jesus reveals God's unconditional love for us. We may feel that God doesn't love me or that I am in darkness. But that's not true. There is no place, no moment, no relationship, no situation in which God does not love me. That's what Jesus tells us, especially this Holy Week.

It's the humanness of Jesus that shines out for me in the Passion of Mark. Jesus is right there with us. He knows what it is to suffer. Take the scene in the Garden, "Terror seized him and he began to be really afraid almost to death." He cries "Abba, Father," the first time we hear it in Mark's Gospel. He truly does not want to suffer. Nowhere else in the Gospels is the frail humanity of Jesus so strikingly portrayed. He prays to be spared, to have the temptation removed. Jesus was never free from the insidious nature of evil. Now he is face to face with it. He is being tempted to eliminate suffering from his messianic way. His disciples fail him. In his agony he asks his three closest disciples, "Are you asleep? You should be awake, praying, not to be put to the test." They could find no answer as to why they had failed him. We, like them, are often asleep, unable, and unfree. Alone, through anguished prayer, Jesus begins to understand what is asked of him.

The one who instigates the arrest is one of Jesus' intimates, his closest friends, one of the twelve. And he indicates Jesus to the mob with a warm kiss and greeting. Kiss is mentioned twice in the

text. Mark is writing his Gospel for his Christian community in Rome (**cf. Brian Incigneri, *Letter to the Romans***). Many members of the house Churches, who exchanged the kiss of peace in their worship, under the threat of Nero's persecution, death, torture, were betraying members of the house Church communities. The horror of such arrests from one's own loving worshippers who may have claimed, "Not I, surely!"

They take hold of Jesus, they have some kind of warrant, and Jesus challenges their authority. He knew he would be betrayed. Not a word is spoken between Jesus and Judas — the other Gospel writers try to soften that. The silence of Jesus also before Caiphas, Herod and Pilate, may be modelling of behaviour by Jesus not to speak, not to implicate others. Simply stand. Be true to who you are.

Jesus does not meet his betrayer with resignation, but as a resolute victor over temptation who rouses his followers to accompany him to meet his fate. He is inviting us to go with him to know the power of the Cross which is never separate from Resurrection. The death of Jesus is the triumph of failure. In obedience to his Father, Jesus will continue to offer God's unconditional love, as he himself trusts that love. Jesus implicitly calls on Pilate to take a stand, to range himself on the side of justice and right. Pilate tried to evade the responsibility of dealing with Jesus. No-one can deal with Jesus for us; we must deal with him ourselves. There is no escape from such a personal decision in regard to Jesus; we ourselves must decide what we will do with him, accept him or reject him. Instead Pilate, anxious to placate the crowd, lets them decide and they choose a robber, Barabbas, for the true Son of Abba, a saviour. In spite of claiming Jesus has done no harm, he orders him to be scourged and led away to be crucified.

Into Pilate's life came Jesus, and suddenly he saw all that he had missed but he had not the courage to defy the world or the crowd, in spite of his past, and to take a stand with Jesus and with a future that was glorious.

There are three ways of looking at the Passion story:

1. From the vantage point of Jesus. What happens to Jesus and what he does in response to all that happens to him.
2. From the vantage point of his enemies who want to do away with him.



3. From the vantage point of his disciples.

But what stands out is Jesus' response. He is not a passive victim, but offers his life positively for us. He changed a betrayal meant for death, into one of self-offering. In his crucifixion, the driving in of the nails, the contortion, the mockery, he takes us beyond suffering into relationship to his Father — a relationship for all, so that the Centurion under the Cross, who knew bravery in battle, was compelled to say in wonder when he had seen how Jesus died, "Indeed this man was a son of God!"

## Second Homily

Jesus has hit the big-time! He's in the limelight! He's finally made it! When earlier, Jesus told his disciples he was going to Jerusalem, fully knowing that the authorities wanted to kill him, the disciples sluggishly, fearfully dragged behind. But now that Jesus has shown himself, riding on a mule like Solomon going to Gihon to be anointed king, the disciples walk head-high, close to Christ. This moment is what they dreamed of.

What about us? When we gather this Passion Palm Sunday, joining the crowds and waving palm branches, what are we doing? It's not a case of historical flashbacks, trying to go back in time to retrace Jesus' steps, to reconstruct the scene, to see why he died, what he lived for. Our procession is more than mere imitation. No, we are entering into a present mystery.

Beneath it all, at stake is a Saviour. We all want someone, some leader who can tie all the loose ends of our lives together, as long as it doesn't cost us too much. Jesus may have wanted this from a human angle as he saw the end fast approaching. He came to fulfil the mysterious designs of God, to go right through to the end as the Father asked. His prayer: "Father let this cup pass from me" was answered by the Father's, "No, my Son, You must drink this cup." This involved the emptying of self in Jesus, that he would be poured out. Yet in this total emptying, this letting go of everything to God, God his Father brought everything together in a wonderful, totally unexpected way. Jesus let go his reputation, his disciples, his friends, even the message he had to bring — the revelation of God as love — and he let go his own self in death. He was brought to a new point of freedom, there was nothing that he clung to, God could work through him, the sinless One, to bring salvation to all (*Bausch p. 458*).

By this procession we profess our faith. We are going up with Jesus to Calvary. This is Christ's journey and our journey. We proclaim that by going to his death, Jesus will take us to new life, not necessarily comfort, but one of stability in Christ, one of deep peace. I witnessed that yesterday when an old man who had been divorced, longing to return to the Church, came to confession after 35 years. Reconciled, he held my arm for quite a while. The Cross is central, not to glorify

suffering but to realise that “God’s awesome work was done in the frailty of the Son”.

Hugh Mackay in his book, *Reinventing Australia*, says we live in an Age of Anxiety. Everything is being rapidly re-defined, work, family, relationships and the vulnerable are going to the wall. The Church is being marginalised. It’s happening now in the present pandemic. Bishop Derio Oliveri from the small Italian diocese of Pinerolo near Turin contracted Covid but recovered. He wrote a beautiful pastoral letter about what the Church might be like after the pandemic. “Not communities that are closed in on themselves and their own organisation, but communities that are open, humble, full of hope; communities infectious with passion and trust. Not a Church that goes to Church, but a Church that goes to everyone. Full of enthusiasm, passion, hope, love. Believers like this will regain their desire to go to Church, to go to Mass, to be fed” (quoted in *Liturgy News*, June 2020 p. 13). We are challenged to be not a Church aligned with money, State and power, but a Church of service, like Jesus, who emptied himself, coming in service. Yet that loving service, naming injustice, hypocrisy and double-standards took him to the Cross.

Oscar Romero is a good example of one who followed Christ in the unique circumstances of his time. He stood up to protect individual human dignity. Like the suffering servant, “each morning he was wakened to hear, to listen like a disciple” to the poor, brutalised campesinos who cried to him for help. He went with relatives to the garbage dumps where the death squads had thrown priests, poor people, catechists who dared to criticise the government. With a disciple’s tongue he spoke out powerfully on behalf of the weary. He followed Jesus and was assassinated while saying Mass in the hospital chapel run by the sisters on 24 March 1980.

When in the Garden, Jesus asked his three closest disciples, “Are you asleep? You should be awake, praying not to be put to the test.” They could find no answer as to why they had failed him. We, like them, are often asleep, unable, and unfree.

It was this handicapped quality in us that the Son embraced in the incarnation. In becoming human, he took on our human weakness even though he was innocent of sin. We are saved by an incarnate God. Jesus did in our humanity what we were unable to do. He brought us back into an obedient, full, loving relationship to the Father. But look what it cost him in the garden. This isn’t make-believe. “Terror seized him, fear and distress came over him.” Jesus came to atone for our sin (**Bausch**). We are to be a community where the frail, the anxious, the poor, those whose backs are to the wall can find a place, a welcome and help to restore dignity. Lord, give us a disciple’s ear, open to you, O God in the cries of our sisters.

## Third Homily

Jesus has hit the big time. His disciples are walking proudly beside him mounted on his donkey, as Solomon and others after him preparing for kingship. This is the moment they have been waiting for — Christ proclaimed as King messiah. But before this Mass ends Jesus will have gone

from the back of a donkey to the face of a cross and the disciples running for their lives, swearing they never knew him.

So today, we enter into Jerusalem, the gateway into Holy Week. We meet what the Church intends to be the most transforming experience of the whole year, the suffering death of the innocent one, Jesus, whose cause as Son of God, Saviour, is made real for us by his rising from the dead by his Father's hand. The authority of the suffering one accelerates our transformation. If only we could grasp those words of St Paul which stayed with him and gave him courage in the face of terrible hardship, "He loved me and sacrificed himself for my sake" (**Gal. 2:20**). The authority of Jesus comes from the fact that although innocent he suffered for us and with us.

An example from an early Australian novel, ***For the Term of His Natural Life***, is the story about an Englishman, Rufus Dawes, wrongfully arrested for murder and transported as a convict to Australia where he experienced excruciating suffering and brutality. The only person able to reach out to Dawes, and then only briefly, was the Anglican chaplain, the Reverend Mr North. Mr North helped Dawes not so much because he was a minister of religion, but because he suffered, suffered the anguish and guilt of an alcoholic, overcome by a profound sense of unworthiness. In this man the hardened convict perceived a companion in suffering, and the author makes this observation about the brief meeting of the two men, "He who would touch the hearts of men must have had his own heart seared" (**Marcus Clark, Book III, Chapter XVI, Penguin Paperback, 2009, p. 334**).

Jesus' heart was seared. Jesus is God, yet the references to his humanity I find greatly comforting in the face of his horrific suffering. "A sudden fear came upon him and great distress. He threw himself on the ground and prayed that if it were possible, this hour might pass him by." Feel the emotion: his need for his disciples to keep awake with him in his agonising prayer, he did not want to be alone; the denial by his disciples, the betrayal, an informer among the very ones he had chosen, the ambush of Jesus by the Jewish authorities with clubs and swords, the arrest, trial and torture.

And yet, despite the failure of the twelve, throughout his suffering, Jesus' trust in his Father 'Abba', is maintained even to the cross. Mark does not let the twelve, especially Peter off lightly, Peter who said, "Even if all the others betray you, I will never betray you" (**Mk. 14:29**), but whose betrayal came to a head at the fire in Caiphas' courtyard. Shamefaced, he came to see what would happen to the one who had changed his life. In the wrong company, the solace of the fire, he succumbed and uttered his three-fold denial. Luke has Jesus looking at Peter as the cock crows three times, and he fled weeping bitterly. It was not doctrine, or a law Peter had given up but the relationship with the one who had loved him into life.

Did Jesus foresee all this as he rode into Jerusalem? We all have a Jerusalem ahead of us. For us it is not a city but it might be an illness, a change in our life, a problem, challenge, or perhaps

uncertainty ahead of us. Jesus shows us how to move toward Jerusalem and through suffering be transformed, mature through it and gain a new authority.

Unless we transform our anger, our weakness, whatever it is, we will transmit it, sometimes with terrible consequences for others; as in the Lufthansa air disaster on 24 March 2015, when the co-pilot, Andreas Lubitz, suffering from suicidal tendencies, locked out his co-pilot and put the plane into a controlled descent which crashed in the mountainside north-west of Nice. All 144 passengers were killed. In our own lives we can lock people out who may be able to help us. Jesus constantly reaches out to us, even from his cross; going to death to save us and raise us up in the power of his resurrection if we would believe in him.

No matter how seared our heart, Jesus as human is still full of mercy, and as God has power to help us face what we are going through and be transformed. For no matter how deep the pit, his love is deeper yet.

# **THE EASTER TRIDUUM**

**Year B**

# Holy Thursday

Ex. 12:1-8, 11-14

1 Cor. 11:23-26

Jn. 13:1-15

Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world. He loved his own and loved them to the end, both to the end of his life and totally, no holding back. Have we really reflected on those words of Jesus, "With desire have I desired, longed to celebrate this Passover with you before I suffer."

It was a strange mix that night. Jesus called his disciples together to celebrate the great national feast of Jewish liberation, Passover. There was intimacy, joviality in the sharing as the meal went on, but there was also betrayal under the surface soon to be enacted by Judas and the other disciples. Jesus knew it. Instead of accusation, he washed his disciples' feet, hoping against hope that they would love one another as he himself loved them. It was an action that shocked Peter and the rest of the disciples. Jesus was turning upside-down their values, of what it meant to be Master, what it meant to minister. He taught them love.

Alan Paton in one of his books, **Ah, But Your Land is Beautiful**, set in the Apartheid Era, tells the story of the relationship between the Reverend Isaiah Buti, the black pastor of the Holy Church of Zion, and Judge Jan Christiaan Olivier, the Afrikaner who is the Acting Chief Justice of South Africa. The pastor asks Olivier if, as a witness to the possible and positive relationship between black and white South Africans to which they are both committed, he would come to Buti's all-black Church on Holy Thursday night and participate in the washing of the feet of his parishioners.

Mr Buti tells Olivier that he will call the judge up to wash the feet of Martha Fortuin, who was a servant in Olivier's house when his children were young. Olivier agrees readily, saying, "She washed the feet of all my children. Why should I hesitate to wash her feet?" but says he will do it as a free and private person, as he cannot parade himself as a judge.

"On Holy Thursday night he wrapped a towel around himself, took a bowl of water, and knelt at the feet of Martha Fortuin. Not only did he wash both her feet; he took in his hands those feet that were worn and calloused with much serving and gently kissed them. Then Martha and all the Holy Church of Zion in that place wept.

"But a young and ambitious reporter had, by chance, seen the judge drive up and enter the Church and followed him. His 'story of the year' broke in newspapers the next morning, and Judge Jan Christiaan Olivier, like Christ, faced his passion and the wrath of the white supporters of apartheid and the ruin of his legal career" (**Verna A Holyhead, *Sowing the Seed. Welcoming the Word in Year B*, p. 53-4**).

Jesus stripped down to serve. Only his unconquerable divine love could ever find those of us who are lost or feel destroyed by what we have done. Jesus is the servant tonight. Tomorrow he will be the suffering servant. The blood of the lamb splattered on door post and beam to save a

nation will be poured out tomorrow to save the world and bring about his Father's kingdom. Can we sense his desire? As we cradle his broken body before eating of it and drink from the cup of his suffering remember with St Paul, "He loved me and sacrificed himself for me" (**Gal 2:20**).

What Jesus showed his disciples 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 (**Denis McBride ibid p. 109**).

Outside the room there was hateful opposition, but within the room there was tension, rivalry, and betrayal. That was when he washed their feet with love, hoping against hope, just as he does tonight, that we might understand and respond to his love. It has taken the disciples and us, the Church, a long time to understand the subversive nature of Jesus' act. We find it hard to let our feet be washed. But Jesus did it and he gave us a command to do it to one another. "Do this in memory of me — Eucharist." "Do this, wash each other's feet as I have done," is the same message. It's a new command to feed and serve our brothers and sisters. We may not know each other, but to wash and feed others creates a spiritual bond which says, 'I am with you'.

This is the beginning of the Easter Event, the Death-Resurrection of Jesus. Really present in the Son become Servant, in the Bread and Wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus, is the Death-Resurrection of the Lord, present in such a way that we draw close to him and through him to one another. Tonight, Jesus invites us to copy what he has done. Are we willing to pick up the tab at this meal? Let's do it!

## Second Homily

You know those games for two-year-olds where you fit a square, a circle or a diamond into the spaces on the board? Well, a two-year-old friend of mine was trying to fit a diamond into a heart. It wouldn't fit so with his small hammer he was bashing the diamond into the heart trying to make it fit. It's a bit like us trying to find love in many things, money, being smart at the job, looking beautiful, good health, but in the long run our heart is looking for more.

Sometimes, too, words are not enough; they have no effect in reaching the deep needs in us, or in the other. Five-year-old boys can be very stubborn, like young Jan who did not want to go to school. The parents talked to him; they took him to the teacher, then the headmaster, but to no avail. Little Jan slipped away to the swings in the park. Someone suggested taking him to a very old, insightful rabbi. The rabbi looked at the boy and scooped him up in his arms and hugged him. He did not miss school again. We need to be loved, to be embraced when nothing else works. The woman who suffered from internal bleeding for 12 years and nothing seemed to help, she decided to try to hold on to the hem of Jesus' robe. She was cured as power from Jesus flowed to her.

When Jesus came to the Upper Room to celebrate Passover with his disciples, he knew that

outside the room there was hateful opposition, but within the room there was tension, rivalry and betrayal. He could have berated his disciples, but instead he stripped down like a servant and began washing each one's feet. As Jesus took the feet of each disciple, he knew them although he didn't look up; he sensed the direction each one's life was taking. He took those feet, held them tenderly, and washed them with love, hoping against hope, just as he does tonight, that we might understand and respond to his love.

It has taken the disciples and us, the Church, a long time to understand. Our feet are a vulnerable part of ourselves. We find it hard to let our feet be washed, to have someone else's foot in our face. But Jesus did it and he gave us a command to do it to one another.

The Passover meal was one of national liberation. It celebrated the Jews passing from slavery in Egypt to becoming a freed nation. By the gift of himself, more than words, Jesus transformed that meal into a passing from darkness to light, from death to risen life. He symbolised the gift of himself by washing his disciples' feet, an action that shocked Peter and the rest of the disciples. Jesus was turning upside down their values, of what it meant to be a Master, what it meant to minister. He taught them 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.

Do this in memory of me — the Eucharist; Do this, wash each other's feet as I have done, is the same message. It's a new command to feed and serve our brothers and sisters. We may not know each other, but to wash and feed others creates a spiritual bond which says I am with you. I want to break down the barriers between us, between Lord and servant, because Jesus the Lord has broken down these barriers. It's in the midst of people that we celebrate, do in memory of Jesus, and re-enact Christ's total self-gift for us through Death to Resurrection.

We celebrate tonight the Passover, the passing over of Jesus to his Father. The Father entrusted everything into Jesus' hands. Can we see that the Father is saving, serving people through the Son? This is the beginning of the Easter Event, the Death-Resurrection of Jesus. Really present in the Son become Servant, in the Bread and Wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus, is the Death-Resurrection of the Lord, present in such a way that we draw close to him through one another. Tonight, Jesus invites us to copy what he has done. Are we willing to pick up the tab at this meal? 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 uttermost 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 servant, took a towel and basin, and washed his disciples and our 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.

On Wednesday night, 3 May 2017, while the television broke stories of violence, murder and hate, the Passover moon turned blood red, the moon blocking the sun's light relative to earth. We can so easily block out love, the light of Christ from our lives, and blood flows on our streets here and in Myanmar from militia whose eyes speak of hate to anyone who opposes them.

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 2011 tsunami, rescuers were searching among the wreckage to find survivors. They had almost given up the search when one went back one more time and heard a baby cry; he shouted to the others, "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 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.

Such is the Father's love when we hear the Passion today, the Father's words out loud, audible, made visible in his Word. Jesus, who gave his life for us, tells 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, 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.

## Second Homily

There is no Eucharist today, but we have the Passion and the Cross and the Universal Prayer sending Christ's redemptive love to all the world. And at the centre is Christ standing, the Father's witness and the fulfilment of God's plan. I want to reflect prayerfully with you on the unfolding of this plan.

**Jesus stood** before the chief priests and the whole council who brought false testimony against him, but he remained silent. They handed him over to Pilate who asked, "Have you no answer to the charges they bring against you?" But Jesus made no further reply and Pilate was amazed. In spite of knowing Jesus was innocent, Pilate said, "I will have him scourged and hand him over to you." Why? In the face of the silent one, Pilate finds himself judged, challenged in his deepest self. Hardened and brutalised, he will not let this Jew have power over him. The act of scourging was to denigrate, reduce the humanity of this man, as all torture is intended to do. Despite the ferocity of the soldiers' scourging, Jesus remains unbowed, his stature and sense of who he is and what his mission is remains intact — to redeem out of love.

In George Rouault's painting *Christ mocked* we see the face of one who is silent, the face of man, the face of God. Jesus is the one who can meet the deepest yearning in the human spirit, yet one who can stand alone against evil, suffer alone, defenceless and silent. He needs us to pray today and act as he did. Within us he is an inner power to face evil, even death, and to conquer it.

Let's enter into our own silence as we come together before God. We are one with the One who is mystery who created the heavens and the earth; We are one with the One who is mystery who created you and me; I am one with the One who is mystery who created me and loved me and whose Spirit lives in me. Lord Jesus give me strength to bear the scourge that devastates my life, work or family and know that you are bearing this with me.

**Jesus fell.** There's a strange quirk of human nature that when our leaders or prominent people fall, and the news or social media swoop on it and amplify it, we get a sense of satisfaction, as if their fall lifts up our estimation of ourselves. But when we experience our own fall and own up to it, there is a renewed sense of solidarity with the weakness of others through our own weakness. In fact, it may be the cause of a greater growth in us, a breaking down of a false pharisaism in us.

Where sin abounded grace did more abound. But as St Paul says, it does not invite us to greater sinning. Instead, there is humility, a greater awareness of our creaturehood before God that we

share with everyone, that we are creatures totally dependent on God.

When Jesus the sinless one fell, what is he teaching us? Jesus was pronounced innocent by Pontius Pilate but strange justice, he was flogged with lashes that would have killed any man and released to the crowd to be crucified. In this weakened state he carried the crossbeam and felt the weight of it when he fell. This befell Jesus because he was true to his Father's will to bring about a kingdom of love, healing and welcome to sinners. Jesus teaches us not to give up our high ideals but to struggle, to rise up again with God's help, and with Jesus' love and challenging word.

Years ago, on a five-day hike along the Jamieson River with youth leaders in training like myself, one of the leaders with her haversack came off the bus and fell straight away. It looked like she had given up before the hike began. She was the daughter of a minister. I challenged her by the example of Christ carrying his cross. She responded to the challenge and walked ahead of the group all the way.

Lord Jesus, teach us not to give in to despair when we fall under apparent and real injustices that life serves up to us. Not to say, I expect nothing from life anymore. But to ask what does life expect from me? Jesus, you knew the desires of your Father's heart to save us all, and so you struggled to your feet and faced the most harrowing experience of your life. You did it for love of us. Help me to rise again, hold on to my ideals and follow you.

**Jesus is nailed to the cross.** They nailed Jesus' hands and feet to a tree; feet that walked the length and breadth of Galilee and Judea, offering God's gracious gift of salvation; hands opened wide in healing, casting out the darkness, welcoming all into the embrace of his Father's love, if only they would heed. And now hands and feet are held fast, fixed by rough spikes, hands and feet contorted in pain. Those nailed hands and feet bear the weight of the sins of the world. The Sinless One has become our sin, has been made a curse nailed to the tree, that we might be made right with God.

Jesus, Son of God, Saviour, have pity on us. You have borne and borne away our sin. Jesus, Son of God, help us to know the cost of our salvation, the love that held you there. They challenged you to come down, to leave your bed of pain, and then they might deign to believe in you. Jesus, you knew excruciating pain, mental, physical, and spiritual torture, feeling no longer the Beloved Son, but abandoned even by God — and yet you are the source of our peace.

We pray Lord, for those caught up in such anguish that they wish to terminate it. We pray against the tragedy that is euthanasia, abortion, and suicide. Help us, your people, to give hope where there is despair, to ease the pain in suffering and to give time for those suffering to come to acceptance of your loving will for whom all life is sacred. Lord, hear us and give us peace.

## Third Homily

We've gotten so used to the symbol of the cross, that we take it for granted. But how do we comprehend the sheer enormity of evil, like the Boxing Day Tsunami in 2004 that hit Banda Aceh with 100-foot waves filled with black debris and took 228,000 lives in 14 countries. That was what Jesus faced in Gethsemane. Even more is the impact of Covid which world-wide multiplies that number many times over and is bringing civilisation to its knees, but not necessarily to prayer and intercession.

A doctor in a town in Paraguay was an outspoken critic of the human rights abuses of the government. One day the local police apprehended his teenage son and tortured him to death. Rather than dress his son for the funeral, the father displayed his naked, scarred body on the blood-stained mattress on which he had been tortured to death. It was a powerful, courageous statement. It put power and injustice on grotesque display and dramatised in a modern way what happened on Good Friday (**Mark Link, *Jesus 2000*, p. 111**). The crucified body of the Son of God was displayed on the cross to dramatise the grotesque evil of sin.

By his cross Jesus comes to us in the most outlandish way, not as a piece of jewellery. He comes in sacrifice and self-giving and total love. Innocent of the charges against him, he nevertheless accepts the cross to show us how far God's love will go for us, how high he will be raised for us, and most importantly, where he expects us to follow. The cross is the sign of a radical way of living that demands making choices.

Jesus underwent the way of weakness. But from that weakness comes courage to do what Jesus did, to die for others. Ernest Gordon recalls this true story from a Japanese prison camp in Thailand. One day when the shovels were counted after work, the guard on duty went berserk. He said one shovel was missing. Screaming in broken English, he ordered the thief to step up. When no-one did, he cocked his rifle and threatened to fire on the crowd. At this point an Australian came forward. The Aussie stood silently as the guard beat him. Finally, the guard struck him a thunderous blow to his head with his rifle. The Aussie dropped, clearly dead. But the guard kept on beating him savagely. Then the work crew carried the shovels and the dead Aussie back to the guard house. There the shovels were counted again. No shovel was missing after all (**Mark Link, *Jesus 2000*, p. 105**).

To give one's life for one's friends. For us, this can be acted out in situations of weakness in the home, the hospital, in any business where our courtesy and gentleness can change the situation to bring peace and healing. Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus his friend; he is weeping today at the suffering, and the courage of those who follow him. But Jesus' weeping is not softness. It portrays a strong commitment to be true to God. Like Leah Sharibu, one of 300 girls forcibly taken by Boko Haran; her 104 kidnapped classmates were allowed home to Lagos, Nigeria, in exchange for imprisoned Boko Haran commanders on condition they converted to Islam — that was the

condition for the girls' release. Leah, a 15-year-old Christian was taken back into captivity. "You may kill me," she said, "but I will not become a Muslim."

As we become marked by the cross, we may suffer, lose face and privilege and our plans. Our task today is to come to the foot of the Cross and trust him to do the rest. Jesus' cry on the cross in today's passion, "It is finished" means more than a sigh of relief that finally his suffering is over; it proclaims with a shout of triumph, the goal and completion of his incarnate life and ministry; it asserts that what Jesus has done for us endures for eternity.

# Easter Vigil

Gen. 1:1-2:2 or Gen. 1:1, 26-31a  
Ps. 33:4-5, 6-7, 12-13, 20-22 (5b)

Ps. 104:1-2, 5-6, 10+12, 13-14, 24+35 (30) or  
Mk. 16:1-7

When the three women burst into the room where the eleven were, before they had even opened their mouths, their looks, their voices, their gestures, made everyone realise that something unheard of had happened, and a shudder ran through their bodies. The world of spiritual realities enveloped them, filling the place and all those in it. The women struggled to put into words: "The tomb is empty, we have seen angels. Alive, alive, the Master is alive." Peter and John raced to the tomb and Peter came away scratching his head.

The Resurrection is a faith experience. It wasn't made up. It was something from the outside exploding in on the Apostles that took them completely by surprise and which they had to grapple with. No-one can say, "Jesus **is** risen, Jesus **is** Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. That **is** is continuous to the end of time. It was by the Spirit that they came to believe that Jesus lives; their faith-experience was transmitted faithfully to us. All that he claimed to be is true, Saviour and Lord, if only we let him in.

Nothing has mastery over him — neither death, nor sickness, nor poverty, neither spirits above or below can separate us from the love of God revealed in Christ Jesus. He **is** Lord. There is no hour-glass in his life, and his power flows to the ends of the universe. It is a cosmic event. He is simply available to anyone and everyone who calls for help. Any place, any time.

Keith Green, a Jewish convert and singer wrote about a moment of certainty in his life: "All my life I've been searching for that crazy missin' part. With one touch you rolled away the stone that held my heart. And now I see that the answer is as easy as just askin' you in. And I'm sure I could never doubt your gentle touch again. It's like the power of the wind. Like wakin' up from the longest dream or so it seemed when your love broke through." It's the person-transforming power of the risen Christ. And it's the faith experience of the Apostles that the Church is built on and helps us in our struggle to come to faith.

We're content to believe in the Resurrection, but the disciples experienced the reality of it by submitting their lives to Jesus. Christ's conquest of death overcame their fear of death, brought them into a community of hope, and sent them to witness courageously to Jesus risen; and to speak the compassionate word of God into the world, entering into the suffering and hope of all people making common cause with them.

This is the day the Lord has made for us to acknowledge him and let him remake our lives. That's my prayer: that we will really experience what we pray about; that faith will accompany our prayer; and that we attain the solid conviction and vivid awareness of Christ risen.

## Second Homily

The Orthodox Church begins the Easter liturgy with telling jokes, because Easter is God's joke on Satan. Satan thought he had killed the Lord of life to bring in a reign of death, destruction, sadness, and hopelessness, but instead joy has erupted, life is starting over again! But it's not the same, it's something new, wonderful. Jesus is alive and goes before us into the Galilees of our lives.

There is joy tonight as we welcome five of the elect for Baptism, and three into full communion with the Catholic Church. From last Easter 'til now we met weekly every Wednesday to explore, share and deepen our faith and grow as a community, supported by you the Christian community of St Christopher's. They are ready now to take this courageous step in faith. Life in Christ is not automatic but grows in the daily living out of that faith.

The women hurrying in the early morning to the tomb were worried, wondering who will roll the stone away for us, this huge stone weighing over a ton. They found not death but life. Jesus is alive! It's the stone-moving power of the Resurrection. No matter how big the obstacles we face, Jesus has broken their power over us. The stone-moving power of the Resurrection of Jesus can change hearts, transform lives. And that power is the Holy Spirit who has been poured into our hearts tonight with the water poured over us as we open ourselves to God's love and die to un-love. Be led by the Spirit who lovingly speaks to our hearts, calling us through the Father and Jesus into the closest friendship with God's family.

Through our Baptism into the Death-Resurrection event of Jesus we are taken into the life of God. A 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 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 the Trinity. The character of Baptism on our soul can never be erased. It's the way by which God recognises us as his own and calls us to follow him.

We have reduced life to all the same. Footy now on Good Friday and who raises a cry? We have reduced Easter into bunnies and butterflies, Easter eggs, but that's not what Easter is about. It's about a dead Jesus. Horribly crucified who came back to harass us. And that scares us. Easter is about a Jesus who while alive was so radical, so counter-cultural that the prevailing culture killed him. He was a threat to the world as it was, and more of a threat now that he's footloose after the Resurrection. Bunnies and butterflies we can handle, but a risen Christ, just as radical as he ever was, is too much (**cf. Bausch, *Telling Stories, Compelling Stories, Twenty-Third Publications, 2001, p. 164***). We prefer to turn on the telly for the footy.

Easter demands faith, decision. Every Baptism demands decision. Have you noticed how Baptism and death are intertwined in the Baptismal service as it's meant to be in our lives. Naeem, who comes from Pakistan, is certainly aware of the meaning of the rite. Jesus is about happiness

and a way of life. He's about the decisions we make in business and in school. He's about honesty and caring and concern for others. He's about whistle-blowing and ethics. He's about chastity and fidelity, about truth, making relationships work. He's about life here and hereafter for those who listen to him. He's about real joy and fulfillment. He's radical and he's risen. He's a body got loose. That's the Easter message. He's nothing against eggs and butterflies: they belong to Hallmark. He's looking for fellow radicals. They belong to him (**ibid. p. 167**).



# Easter Sunday

**Acts 10:34a, 37-43 Col. 3:1-4 or 1 Cor. 5:6b-8**

**Sequence: *Victimae Pascali Laudes***

**Jn. 20:1-9 or Mk. 16:1-7**

It was a wonderful celebration last night as four of our elect were baptised, and two already baptised were welcomed into full communion with the Catholic Church, and all received the gift of the Spirit and shared in the table of the Eucharist. I wanted to feel joy, but I was flat. I was busy all day making sure everything was right and I felt like mothers, who prepare all day for the family Easter or Christmas dinner and at the meal feel quite worn out.

Mary Magdalen and Peter and John didn't feel joy. There was panic. Mary noticed the stone had been moved and ran to tell Peter and John who came running — the weight of Jesus' death and their own betrayal still heavy on them after Mary's report, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb." My God, when will the nightmare never end; haven't they done enough?

You get the sense as they enter the empty tomb and see, of Peter coming away scratching his head, wondering, and the evangelist comments "... until this time they had failed to understand that he must rise from the dead." In John 7:37 Jesus cries out to us in our down times in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty let them come to me and drink. If anyone believes in me, out of their inner selves will flow rivers of living water." He was talking of the Spirit which had not yet been given because Jesus was not yet glorified. For John, Jesus' glorification refers to his death by crucifixion. How do you make sense of all that is happening?

We want to stay with the joy of the resurrection. But the Easter happening is the death-resurrection event of the God-man, Jesus, whom the Father raised from the dead, because of his obedience unto death on the cross. It is Jesus' willing obedience which gives power to the resurrection. The Father raised Jesus as vindication of Jesus' claim that he was the Saviour of the world. Let's stay with the pondering of the disciples. They did not see Jesus rise. All they saw was an empty tomb. All their human reasoning left them with questions. They were totally defeated. But as they surrendered in prayer with Mary and the other disciples, they experienced the stone being rolled away from their hearts.

They began to feel the Spirit, Jesus promised he would send from the Father, moving in them, their faith was strengthened, miracles were performed by them beyond their own power. The risen Jesus was with them in a new untrammelled way. That has been my experience, especially through the Sacrament of the anointing of the sick. Homeless people felt renewed, people regarded as dying got up and got on with life as normal. I believe what St Vincent Pallotti said, "If we stop putting obstacles in the way, God can work through us." It is God's doing.

Easter is the Father's vindication of Jesus as Saviour of the world. What does that mean? Jesus spent his life inviting us to join him in the life that really is life. He wants to set us free. In Peter's

speech to Cornelius, he spoke of Jesus' ministry: "After his Baptism, God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and he went about doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the devil." But after his resurrection and conquest of Satan, sin and death, "to those who believe in him will have their sins forgiven in his name".

Paul Claudel the playwright wrote: "Now that his heart is open and his hands are pierced, there is no cross among us on which his body will not fit. There is no sin in us to which his wound will not correspond." The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ encompass and relieve every kind of suffering that could come to us, every kind of sin done to us or committed by us, even most wilfully. We are freed to live without their consequences. Welcome to the freedom that comes to those who hold fast to the Gospel, loving God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. He comes again and again to roll back the stone that holds us.

A blessed Easter everyone. May the joy of Easter be yours this day.

## Second Homily

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 cowed 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.

With the women let us be filled with awe and great joy, running to tell the Good News. Let this night be a night of celebration, a night and day that goes on for fifty days. Jesus has triumphed

over every obstacle. Jesus wants the joy and stone-moving power of this night to be available to us always. As we take in Jesus' word with faith and obediently act on it, we shall meet him on the way.

After we renew our faith in Jesus, renew our Baptism, together we go to the table and celebrate the Easter Eucharist. Easter day begins and we are ready for the fifty days of rejoicing. Jesus told the women not to hold on to him. At death we don't want to let go of the one we love, the memories, the touch. He invites us to let go, to discover him in a new way, risen, totally transformed. Then we can be his witnesses.

# **SEASON OF EASTER**

**Year B**

# Second Sunday of Easter

Acts 4:32-35

1 Jn. 5:1-6

Jn. 20:19-31

No-one has ever risen from the dead. The reality of Jesus passing through closed doors (like a ghost), asking the disciple, Thomas, to touch him (unlike a ghost), is an encounter with what has never been experienced before. The evangelist is struggling to find words to express this experience. He finds the story of Thomas a ready vehicle to express this struggle.

Satan disguised himself as the risen Lord and began rising to heaven with all his angels, dressed in dazzling robes, singing Hosannas. The angels in heaven were excited, getting ready to welcome the Master; the ancient doors were lifting. When Satan approached a voice rang out, "Are you the One?" In a grandiloquent voice, he said, "I am he" and opened wide his hands. The door slammed shut. There were no wounds in his hands.

Thomas is not so much a doubter as one who is painstakingly searching to believe against all the evidence to the contrary. From where he hid, he had seen his Master's hands and feet brutally nailed to the cross and seen the thrust of the spear into Jesus' side. He had seen his Master die and heard that he was in the tomb, and with that his hopes had also died. He wanted to be sure of the identity of the One the disciples excitedly spoke to him about. He had been absent the first time Jesus appeared.

In the first part of the Gospel, we see the healing of broken relationships through the gracious pardon and love of Jesus to those disciples who denied knowing him and are now back into renewed relationship with him. Their joy was evident in their demeanour. He's alive and we're forgiven, and they wanted to share this joy with Thomas. Still, Thomas cannot accept this. He will not be pushed by the group of disciples. He will not accept that Christ has risen on hearsay. He had seen Christ crucified. It had shattered all his hopes in the messiah. He wants to verify that this Jesus he saw crucified really is risen and so he wants to touch the wounds in Jesus' hands and side.

Young people want an experience of the risen Lord. There is a shift today from the experience of authority — accepting truth on the word of another — to the authority of experience — one's own individual grasp of the faith and the conviction that comes from that. Yet it's more than logic, thinking things through for oneself. It's a leap of faith that comes because one's heart has been moved by the love of Christ, in life or among the Christian community at worship and in service. Thomas is someone who seeks experience.

Individually, the locked doors stand not only for the fear of being arrested by the authorities. They are also an image for the close-mindedness or the hardness of heart that keeps us from encountering the risen Lord.

A woman I met, abused by her father as a girl, vowed that no-one would ever touch her again. She put up a wall so high to protect her from being hurt again. She fell in love, married a loving

man who helped her. But after a while she felt the wall go up between her and her husband. She had two sons and as they grew, she had the same feelings toward them. In desperation she came for help, prayer, counselling, and healing.

Jesus, on the eighth day, the new creation, allowed Thomas to touch his hands, to put his hand in and touch his heart — wounded yet open to receive him. Jesus, in the sacraments of the Church, in people and in this present moment, extends his hands and heart to us. His pierced hand tells us what he did to save us.

An old Indian Chief explained it by putting a caterpillar in a circle of dry grass and leaves. He lit the circle and as the fire almost engulfed the caterpillar, he put his hands into the flames to pull the caterpillar to safety. Jesus put his hands into the flames to pull us out. He has borne on our behalf the wounds that pierce our hands — a reminder of all the blows we have received from others, of hands that grasped us tightly, pinned us down, hurt us. In each Eucharist Jesus offers to take our wounds upon himself, for them to be cut into his own hand. Jesus' open hands reveal that he holds nothing back. He has revealed everything to us — and wants us to be truly free.

In the Eucharist, Jesus offers his pierced side to us. From his side blood and water flow toward us. The water and blood are for John an image of the Holy Spirit that is poured over us and of the love of Christ which is poured into us. John is also rejecting the Docetist doctrine which held that Jesus the Son of God only seemed to come to us — the divine power that came upon Jesus at his Baptism, left him at the moment of the Cross; the Son of God only seemed to die. But for John, Jesus' love took him right through to death, tasting and atoning for all the bitterness, hatred, hurt and sin of all people — in order to bestow peace and healing on a new redeemed humanity.

Through us, Jesus wants to pass through the closed doors of those who have withdrawn into themselves out of fear. Through us, Jesus wants to show people his hands and side. Through our hands, he wants to touch people tenderly, to encourage them and raise them up. Through our hearts, he desires to pour his love into the isolation and loneliness of people.

What would you like to take in hand today? Who would you like to touch tenderly, stretch out your hands to in reconciliation? To whom do you want to show your heart? Christ wants to show his love for people through your hand and heart.

## Second Homily

Thomas in his grief and pain had cut himself off from the community, from the other disciples. He had seen Jesus die and had heard that he was in the tomb, and with that his hopes had also died. Thomas is our twin because we go through the same thing. Like him we do not want our sore spot touched. We want it left alone. While it's understandable, it is a mistake. How can healing happen if we will not allow our wounds to be seen and touched? **(cf. Flor McCarthy, *New Sunday and Holy Day Liturgies, Year B, Leinster Leader, Co Clare, 2005, p. 107*)**

When we are down, sometimes the excited account of what happened to others when we were absent, has the opposite effect on us. Thomas saw the change, the joy, the inner transformation that Jesus' forgiveness had brought about in the other disciples, the renewed sense of purpose in them, and it made him even more stubborn. He was not happy with their telling of what had happened to them, he wanted to experience it for himself.

In fact, Thomas is not a doubter, but someone who seeks experience. He is not happy just believing what others tell him. He wants to see, feel, touch for himself; only then is he prepared to believe. 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? Does he need evidence to prove that the risen one and the crucified one are the same, because in his opinion it was unlikely that the one who had died in such agony would ever live again. The death of Jesus was not a Gnostic make-believe, that the human Jesus was only a shell and that God could not die. In the second reading John asserts the truth about the Jesus we believe in, truly Son of God, attested by the Spirit in his baptism in the water of the Jordan, but who died pouring out the last drop of his blood for us.

Thomas had missed the first appearance of the risen Lord but was there for the second. The first thing Jesus did was to show him his wounds, the proof of his love. He invited Thomas to touch those wounds. But in reality, Thomas was the wounded one. He was wounded by grief, loneliness, and despair. In his pain he wanted to be alone. Even though his wounds were invisible, they were very real. Jesus was able to see them. It was he who touched Thomas's wounds and made him whole again. It was by touching and being touched that Thomas was healed of his unbelief as well as his other wounds. It's the same for us, our hearts are healed only by the presence of another human being who understands human pain (**ibid**).

Thomas responds to Jesus' offer to touch his wounds by his personal confession, "My Lord and my God." Think for a moment of the names you know Jesus by: Saviour, Brother, Shepherd, Rock, Refuge, Healer; write down your own personal confession and then put "my" before those titles. Say them over and over: "my saviour, my brother, my rock," and then repeat Thomas' confession, "My Lord and my God," especially at the elevation of the host and the chalice.

John concludes the story of Thomas with Jesus' words: "You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

These words refer not just to us, who did not live at the time of Jesus. If Thomas is to be an image of our faith, we must, however, understand Jesus' words in a different way. Our faith holds that we are able to experience, touch and hold Jesus; and are able to see and not see. But there are times in our life when we see and experience nothing. Experience is good and right, and deepens our faith, but we must not bind our faith to experience. There are times when we are in the desert and experience nothing. Like Mother Teresa who, once she took up her work in the slums of

Calcutta, entered the dark night.

Jesus calls blessed those who do not see and yet believe. Here he clearly wants to initiate his hearers into an even higher form of faith. Faith transcends experience. Faith is all too often non-experience. But in this non-experience, faith holds tightly to God, the invisible and the intangible. Many believers are familiar with this non-experience. No light seems to shine into their darkness.

They suffer from their wounds and feel no transformation and no healing. And yet they believe they are in God's hands. Trust the fact that your illness or the continual ill-health of another has a meaning even though you do not understand it. Try to behold the invisible in the visible; in the wounds, love; in the hurts, all that is whole; in all that you go through, an expression of the love of the risen one. Doing this, you will, like Thomas, touch the one who wants to touch you with his love through all that you touch with attention and care.



# Third Sunday of Easter

**Acts 3:13-15, 17-19**

**1 Jn. 2:1-5a**

**Lk. 24:35-48**

I don't know if you have had an experience which might have come as a shock that was followed by real joy. I'm talking about the recognition of someone from your past whom you loved and thought you'd lost. Then the recognition that gives a lift to the heart and an eager quickening to your step. "Yes, it's him, whom we thought was dead!" Catching a glimpse of him, here and there, and slipping away like a will o' the wisp, Cleopas and his wife had to come back to tell the community which they had left disillusioned, that they had seen him; that he is alive; they met him at the breaking of the bread. And it was in communal witness and discernment that they knew he was risen.

Then suddenly he was in their midst. Was he real? How fragile their first experience of Jesus risen and alive among them. They needed to be reassured, needed to touch him. In their alarm, still needing to be reassured, Jesus asked for something to eat. That's the experience of the disciples, shock, panic and then the joy of recognition that overcomes the guilt, the dread of meeting.

Jesus had to show them the meaning behind their experience. They were slow learners. He showed them the wounds in his hands and feet to prove he was not a ghost; asked for and received some grilled fish which he ate right in front of them; his was a body that broke death's hold. They had to get over the obstacle learnt from Jewish tradition that a person who hung upon a tree was cursed; so, Jesus could not be the true messiah. Jesus opened the scriptures to help them see the meaning behind his shameful death and resurrection as he had done before on the road to Emmaus.

Peter, in the first reading, said it was God's plan that his Christ would suffer. Only Jesus can explain the meaning of his death and resurrection by taking them through the teaching of Moses, the prophets and the psalms, calling for a new way of seeing, of repentance, in order to truly witness.

This is more than a return, a reinstatement of the friendship, the intimacy, the love we experienced before. Jesus' love dispels our fears of death, of what others can do to us. The way he died and is now risen, and with us, never to be separated again, gives us a new courage. "He's alive and I'm forgiven. Heaven's gates are open wide. He's alive!" It's a joyful, loving realisation that the Master is back.

It's a new kind of love: Augustine in his Confessions describes his conversion, from trying to find love in every created thing, to finding Jesus within, "Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient, and so new ... You were within me, but I was outside myself and there I sought you. I ran after the beauty of things you have made — the things that would have no being unless they existed in you. You called and cried and pierced my deafness; you shone so brightly and dispelled my blindness.

You sent forth your fragrance and I have breathed it in and pant after you ... You have touched me, and I ardently desire your peace.”

I want to love Jesus, to have him awaken and arouse in me the personal love that he has for me; his attraction and power over me that I pursue. The mystics, trying to describe this yearning, this almost sexual longing for union, went to the Song of Songs in the Bible, where the bride, running like one possessed, frantically asks passers-by, “Have you seen my Beloved for whom my soul longs?” And then she meets him. It is a total personal encounter with Jesus that we see in the Gospel.

That one word, “Peace, Shalom, Healing,” speaks simply to the disciples that nothing can ever separate them again from Jesus’ side. We might fail, forget, but he never will. This meeting with Jesus, experienced anew time and again, is not something that evades us like smoke as we try to touch it. This experience is real.

Francis Happold described the time when Christ came to him in his room at Cambridge in 1913. “There was no sensible vision,” he said. “But the room was filled by a Presence, which in a strange way was both about me and within me. I was overwhelmingly possessed by Someone who was not myself, and yet I felt that I was more myself than I had ever been before. I was filled with an intense happiness, an almost unbearable joy, such as I had never known before and have never known since. And overall was a deep sense of peace and security and certainty.” It’s what Augustine described as the shift from searching for Jesus outside of me to discovering him within.

The Lord redeems us because of his love. With that experience goes explanation, the opening of minds and hearts to understand the scriptures. Redemption and the forgiveness of our sins is brought about by Jesus’ death and Resurrection. This conviction carries with it the mission to preach to the nations, to tell others the great Good News of the freedom, the possibility to be our true selves in Jesus.

# Fourth Sunday of Easter

**Acts 4:8-12**

**1 Jn. 3:1-2**

**Jn. 10:11-18**

Today is Vocation Sunday. We often live our lives as married couples, parents, single, young people and don't have time to reflect on its deeper significance. Jacques Cousteau, concerned for the pollution of the oceans, developed underwater photography so that people would see the beauty, diversity, and uniqueness of what was below the surface. He said it was only when people knew and loved what they saw that they would struggle to protect it. On Vocation Sunday we need to get below the surface of present-day life and face the urgent need for vocations to the priesthood, the religious life, and the single dedicated life, seen in concert with the rich diversity and beauty of lay ministries.

Every life is a vocation wrote Paul VI, a call for meaning, to find our place in the Church and world and to make our own meaningful contribution to life. Vocation is a gift of God, a charism which is relational. It relates us to Jesus, the Good Shepherd who calls and it relates us to those with whom our life is bound up.

There is a de-elitising of vocation today which came from Vatican II, which placed the priest and the religious not apart from and above the ordinary Christian, but within the stream of the one call to mission and to holiness. The call to priesthood and religious life points to an intensification of the baptismal consecration common to all the faithful. As priest or religious we are not superior to the faithful, but "one of them" and "among them". As a Maryknoll sister lay dying with some of her people, one of them said, "You see, sister, you are no different from us. They kill you as they kill us."

God loves everyone unconditionally, but he calls and chooses some to reach out to others who in a special way will carry on his mission; to hear and respond in a more intense way to Jesus' call to follow him which is addressed to every Christian.

Vocation comes from listening to the voice of the shepherd in the context of every day. When I was a carpenter, I kept an hour of adoration every Thursday at home when everyone had gone to bed. I had no intention of being a Pallottine. With my brother Michael, I was part of the Pallottine apostolic groups at Kew. I enjoyed the sense of community and hospitality there as well as the challenge to live as an apostle in everyday life. We were going to be builders but when Michael told me he was going to join the Pallottines, my world came crashing down. I did not feel worthy to be a priest and experienced a couple of depressing years, wrestling with the question as I looked at other builders. "What does it profit, if I should gain the whole world ...?" It was hesitancy, like bouncing on the diving board before taking the plunge. You don't come because you don't fit anywhere else. Like marriage you come to give the best that you have because it will take all that you are.

My life has been defined by his call, trying to listen to the Lord as to where he wants to lead me

at each stage of my life. Priesthood or religious life is not a generic thing, a monolith, just like married or single life, it is quite unique. My life, like yours with its experiences, struggles and joys, shapes my and your particular vocation. My vocation has been shaped by the person and charism of Vincent Pallotti who focused my discipleship of Jesus and by youth, adults, and families with whom I worked for years at Millgrove and in the West and now here in this parish. I felt that only now was I ready for such a role as Parish Priest.

A religious charism is given to a person chosen by God at a particular time in history to meet the needs of that time. What I liked about Pallotti was that his charism was shared not only by priests and religious brothers and sisters but by lay people who shared his vision and work right from the beginning.

In the ordination to the priesthood the priest places his whole life at the disposal of Christ, so that Christ can emerge as Head and Shepherd of the Body. We know how Christ envisages Headship, “not lording it over, nor making his authority felt,” but as a servant for the good of the Body, laying down his life as a ransom for all — servant leadership, called out beyond comforts to the service of those who call for help — to witness their tears, to be at the bedside of the dying, to reconcile. We need leadership in the Church, but the priest is not the solo concert player holding all the ministries in himself. No! His is a priesthood that must be open to other ministries, to the priesthood of the faithful, evoking and calling forth the gifts in others, affirming initiatives.

This week we have had a tremendous example of lay ministry that is enriching and challenging to the Catholic Church in Australia and elsewhere. The priesthood and religious is only a small facet of the life of the Church. But as we heard from Bruce Downes, the encouragement of Bishop Barry Hickey was key to the courageous steps he took in founding “The Catholic Guy television ministries”. The family also is a tremendous place of welcome, growth and calling forth the gifts of others to service, to love, but also the place that fosters religious and priestly vocations. My mother asked me, “Have you thought of becoming a priest?” In the tradition of the Hebrew, I answered with another question, “Why do you think I became a carpenter?”

But the seed was sown. The carpenter needed joiners and so I came and experienced the most joyous and fruitful time of my life. The dynamic of silent Eucharistic adoration inevitably leads to the question, “What do you want me to do, Lord?” Listen! The need is great, and you may be the one that Jesus is calling. He will protect you. Follow him in love!

## **Second Homily**

The Good Shepherd brings to mind some wonderful images of grandparents, parents, older sisters, religious, priests, dedicated single people. Shepherds like those care not only for their own sheep but for many others. It is a task that stays with mothers and those in nurturing roles with children not their own, youth, young adults, and older people.

An 87-year-old white American said, during the Depression on a poor farm down south, he caught polio when he was three-years-old. His parents took him to a hospital in New York and left him there. What use was a crippled boy to a poor farmer? The doctors had few remedies, so he was sent to an estate down south. There was an old black woman, Mom Jean, who had her own children, but all the children in the neighbourhood knew her. She had herbal remedies and a wonderful wisdom.

She had her own ideas for the little polio boy. Every day after work she would exercise his legs, rubbing and moving them. When the little boy cried in pain, she would sing to him and tell him stories. She didn't know about hydrotherapy, but she knew the clear running water of a nearby creek would help. Her boys took the little boy to dangle his feet in the cool water.

When he was twelve, Mom Jean took him outside, leant him against a tree, took away his crutches and told him, "Last night I had a dream and the Lord told me you can walk." The boy pleaded and cried, but she insisted that he walk. He walked toward her, fell into her arms and they both cried. He never used crutches again. The young man left and joined a circus, but he came back years later when she was dying, to thank her for all she had done for him **(cf. William J Bausch, *A World of Stories*, p. 104).**

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 wolf and bear. 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, too constant. 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.

A teacher was talking to his students about the risk entailed in being a good shepherd and told this story: "An aeroplane was carrying a group of peasants every week to work on a road in Burma. The trip was long and boring. To pass the time they played cards, but whoever lost was thrown out of the plane." The students cried out, "But that's horrible." "Yes," said the teacher, "but it made the game exciting" **(cf. Joan Chittister).**

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. To dedicate our

lives to God right where we are; to radiate an inner peace as we climb onto a bus or tram and greet the driver or open a door for others. If we do this, 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.

“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 to the full. Jesus invites us into intimate relationship with him to listen to his call. Following him does not destroy but 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 the youth, 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.

## Third Homily

Every life is a vocation. It's not a case of having more but of being more. St Augustine said: “What I am is God's gift to me. What I become is my gift to God”; that is, I thank God best by becoming the person God wants me to be. Vocation is a gift from God for others. It's not a selfish possession. It can be a call for a specific task, or it can be for life, like marriage, priesthood, religious life, but also for the committed life of single men, women, and young people. It requires maturity to keep ideals and commitments made; to keep faith and lead others into a joyous, faith-filled, and happy, secure life. How you prepare for that is often through times of service of others, but at other times it's when the plans for your life come crashing down and a yearning for more rises in you.

It first happened to me, I still remember the place and the date. My twin, Michael, and I were going to be builders; after work we often discussed styles of houses, did weekend work together, but this day Michael told me he was going to join the Pallottines. My plans came tumbling down. Every specific vocation is born of the initiative of God. It is a gift of the love of God (Pope Benedict). If so, we need time to be silent, to pray, listen and reflect on what is happening in our lives. For two years I went through a depressing time, looking at other builders and asking myself, “What does it profit, if I gain the whole world and suffer the loss of my own soul?” I felt I was on a diving board, bouncing up and down before I took the dive. I realised I couldn't expect a voice of God telling me what to do. God's voice was in the decision that I had to make, and I made it.

The majority of people marry, that is your vocation, to be in the heart of society in your work, the bringing up of your children, leading them to faith — not an easy task. My task as priest is to serve you through word and sacrament and by sharing in your life at the bedside of the sick and the dying; rejoicing in the joys of marriages and new births at Baptism, listening to successes, discouragements, and so much more.

The focus this Sunday is on priesthood and religious life. They are no longer elite vocations. Today we need to avoid a creeping clericalism that puts us apart and above the people. That's not where Jesus was found. Servant leadership is Jesus' way, a readiness like the Good Shepherd, to lay down our life for God's people; to empower and orchestrate the great gifts that are present in our parish. That's my vocation as a Pallottine. I am not the same as a diocesan priest, not better or more gifted, just different, a difference that comes from the specific character of my institute founded and inspired by St Vincent Pallotti, provided I am true to it. Because priesthood and religious life is not an elite vocation, but in the heart of the people with a passion for the kingdom, it purifies our motives. It challenges our priorities.

Just this weekend with 41 Antioch young people, hearing their confessions, I thought what a great privilege: to listen to their struggles and strivings for God. Often when you are at a wedding or travelling overseas and people discover you are a priest, they open up and share their story.

I know from my own experience that priesthood, responding to God's call is not a stereotype, all the same. You stamp the priesthood with your own character and charism. I found that God's call came as a result of the convergence of many factors and often triggered by an external factor, not once but many times. I have had many calls and I believe in living in response to God's call. I could honestly say I have had five career changes: a trained youth worker and retreat giver touching the lives of thousands of young people; the founder of a young adult community, assistant priest, formation person not only of our priests and brothers, but of lay missionaries, couples on family camps; trained in pastoral counselling; author and overseas retreat giver to priests and religious and a lot else besides. And now parish priest for the last 18 years. When I took up the task of parish priest of St Christopher's, I thought at the time, that only now am I mature and ready for this role. But we're not finished yet. Priesthood is an apostolic adventure. When you married you fell in love; as priest it is the same for me, but where you had to learn at first-hand, I had eight years of testing my vocation with moments of commitment along the way.

I've told a little of my journey not to boast, but in all humility to let you know the great joy and opportunities to serve, that Pallottine priesthood affords. Everything you learn is valuable. Nothing is lost in the household of God, said Otto Raible, first Pallottine Bishop of the Kimberleys. And neither are you!

## Fourth Homily

I was surprised that the year had passed so quickly since the tragic deaths of four police officers on the Eastern Freeway, Lynette Taylor, Kevin King and two new recruits Glen Humphries and Josh Prestney; the terrible unfolding of events and still the raw grief experienced by their families. That same memory and grief is experienced today on the eve of Anzac Day as we remember and pray for the many service men and women who died in the service and defence of their country; members of the Commonwealth who fought together in Gallipoli, World War I and World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, East Timor, Afghanistan. On top of that the millions of civilians, mothers and children who died of war, starvation, and disease.

We gather not to glorify or endorse conflict of any kind. Many want to march on Anzac Day wearing red poppies from Flanders fields representing the blood shed for others. The shadow of Covid limits numbers who can attend but makes us mindful of the many doctors and nurses who, like the Good Shepherd, right at this moment, all around the world, are laying down their lives to save others.

In the words of our Australian poet C.J. Dennis who wrote the poem, *A Square Deal*: “We want this land we’ve battled for, to be a land worthwhile.” And again, “There’s something owing to the dead, An’ diggers live for more than bread.” Many Australian and other soldiers who lost their lives in war weren’t thinking to save the world or defeat evil regimes. As in the trenches of France, and the patrols in Vietnam, or on the Kokoda track, they were looking after their mates alongside of them. Many Australians march on Anzac Day in memory of their mates left behind, and the ones who have passed on before them.

Former prime minister Paul Keating said, “The spirit of Anzac became the canon of Australian life: the ideals to which we aspired, the values by which we lived. We will continue to hold the memory of those who served and died as inextinguishable and sacred. We will continue to remind ourselves ‘Lest we forget’.”

We remember the nurses, doctors and chaplains, the stretcher bearers, people like John Simpson and his donkey, but also the people whom they served to protect. Nick Madaras was a 19-year-old American soldier killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq. He wanted to share his love of soccer with the children. After his death, family and friends collected 800 soccer balls which were given to Iraqi children. One grateful Iraqi parent said, “Nick Madaras has risen in the Iraqi children.”

We see the tender and tough love of Jesus the Good Shepherd in today’s Gospel, his authority that draws its power from love, as many of you do, grandparents, parents, older sisters, religious, priests, dedicated single people. To be called 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 the sheep. He was responsible for the life of the sheep, even risking his own life,



fighting off wolf, bear, and robbers. Yet the shepherd had no voice or place in society, He was marginalized. 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 or it's too constant. 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.

A teacher was talking to his students about the risk entailed in being a good shepherd and told this story: "An aeroplane was carrying a group of peasants every week to work on a road in Burma. The trip was long and boring. To pass the time they played cards, but whoever lost was thrown out of the plane." The students cried out, "But that's horrible." "Yes," said the teacher, "but it made the game exciting" **(cf. Joan Chittister)**.

Finding our vocation, whatever it is, and striving for holiness in it, is exciting. It breaks the boredom that so many of us may experience and gives us an enthusiastic grasp on life. To dedicate our lives to God right where we are; to radiate an inner peace as we climb onto a bus or tram and greet the driver or open a door for others; to thank the person behind the counter, comes from listening to the voice of the Shepherd. If we do this, 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.

"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 to the full. Jesus invites us into intimate relationship with him to listen to his call. Following him does not destroy but 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 the youth, 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.

# Fifth Sunday of Easter

**Acts 9:26-31**

**1 Jn. 3:18-24**

**Jn. 15:1-8**

Every heart has a homing device. We need to belong somewhere. For belonging is the other side of identity. Jesus said, "I am the true vine ... Make your home in me as I make my home in you. Abide in me, find your home in me."

As we celebrate Anzac Day, I feel that Anzac Cove and Villers Bretonneux in France were places in the dark, in the silence, where young and old found their identity even for a short time — where they identified with the greatness of the human spirit in the midst of horrific suffering: the pruning of so many young lives, fighting for the freedom of the French people far away from their home soil.

How are we able to abide in Jesus when it seems so difficult to pray, to find time or silence as the people did on Anzac Day? How are we to feel at home when we no longer have a home to go to?

I want to tell you about a young 24-year-old Rwandan woman who came home from college to spend Easter with her devout Catholic family. Her name was Immaculee Libagiza, a Tutsi. The death of Rwanda's Hutu President in 1994, sparked a three-month slaughter of more than one million Tutsis. Immaculee Libagiza survived by hiding in a Hutu pastor's tiny bathroom, 4-foot long, 3-foot wide, with a toilet and one shower base. Seven Tutsi women were crammed in with her for 91 cramped, terrifying days. The whole country was stopped by the Hutu government in order to get the job done, which was to kill all Tutsis. The government supplied all Hutus with guns, machetes and spears while keeping up a constant radio barrage to kill all Tutsis. It was government-sponsored genocide.

Immaculee lost most of her family during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. She begged the pastor to push a big wardrobe in front of the bathroom door, hoping it might hide them from the Hutu killers who came looking for her, calling her name from outside the house. The eight women could only use the toilet when the toilet on the other side of the wall was flushed, otherwise it would give them away. For 91 days they could not speak or make a noise, terrified that they would be found, raped, and hacked to death. They struggled in the confined space to change positions, sit or stand, fighting cramps, fear and hatred of those who killed their families.

Immaculee said that in that cramped space she found a place in the bathroom to call her own, a small corner of her heart. "I retreated there as soon as I awoke and stayed there until I slept. It was my sacred garden, where I spoke with God, meditated on his words, and nurtured my spiritual self.

"When I meditated, I touched the source of my faith and strengthened the core of my soul. While horror swirled around me, I found welcome in a world that became more welcoming and

wonderful with each visit. Even as my body shrivelled, my soul was nourished through my deepening relationship with God.

“I entered my special place through prayer; once inside I prayed non-stop using my rosary as an anchor to focus my thoughts and energies on God. I spent hours contemplating the meaning of a single word, such as forgiveness, faith, and hope. I spent hours with the word, surrender.”

She had to fight Satan’s negative thoughts, hatred toward those who had killed her parents and brothers. But Jesus was showing her that even her killers were children of God; and she made it through to forgiveness, even of her enemies.

When order was restored by the French and the Rwandan Liberation Army, the commander brought the man who had killed her father and mother to her. She stunned the commander who expected her to scream and spit on the man by simply saying to the man, “I forgive you.” The commander asked: “How could you forgive him?” Immaculee said, “Forgiveness is all I have to offer.”

“Abide in me, make your home in me, as I make mine in you. It is to the glory of my Father that you bear much fruit.”

Immaculee came to see that all she had gone through, and what she learned from Jesus through prayer was for a purpose. She wrote her story, **Left to Tell** and was later invited to speak to different groups around the world, in families and among nations. How else can we explain opposing leaders coming together, not the result of threats but of prayer? Please God it bears fruit in the future and not merely in words.

She made her mission, “Love and Forgiveness,” not just words, but something alive and active; that we are all children of God, called to love even our enemies; that you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in Jesus. Any money she received from her book and speaking engagements went to support all Rwandan orphans. In the mystery of Easter alive in us, risen Lord Jesus, you gave us new birth in Baptism and the grace to bear much fruit.

## Second Homily

The vine was the symbol of God’s particular choice of the Jewish people. God rescued them from slavery and took them through water, fire and desert and planted them in the Promised Land whose centre was Jerusalem. Planted among the nations, they were to live lives that bore witness to a more humane, loving way of relating, of being community by their relationship to God and their dealings with each other. They were to open others to this vision that had been revealed to them by God. But when the fullness of revelation came, in the wonderful divine-human reality of Jesus, they refused to accept him. Jesus replaced the old vine and called himself and those who believed in him, the true vine, the true Israel, fulfilling the vocation that Israel had failed.

It's true for us today. Jesus presents the vine as the pattern of our life. If we are believers, we are to live the risen life by staying in intimate contact with Jesus. We are to abide in him, taking on the pattern of his life. And what is that? You could explain it by what happened in the story about Bamboo. She grew tall and graceful, tended lovingly by the gardener who asked her, could he use her for his special purpose, and she said Yes. She said Yes again to the painful process as the gardener cut her out by the roots, stripped her branches, split her in two. She wondered what this higher purpose could be when she seemed to have nothing left. The gardener carried her gently to the edge of the field where a small brook was and made of her a conduit along which the sparkling clear water flowed to bring life to the fields.

Jesus himself was pruned by his Father to fulfil his Father's plan to bring us to a totally new life. When God prunes and we let ourselves be pruned we don't know what God is going to do with us. God wants to cut away everything in us that prevents the new life, Christ's new risen humanity from growing in us. Selfishness, illusion, fear, entrenched attitudes or prejudice are cut away. He wants us to be fruitful, living as branches of the vine. We all get pruned in different ways, such as illness, relationship hurts, death of a family member, a business collapse. When everything you worked for is taken away the result can be extreme hurt, but ultimately it can leave us free to move in new ways and to follow the Spirit.

There is no such thing as a solitary Christian. Every Christian is linked to Christ and to all other Christians. The first reading and the Gospel emphasise belonging. Paul with his past reputation still hanging over him could have become a rank outsider were it not for the intervention of Barnabas standing up for him and defending him. "They did not believe he was a disciple." Paul went out of his way to prove he was. But he did not found his own Church. Six times he came back to Jerusalem to keep in communion with the Church, for he knew Christ was in his Church. "I am the vine, you are the branches; cut off from me you wither; live in me and you will bear much fruit."

The Western Australia Catholic paper, *The Record* (**May 2012**), recounted a wonderful story in the parish of Northam, north of Perth. It took us into the context in which Jesus spoke, his words about the vine and branches, the Last Supper, the Eucharist that our children are now preparing for. It was Holy Thursday in the parish of St Joseph's, Northam. Fr Dominic Savio was giving his sermon, saying how we could "give meaning to our memories of suffering by allowing them to make us better or bitter, or we can allow our memories of anguish to choke us or set us free".

While he was still preaching, a one-legged man on crutches came up the aisle, right up the front and told Father to stop and be quiet. Fr Dominic kept preaching: "Each of us is called to remember Jesus so that we recognise Jesus in the breaking of the bread of our own lives for one another in love." When Fr Dominic had finished, the man said: "Can I speak now?" He said: "I heard the bells ringing; I got into my car and came down here. I want to know how I can welcome God into my heart?"

Fr Dominic prayed over him, blessed him, and offered him a seat in the closest pew. A few parishioners got up and sat next to him to show him he was not alone. When the washing of the feet was to begin, one of the twelve people chosen offered this man to take his place. Thomas Bennetts recounts that when he and Father Dominic approached him to wash his foot, the man was crying. “You could almost see the hurt in his eyes, and the joy in his eyes when he found a place where he could get comfort.” During Communion, while most people were praying, the few around him listened to him share his story; that he knew he needed God in his heart to find strength to move on with his life. “I thought you would have chased me away,” he told Father Dominic before leaving the Church that night. “I found love here ... I have always wanted to come back to God.”

Jesus truly is the vine from whom we draw strength. But in the intertwining of our lives with his, the Church is also the vine that, united with Jesus, is meant to bear the fruit of love. It’s hard to distinguish the vine stock and the branches; our lives are intertwined with him and with one another. Our love is not to be just words and mere talk, but something alive and active as we saw in the real-life story of the one-legged man who told the priest to stop and listen.

Easter is about a different way of seeing things. It is about connections that nothing can break — connections with God. It’s the bridging of life with Christ and care for people. If we keep in touch with Christ, he leads us out to people — if you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask and it shall happen. My Father will be glorified that you bear fruit and prove you are my disciples — remaining in Jesus is the basis of confidence in prayer and loving action.

# Sixth Sunday of Easter

**Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48**

**1 Jn. 4:7-10 or 1 Jn. 4:11-16**

**Jn. 15:9-17 or Jn. 17:11b-19**

It was as if God was priming Peter for an act of civil disobedience that would have far reaching consequences. He was resting at noon on the flat roof of a house in Joppa. He was hungry and went into a trance in which he saw a sheet held on the four corners, containing all sorts of unclean animals, lowered from heaven three times and a voice said, "Get up Peter; kill and eat." Peter protested to the Lord that he had never eaten anything unclean or profane in his life. But the voice said three times, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Right then, three Gentiles (the unclean) were at his door calling for Peter. While he was still puzzling over his vision, the Spirit spoke to Peter, "Look three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down and go with them without hesitation, for I have sent them." He set out with them on a three-day journey until they came to Caesarea and to the house of Cornelius, a centurion, who had assembled all his relatives and close friends to hear what the Lord would say through the preaching of Peter. The meaning of his vision and his disobedience of the law became clear to Peter who stated it to the people: "You know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone unclean or profane."

Hearing Cornelius' story and seeing the extraordinary outpouring of the Holy Spirit on everyone present, brought about a convergence in Peter's thinking that this was God's will for him. It reinforced his conviction, "I have come to see that God has no favourites," and comparing his own lived experience of the Spirit which was now happening in Cornelius' household, he baptised them into the Christian community. Peter used this same argument at the Council of Jerusalem where the different factions came to debate whether Jews and Gentiles should be admitted into the Christian community. With the authority of experience, he moved the Christian Church forward under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Peter broke his previous religious law to follow God's clear command. It was love rather than restrictive law that enabled Peter to state 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 and having absolute respect for God. It is about letting one's conscience be informed by God, and then being true to one's conscience, whatever the law of the land may say.

The strength to follow one's conscience comes from the fact that God loved us first, proven by God sending his Son so that we could have life. If we keep God's word and lay down our lives because God has commissioned us, then our lives bear much fruit. Pope Francis, voicing the Catholic Church's pro-life stance which is facing state-sanctioned opposition, writes, "Here I feel it urgent to state that, if the family is the sanctuary of life, the place where life is conceived and cared

for, it is a horrendous contradiction when it becomes a place where life is rejected and destroyed ... The family protects human life in all its stages, including the last. Consequently, those who work in healthcare facilities are reminded of the moral duty of conscientious objection. Similarly, the Church not only feels the urgency to assert the rights to a natural death without aggressive treatment and euthanasia," but likewise "firmly rejects the death penalty" (***The Joy of Loving, par 83***).

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 commands us in today's Gospel 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 euthanasia Bill was pushed through in 2017. Further amendments by Justice Party MP Stuart Grimley, would allow "Doctors [in regional and rural areas] ... to use telehealth to conduct appointments about [euthanasia] and the threshold for who can access euthanasia could be lowered ..."

Dr John Duffy from the Australian Care Alliance ... was extremely concerned about any legislation that would enable doctors to conduct telehealth consultations on "something as serious as this". "Through in-person consultation you get to know patients ... pick up on their unspoken body language, which can't be ascertained through the internet. ...you're talking about people killing themselves ... and it would seem inappropriate to do it via telehealth." (***The Age, 4 May, p. 4***).

Anti-life 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.

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.

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, to name a few. They chose to follow their consciences rather than an unjust law. Support our

health professionals and their rights to conscience including Catholic hospitals, to challenge this legislation by contacting your State MP. These are concrete ways of obeying the command to love one another in the name of God who is love.



# Mother's Day

## Readings occurring on 14<sup>th</sup> May each year

Today we honour our mothers, whom we often take for granted. A neighbour asked the mother of a big family: "How do you divide your love among all your children?" She replied, "I don't divide it, I multiply it." The wonder is that giving the whole of your love to one person, doesn't mean the others get less. Each gets more. I come from a family of six children and find that to be so true. It's not that mum had to do everything, she and dad involved us brothers and sisters to work as a team from an early age. God loves the whole of humanity as if each of us were the only one.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. Celebrating Mother's Day isn't a mushy kind of love but carries with it an openness to learn and hold on to what mum wanted to convey to us, to pray, to know right from wrong, to obey God, to be generous and loving as God our Father wants us to be, to grow to our full humanness as persons.

Pope Francis in his exhortation *The Joy of Loving*, on families, wrote that "each new life allows us to appreciate the utterly gratuitous dimension of love, which never ceases to amaze us. It is the beauty of being loved first: children are loved before they arrive — it's the primacy of the love of God who loved us first."

As mothers, you are among the most outstanding group in our community, doing remarkably well in identifying and bringing out the talent of your children, fostering in them that unique sense of personal worth and creativity which is the key to entering into life. Trying to keep abreast of the specific social challenges your children meet, aware of their problems, and you share the sheer joy on their faces when each child achieves something, especially when she or he started from disadvantage.

You bring new and great gifts to your children and the greatest gift is yourself. It matters what you do and say. Your children are gifted by your difference. To be a mother is a special calling. Give it your best. Be true to your own giftedness.

Pope Francis invites parents to dream, but not preclude the unique dreams of your child. You see the struggle in the Gospel: Mary and Joseph searching for Jesus who has gone missing and finding him three days later in the temple, and the mother's exasperation, "Why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been searching for you with great anxiety." They meet Jesus' reply, his seeming unconcern, "Why are you searching for me? Didn't you know I must be in my Father's house, be about my Father's business?" It's not a smart reply that often annoys parents, but honest searching to know what his or her unique calling is. It's not rebellion, for Jesus went back to Nazareth and was obedient to them preparing for his life's work.

Each child is not the same, and they change as they grow. Collaborate with others whom you know and trust and consult with them about different approaches to your children as you see them growing, learning, and changing. Learning how they change, are moody, difficult to handle, don't like to be corrected or don't like your approach, and can be rude and against you, petulant like the kids in the Gospel, "you didn't dance to our tune!" It takes time and patience to develop your ability to handle them.

As your children grow and learn new things, be open and willing to exchange ideas and learn from them. It calls for humility. Pope Francis with great affection urges all mothers especially young mothers, "Keep happy and let nothing rob you of the interior joy of motherhood. Your child deserves your happiness. Don't let fears, worries, other people's comments or problems, such as, 'What right have you to have another child,' lessen your joy at being God's means of bringing new life to the world ... Ask the Lord to preserve your joy, so that you can pass it on to your child. May you always be overwhelmed by the grace of God rather than by the cares of life."

We live in a culture where individualism is so marked. We need to create ways of togetherness. Walt Whitman in his poem *Song of Myself*, stanza 51, writes that each of us contains multitudes. If we could respectfully encounter each other, listen to other's stories, what rich memories we could accumulate that would foster creative imagination. Being a mother is not just about the mind, but the soul. Learn from Christ; the depth of his approach and variety of his ways with people that we can learn from.

Love is what mothers do best. You teach love in the only effective way we do anything: by doing loving things for your children and for other people. Like Jesus you are the measurement on how we are to love. Every mother silently says; watch me and you will learn to love. Let me move you from inbred selfishness to sharing and concern for others. Watch me and I will show you how to do it. Yet there are times when you have to challenge your children, like how Jesus challenged Peter: "Do you love me?" I need you to show it. Tough love can wake up the children to the honour they owe you. Children naturally own you, "My mum, my dad, my things", but they also owe you appreciation and love which we do today.

"Where is the growing edge in your life, where the Spirit is calling you further?" Use your gifts and be open, searching, looking to grow, and become better.

Take time to think, it is the source of power. Take time to play, it is the secret of perpetual youth; take time to read, it is the foundation of wisdom; take time to pray it is the greatest power on earth; take time to love and be loved, it is a God-given privilege; take time to give, it is too short a time to be selfish; take time to work, it is the power of success. We are the most talkative age in history. Silence prepares us for action.

On this Mother's Day, God bless you mum, You are the one!

# The Ascension of the Lord

Acts 1:1-11

Eph. 4:1-13 or Eph. 4:1-7, 11-13

Mk. 16:15-20

The two angels chided the Apostles, “Why are you standing here looking upwards, get on with the job!” And as Jesus ascended, his accompanying angels were astounded as they looked down at the men who were to continue Christ’s work. John Chrysostom wrote, “It was through the agency of uneducated men that the cross brought conviction, and drew the whole world to itself ... If so, it is clear the Gospel is divine. For how was it possible for unlettered men to attempt such great enterprises, men who were cowardly and unmanly, failures, some fled, Peter denied him? They even asked themselves, ‘When he was alive, he did not conquer a single nation — shall we convince the whole world by speaking his name?’ It would have been folly even to conceive of such things, let alone to do them. It is clear that if they had not seen him risen and received this mighty proof of his power, they would never have risked such a gamble” (**Hom. 4:3-4; The Divine Office III, p. 214\* adapted**).

But that changed when the Holy Spirit came upon them with power as they prayed with Mary in the Upper Room. They knew that Jesus had made it back to the Father, and they with him. As Peter explained to the crowds in Acts 2:33: “Exalted at God’s right hand, Jesus first received the promised Holy Spirit from the Father, then poured this Spirit on us. This is the Jesus that God raised; we are his witnesses.”

When Jesus took his Apostles to the mountain, he opened up a vista upwards to their ultimate destiny, but he also gave them a vision outward to the world around them. Their mission was to preach Christ risen. The departure of Jesus was necessary for the completion of his mission and the maturing of the disciples themselves.

On our part we are to continue the message and mission of Jesus, by being Jesus, by bringing him alive through our life and witness. For this we need the Holy Spirit who comes to reveal Jesus to us and in us, to interiorise and universalise Jesus in every culture, place, and time. But how do we witness? Through our bodies, as Teresa of Avila said, “Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good, and yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.” Playing netball or footy, caring for the sick, feeding the baby or looking after the grandchildren ... all these can witness Jesus through our attitude. Jesus continues to work with us, “through the signs that accompany our work,” writes Mark.

The Ascension reveals the wonderful dignity of our total person, our humanity that now has access to God (Jesus pioneered the way); and the command to be witnesses. Jesus’ ascending does not cast off the body. It’s not a deliverance from the body, but the resurrection of the body. Jesus risen carries the wounds on his body he suffered for us, and on his heart, before the Father.

These are his glory wounds.

This body of ours, with its groans and bulges, its vitality, emotions, capacity to dance, its ups and downs, headaches, and heartaches, is of immense value and dignity. As we work for family, experience tiredness of body or illness, ultimately we carry these before God. There's a story about Satan who disguised himself as the risen Jesus, and disguised his evil angels as angels of light, who sang "Lift up your gates O heaven, and let the king of glory enter." The angels in heaven were thrilled and began to open the gates as they asked, "Who is this king of glory?" And Satan opened wide his hands in a grandiloquent gesture and said, "It's me." Immediately the heavenly angels slammed shut the gates. The marks of the wounds were not there. He had not earned access to God.

The Father has shown Jesus, through Resurrection and Ascension, as the only way to live. Jesus, as man, has made it to the Father and has inserted into our humanity this relationship he has with God. He shows us our destiny. Jesus' reverence for our human dignity has to find expression in our life; to be convinced of Jesus' way of living, to live it and spread it.

There's a cynical statement, "He's so heavenly minded, he's no earthly use." But it's precisely when we take on the mind of Christ that we are more effective on earth. Remember the story of Eric Liddell in the film, ***Chariots of Fire***. He would not run on the Sabbath despite the cajoling and pressure from the Olympic Committee. And the comment of one on that committee: "The lad is a true athlete, a man of principle. His speed is a mere extension of his belief. We tried to sever his running from his person, and nothing is worth that, least of all a guilty national pride." Our pride in Christ, risen and ascended, makes us heirs and co-heirs. Let it find expression in our witness in all we do and all we say.

## Second Homily

A famous explorer who spent two years making it to the North Pole wrote a message and tied it to his pigeon, it circled three times around him, nothing but ice all around, and flew 2000 miles to Norway and flapped into the lap of his wife. She knew that he had made it.

When the Holy Spirit came with power on the Apostles and Mary, they knew that Jesus (in the humanity that he shared with us) had gained intimate access to God. As Peter explained to the crowds in Acts 2:33: "Exalted at God's right hand, Jesus first received the promised Holy Spirit from the Father, and then poured this Spirit on us." This is the Jesus God raised up, and we are his witnesses.

There are two things here: the wonderful dignity of our total person, of our humanity that now has access to God, Jesus pioneered the way, and the command to be witnesses.

Jesus' ascending does not cast off the body, it's not a deliverance from the body. Jesus risen carries the wounds on his body, on his heart for us, before the Father. These are glory wounds.

This body of ours, with its groans and bulges, is of immense value and dignity. Our own suffering in our body as we work for family, for others, ultimately, we carry these before God. Satan disguised himself as the risen Jesus and disguised his evil angels as angels of light who sang “Lift up your gates, O heaven and let the King of glory enter.” The angels in heaven were thrilled and began to open the gates as they asked, “Who is this King of glory?” And Satan opened wide his hands and said, “It is me.” Immediately the heavenly angels snapped shut the doors. The marks of the wounds were not there, he had not earned access to God.

The Father has shown Jesus, through Resurrection and Ascension as the only way to live, to become fulfilled, radiant human beings. Jesus as man has made it to the Father and has inserted into our humanity this relationship he has with God. In Jesus we are there with God. Further, Jesus’ reverence for our human dignity has to find expression in our own life. To be convinced of Jesus’ way of living, to live it and spread it. For this we need to have caught the fire of the Spirit. The same power that raised Jesus is poured out on us through the Holy Spirit.

Our second mission to witness: if someone you love dies or departs, often you step in to carry on that person’s work and you mature through it. The departure of Jesus was necessary for the completion of his mission and the maturity of the disciples. We are to continue the message and mission of Jesus, by bringing him alive through our life and witness. We need the Holy Spirit who comes to reveal Jesus to us and in us, to interiorize and universalize Jesus in every culture, place, and time.

Theresa of Avila said: “Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good, and yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.” Playing netball or footy, caring for the sick, feeding the baby or looking after the grandchildren ... all these can witness Jesus through our attitude. Jesus continues to work with us, “through the signs that accompany our work,” writes Mark.

There’s a cynical statement, “He’s so heavenly minded, he’s no earthly use.” But it’s precisely when we take on the mind of Christ that we are more effective on earth. Remember the story of Eric Liddell in the film, ***Chariots of Fire***. He would not run on the Sabbath despite the cajoling and pressure from the Olympic Committee. And the comment of one on that committee: “The lad is a true athlete, a man of principle. His speed is a mere extension of his belief. We tried to sever his running from his person, and nothing is worth that, least of all a guilty national pride.” Our pride in Christ, risen and ascended, makes us heirs and co-heirs. Let it find expression in our witness in all we do and all we say.

# The Feast of Mary, Queen of Apostles

Judith 13:23-26

Acts 1:12-14

Jn. 19: 24-27

St Vincent Pallotti's foundation of the Union of Catholic Apostolate, which called all Catholics, lay, religious and clergy to be Apostles, came under suspicion. He wasn't allowed to use the title, Catholic Apostolate. The idea of lay apostolate was considered an attack against the official apostolate of the hierarchy and deemed identical with the Protestant idea of a 'general priesthood' beside which there was no place for a hierarchical priesthood. Not allowed to use the title, Vincent changed the aim of the Union to "Deepening, defending and propagating the Catholic Faith, under the special protection of Mary, Queen of Apostles, and in absolute dependence on the Pope".

Mary, Queen of Apostles was the visible icon of Pallotti's great idea. It said it all, especially when he added to the picture two women on either side of Mary. Mary was neither priest, nor did she preach, but it was the quality of her life that summed up his vision of all called to be Apostles. She was model, mentor and intercessor for the whole Church in mission.

Pallotti's vision was closer to that spoken in **(1 Peter 2:9)**: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people God claims for his own." With an over-emphasis on clergy, the laity were reduced to a passive state. But the Greek word *laos* meant not one group in the Church but meant God's holy people, every single person baptised into Christ, who needed to be awakened to the call to bring Christ to the world. This vision was endorsed by Vatican II, **(Chapter Two in the Constitution on the Church (LG) 2:12,13)**, all the baptized form one People of God with the co-responsibility of every member. When I joined the Pallottines in 1957, in my meditations on the picture of Mary, Queen of Apostles, I came to see it was not just a holy picture but a vision of what the Church was meant to be. In each work I started I wanted to make the vision of the Cenacle a reality, at Millgrove, in Riverton and in Syndal. The Cenacle isn't rooted to a place but must live in the hearts and minds of people.

The first reading from the *Book of Judith* **(Jdt. 13:22-26)**, speaks of the role of a woman in the saving of God's people. Nebuchadnezzar, the Assyrian king, sent his general Holofernes to besiege the Jewish city of Bethulia and cut off its water supply. At a time when the Jewish nation was ready to capitulate to the Assyrian army, Judith, described as a beautiful young widow, resolved to save her people. She fasted and prayed then dressed in her finest linen and, with her maid, walked into the camp of the enemy. Holofernes was captured by her beauty and after three days had her dine with him. In a drunken state he took her into his tent and fell asleep on the bed. Judith told her maid to keep guard while she, left alone with Holofernes, took his sword and cut off his head. She put it in the food basket her maid carried and walked out together with her from the camp back to

her own people. The Assyrians panicked when they discovered their leader dead and were routed by the now invigorated Jews.

The story took me to Genesis 3:15 called the proto-Gospel which spoke of the woman whose offspring would strike at the serpent's head through suffering, it is seen by the Church as referring to Mary and her Son, Jesus, who will suffer to redeem humanity after the Fall. Mary's role is subordinate to Christ's (**ibid. LG, 62**); as Queen of Apostles ... she remained intimately connected to her Son and cooperated in an entirely unique way in the Saviour's work" (**Decree on the Laity (AA) 1,4**). The Gospel of John (**19:26-7**) takes us into the mystery of the woman under the cross. She is called to Mother Christ in us. When the disciples were at their lowest ebb, they gathered in the Cenacle with Mary and joined with her in unceasing prayer. From being dispirited they were opened to the power of the Holy Spirit by the courage of Mary, who helped birth them into actively becoming Apostles and carrying Christ to the world. The Cenacle is the place of power for mission through prayer. And Mary is at the heart of that. Pray to her.

# Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-11

Gal. 5:16-25 Sequence: *Veni Sancte Spiritus*

Jn. 15:26-27; 16:12-15

Pentecost is not a stand-alone feast. It is the Jewish celebration of the week of weeks  $7 \times 7 = 49 + 1$ . If the number 7 for a Jew meant fullness, poured out and running over; 7 times 7 meant a harvest. Pentecost meant the 50<sup>th</sup> day; originally a nature feast, it became a celebration of the giving of the Law on Mt Sinai. Pentecost for Christians, however, meant the fullness of the Easter mystery. The feast celebrates Christ's return to the Father, the conjoint sending of the Spirit from his Father who is the source of all mission and the continuation of that mission in the Church, in people like you and me. God's love revealed in Jesus is now splashed upon our earth by the Holy Spirit. Christ came to the world as love that the world might come to love as Christ. The Holy Spirit is the embodiment of their love.

In the Gospel, the Spirit comes alongside as a defence lawyer to argue Jesus' case that he truly is the Son of God, and to strengthen the Apostles to go into the marketplace and bear witness to anyone willing to hear. The descent of the dove brings the compelling conviction that Jesus is alive, even in the worst catastrophe. In the Acts of the Apostles, we have the powerful image of the Holy Spirit as one who is not shy of the boundaries and barriers that people erect.

How does the Spirit continue Christ's mission in us? In Acts, we hear the Spirit coming as a mighty wind and flames of fire; the Spirit is not like a spring breeze, she is more like the winds that hit and lay flat all the precious protections against her force. The Spirit fills not only the place, she fills the disciples' minds and hearts. She takes this group of dispirited followers and fires them with a new energy, a new enthusiasm and a new authority. She brings the capacity for the disciples to open themselves to risk, and the fire brings new light and understanding, conviction and boldness; the Apostles move out to proclaim to all how they have been changed by the Spirit.

The noise not only fills the house, but it also fills the Apostles and women in the Upper Room; it draws people with its noise to ask, What's going on? It speaks to the yearning in people's hearts when they see joy, a community alive; the yearning to escape the frustration, monotony of one's life, to ask: What must we do to share in the same spirit? The Spirit might work in our own lives in a similar way. When we experience a crisis, physical, moral or spiritual, when things collapse, confusion reigns in our minds and hearts; this is when the Spirit draws near to us as we are asking why, what's happening, why is this happening to me?

It's not just the inflammatory speech of Peter, telling the Good News of Jesus, but it's something more. In verse 37, chapter 2 of Acts we are told, "that when the people heard this they were cut to the heart and asked Peter what should we do?" In J.R. Tolkien's words, the work of the Spirit is "to rekindle hearts in a world grown cold". To rekindle is a homely word, like being around the fire; being at home, coming home to oneself and to God. The Spirit speaks to our inner selves.



We are not happy living on the surface, knowing the potential in us for good not yet exercised, and yearning for a religious life that makes greater demands on us. The growing sense of dissatisfaction with our own ordinariness is accompanied by a passionate craving for surrender, sacrifice and abandonment to God's will. It is personal, but it is also the impact of a loving, welcoming community that is aware of being sent.

Sometimes we are afraid to yield to the Spirit. Why don't people ask of us that first question addressed to the Apostles — What's going on? — so that they might ask the second question — What must we do, so that we might share your Spirit? That we are not yet in unity as a Christian Church must lead us to the fire of the Spirit who is the basis and power of Christian unity. Sr Mary Wickham in her book of poems ***In the water was the fire*** wrote desirous of unity: "I thought it died and I wept for it, since its death meant death for me. But the tears became a spring and in the waters was the fire, a thousand lights and flashes, and in the pain was your desire ... this passion of presence is, after all, beyond sullyng or sense or measurement and is the love I know but am slow to learn."

To rekindle hearts in a world grown cold, expresses beautifully St Vincent Pallotti's challenge to all of us to evangelise. To bring the good news to people of our time: to revive faith and rekindle love. We are not to be a fortress Church keeping out secular forces and the relativity of truth. We are to be in the world, with a passion to bring about God's kingdom. Grace is another word for the Holy Spirit who is present everywhere in everyone, provided we tune in to the Spirit's wavelength. It is a call for each of us to start afresh with Christ, to contemplate the face of Christ in prayer, scripture and in love.

## Second Homily

Standing in the rain (in this cold weather), waiting for a bus is no-one's idea of a pleasant way to pass the time. Waiting for an important letter to arrive, or exam results, or for people to turn up, are all activities that few of us actually enjoy. There are times in the lives of all of us when there is nothing else to do but wait. It seems such a waste of time. We feel frustrated for we have no control over what happens. But there are times when waiting can be a positive experience: parents waiting for the birth of their child, full of hope in the promise of the child. What they are waiting for is quietly taking shape in the tiny bundle of life in the mother's womb. So too, in the history of God's people: the community wait for the fulfilment of a promise that God will come.

The first reading shows the Apostles, Mary and the women, and the brothers coming together in the Cenacle in anticipation of Jesus' word: "Stay in Jerusalem until you receive power from on high." Waiting on the Spirit is not their idea; rather they wait on the basis of the promise of Jesus. They are a community gathered around that promise — they are expectant that something new will happen in them, and they are attentive to the present moment through prayer. We're witnessing the first page in the Church's biography. What new thing are we, the parishioners of St

Christopher's expecting? What is the next page in our community's biography?

At the beginning of his Gospel, Luke showed us that Mary's response to the Word of God was to let it happen. Let it be. Let it become. Let it take shape in her. Now Luke shows us at the beginning of the Church how the whole community responds to the Word like Mary first did: they wait attentively to let the Word of God happen in their lives. They wait together, because together is the place where the Spirit comes. Wait and receive are two words that describe the coming of the Spirit, and neither word is our doing.

What we are invited to do as we approach the feast of the Spirit at Pentecost is to wait together around the promise of Jesus: to share the conviction of the first Christian community that the Spirit of God will send us out in mission. Waiting is not passivity; it is the prelude to action; but like waiting it is not our doing. It is our action in response to the Spirit.

In 2009 the parish council began quarterly home Masses in our parish divided into zones which developed into friendship groupings. We didn't know the outcome. Our prayer was "that the Lord may open a door for us" (**Col. 4:3-6**). Letters went out two weeks in advance to everyone in the zones inviting them to come. We wanted to know each other in our neighbourhood, to build togetherness. For example, if you look along your pew, how many people on that pew do you know by name? We need to build togetherness; it's in small groups that we grow in our faith, in prayer and in confidence, and grow into the likeness of Christ. Galatians mentions the fruits of the Spirit which really are the characteristics of Jesus. Affirm the signs of Jesus you see in each other: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, great-heartedness, faithfulness and self-control.

My experience of neighbourhood groups is how people grow and begin to reach out to others around them on the basis of neighbourliness. I think the time is coming when Christians will need to stand by each other. The stresses are great; the temptation to isolation is strong. Jesus throughout his ministry, kept laying his hand on unlikely people saying YOU ARE NEEDED, and so awakened in them a transforming respect for the importance of their own lives. The Spirit does the same. Jesus promises us we are not alone. "When the Advocate comes, whom I shall send from the Father, the Spirit of truth, she will be my witness and you too will be my witnesses."

**FEASTS OF THE LORD**

**IN**

**ORDINARY TIME**

**Year B**

# The Most Holy Trinity

**Deut. 4:32-34, 39-40**

**Rom. 8:14-17**

**Mt. 28:16-20**

On this feast of the Holy Trinity, John Donne's *Holy Sonnet XVI* has been going round in my head. I wondered what a 16<sup>th</sup> century poet and Anglican priest can say to our generation? He writes, "Batter my heart three-personed God," almost as if God's gentle ways with him, knocking, breathing, shining and seeking to mend, were not enough. "Batter my heart three-personed God, that I may rise and stand, overthrow me and bend your force to break, blow, burn and make me new ... I labour to admit you, but O to no end ... Reason your viceroy in me, should defend but is betrothed to your enemy." It's as if he is saying I want to change, to open my heart to you, God, but I am caught up, absorbed in my own plans, decision-making, my reason. My love for you is lukewarm, you are not yet a person to me, least of all a three-personed God.

In very strong sensual language, he concludes the sonnet: "Divorce, untie, or break that knot again, Take me to you, imprison me, for I, except you enthrall me, shall never be free, nor ever chaste unless you ravish me."

It took me further back to a 4<sup>th</sup> century Manichae and saint, who had given Christianity away and for nine years embraced the dualistic religion of Mani. If the soul in the body was like a bird seeking to get out of its cage, then the body was either feared or treated like a toy or a plaything which suited his lifestyle as he sought to elaborate his own vision of life without God.

But after his conversion Augustine wrote: "You were within me and I was outside; in my sensuousness I plunged into all the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would not have been at all." How many young women as well as men go to parties to get blotto? Where is their sense of self?

How did Augustine break free? In words like John Donne's, he needed God to do it, and God touched every one of his senses which he had indulged before. Now Augustine could write: "You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace. Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you!" God wants us, our total being, in a relationship with himself so that we can relate to others in loving ways.

How are we going to change, unless God, the triune God breaks into our lives? Bruce Springsteen resonates with our generation. "Everybody's got a hungry heart. Everybody needs a place to rest. Everybody wants to have a home. Don't make no difference what nobody says. Ain't nobody likes to be alone. Everybody's got a hungry heart."

Gerard May, the well-known psychologist wrote: "After 20 years of listening to the yearnings of

people's hearts ... I am convinced that all human beings have an inborn desire for God. It is 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."

Even in our marriage there's an aliveness but also a death in our sexuality as we experience a profound oneness and an equally profound aloneness in our journey toward each other in God. Into our weak flesh God has put this immense, sometimes uncontrollable urge to love and be loved. In the midst of his suffering and disappointments St Paul experienced God's love being poured into his heart through the Holy Spirit.

We have a capacity for the infinite, and the actualisation 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. 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 the 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 community of Father, Son and Spirit has created in us an orientation toward family, toward community. Community is not in numbers, in counting heads, but in the quality of the relationships between us. That's what makes community, the solitary and the social, me and others. This is the tension and the richness, the polarity that we live. Risking relationships is where we find God and find ourselves. We are never alone. Only the Trinity which made it can fill the vast three-cornered heart of man and woman.

## Second Homily

We are never alone. The first reading, Deuteronomy, tells us how God wants to be with us, not only creating us but coming into a living relationship freely chosen. God struggles and strengthens us every moment of our life, job, family. Jesus promises in the Spirit to be with us always. But we also have a job to do, the great commission, to go, make disciples, baptise them and teach them how to live by keeping God's commands.

I remember Fr Benedict Groeschel, who ran the Children's Village in NY, saying it was getting too hard for him. He sat, discouraged, on the edge of the pavement, and then Jesus spoke to him, "I will be with you always." It is the witness of God's Spirit to our spirit that tells us we are not alone, that we belong to family, that we are sons and daughters of God. This relationship is an invitation for us to be ourselves. We have not received a spirit of slavery that keeps us down and bound up, but a Spirit that helps us be ourselves as we cry out spontaneously, "Abba, Father."

Our character is forged by endurance through all kinds of struggle. Endurance produces hope

and this hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Paul's words in Galatians 4:6: "God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts who cries out Abba! in us, to prove that I am a son or daughter," relates to Galatians 1:9, "God revealed his Son *in me*." It is in Jesus that I have a new relationship to my Father, or rather, it is Jesus in me who speaks to his and my Father. In John 16:12-15, Jesus promises us the Spirit of truth, the Spirit who speaks Jesus' words to us to guide us, but that word of love is from the Father. You see the close relationship between all the members of the Trinity in that simple paragraph.

The Spirit takes us into Jesus, moves us, through him into the deep life of the Trinity, the family of God. Think how the Spirit was given to us; it gives us strength to give ourselves to one another. As Jesus died, knowing himself as Son, obedient to the task his Father had given him, to win us all back for God, and to open up a new way of relating to God, John said that Jesus prayed to his Father, "It is done, completed, finished," and he breathed, gave over his Spirit to the Church that we may live by that same Spirit and carry on his work. That Spirit is the love of Jesus for the Father and for us, totally poured out on the cross, and the Father's love for the Son and for us is the powerful Holy Spirit who is poured out on us. Only the Trinity can fill the human heart.

## Third Homily

The flame ... what a wonderful symbol for the feast we celebrate today, the Feast of the Holy Trinity. This is the flame we Christians pass on — the dynamic shared life of Father, Son and Spirit, the burning love of God. Jesus sent the flame to unite our world with God, and the Spirit poured into our hearts to ignite the passion in each generation: the shared life of Father, Son and Spirit that ignites our lives in community, in marriage, in friendships. When I catch the flame, my person becomes a being in love; then I have a love that radiates to everyone and everything — because our God's total self is passionate, ignited love, and the wonder of it all — that love is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. The special contribution we make to the religious dialogue with all cultures and nations is our belief that the ultimate and unutterable mystery is a God whose whole being is love — the God we worship, shapes our attitude.

What about the Trinity? As working examples, the triangle is tired and the shamrock is long wilted; besides, both treat the Trinity as a problem to be reckoned with rather than a mystery to be entered into (**Denis McBride, *ibid*, p. 170**). Our task is not to explain the Trinity but to experience the truth it symbolises.

For three centuries the Church struggled with its experiences of God. There was the Almighty One, maker of heaven and earth — the Sovereign of creation, the Liberator of Israel, and the one called Abba Father, by Jesus. There was Jesus — pre-existent wisdom, logos behind the order of creation, the word spoken to make creation come into being, the only begotten Son, Christ, prophet, and revealer of God. There was the Spirit — power, flame, fire, wind, communicator, guide, comforter, Spirit of truth, channel through whom God is present to us. Although diverse these

images possessed a unity. The same God lay behind each, so the Church began to speak of “three faces of God”, God in three personae. In Greek drama the persona was the mask the actor “sounded through” to take the audience into divine human realities.

The Trinity is about the three faces of God. We would be better served by the image of relationships. The Trinity is about our experience of God in three relationships of burning personal love. But each relationship is so firmly rooted in the other two that we recognize not only the face of the one we see but also the personalities of the other two and behind it all, the unity of the Holy One of Israel. Another way saying this is that there is always more to God than we experience in any one face, manifestation, or relationship. When we experience God as our Creator and Father, behind that relationship also lies the Saviour who suffers evil and death for us, and the Spirit who reaches out for us in comfort, strength and enabling power to lead us into truth. Regardless of which relationship is reaching out to us, the other two are there as well.

The Trinity takes us into community, into the quality of our relationships. Just as Jesus and the Father are one, but unique in their identities, so we cannot find our true selves except through the free gift of ourselves to others. Real relationships don't stifle who we are. Union differentiates. We dwell in those we love, and they dwell in us. Ask Jesus to lead us into the mystery of the Trinity. He tells us, “I dwell in the Father, as the Father dwells in me. As you Father are in me and I am in you, may my disciples also be in us. As I have loved so you must love one another, receive the Spirit of love.”

# The Body and Blood of Christ

Ex. 24:3-8

Heb. 9:11-15 Sequence: *Lauda Sion*

Mk. 14:12-16, 22-26

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, in his brokenness. He doesn't back down when the crowd say it's too hard, who can believe it? He doesn't say, I know it's too hard, I'll break it down, make it more palatable. He turns to the twelve and asks them bluntly, "Do you also want to go away?" He cannot deny what he stands for and what his gift demands of them. In the Eucharist he wants to be taken in by us. So how do we respond to Jesus?

The Council of Trent spoke of the Eucharist as an unbloody sacrifice, the mode is different, the reality is the same. You don't often see the figure of Jesus on the cross in Protestant churches. Is Eucharist as sacrifice too confronting? But how do we understand what Jesus is saying? We need to see the Eucharist against the background of the Passover meal which celebrates even today 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 first-born males. 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, for example in the Second Eucharistic Prayer: "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.” And 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 they have been transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. The Church called 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 take on 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

When I was in primary school, there was the cry, “Fight, fight!” and a circle quickly formed. The only trouble was that I was in the fight. The other boy charged at me, ran into my fist which I held in a defensive position. His nose bled. It was all over. The sight of blood, it seemed, sealed the deal and the crowd dispersed. The Semitic people sealed their agreements with blood. To stand in the blood of the Covenant seems a shocking idea to us, but it was the way they forged a treaty between tribes or individuals. Each promised before their gods, “I will give you this if you give me that.” To seal the covenant an animal was split in two, and the parties that made the agreement stood in the blood of the animal, and put their life on the line, before everyone, to fulfil what they had promised. If they didn't keep the promise, the blood represented what might happen to them. To stand in the blood of the covenant then, meant to put your whole life on the line.

Our own experience tells us how necessary blood is for life. We can bleed to death. Blood for the Jew was sacred, it was the source of life. So many have spoken out against the senseless shedding of blood, the inhumane killing in Syria, Afghanistan, in the streets of our own cities, because life is sacred, and we are accountable to God for it.

In the first reading, the motley group of Jewish slaves who had been liberated, freed from the yoke of slavery by God, arrived at Mt Sinai where Moses received and read out the Ten Commandments. Moses then enacted a covenant between the people and their God; a God who promised, “I will be your God and you will be my people”. An altar was set up representing God; twelve standing stones represented the twelve tribes. An animal was slaughtered, and Moses took the blood of the animal in a bowl and sprinkled half of it on the altar and the other half on the people after they agreed to observe all the commandments.

They knew that God had taken the initiative. In the covenant at Sinai, God promised the people to be with them always and care for them as his very own people, guiding their future, provided they kept the covenant faithfully, lived in love, and cared for the poor. Over time this covenant was expressed in relational terms as a marriage between God and his people. God would always be faithful even if his people fell away from keeping the covenant.

Nowadays we hear of people making a pre-nuptial agreement. But that isn't a covenant, it's a contract, which virtually says, "If you don't keep your part of the bargain, live up to the terms of our agreement, it's off and I'm off. And I'm making sure of what's mine before we start." But a covenant means putting my life on the line for the other. If you need my blood, a transfusion, it is yours! Here are the keys of the car, the house. It is a mutual love-commitment as each chooses the other and promises to be faithful in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, 'til death do us part.

That's why marriages are best celebrated at Mass. For at Mass, we see Jesus giving us his total self, his body and blood. The new covenant became reality in the Blood of Christ. On the night before his death, Jesus said, "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many." He put his whole life on the line. In the old dispensation God is portrayed as demanding sacrifice from the people for them to get close to him. But in Jesus we see God become our sacrifice so that he can get close to us. No more shedding human or animal blood to placate an angry God. In Jesus, we have a God who does not retaliate to all that is thrown at him; a seeming God of weakness who absorbs our hate, but who redeems the world. He gives his blood not like the high priest of old, once a year at Yom Kippur, but once and for all time.

John Shea tells the story of a hunter who went into the African bush and bagged two wild turkeys. On the way home he felt he was being followed; he turned around and saw a naked, starving boy following him with his hands outstretched. The hunter put down the birds and gestured to the boy to take them. Despite his hunger the boy stayed at a distance from the birds. He would not take them. It was only when the hunter puts them into his hands that the boy received them.

In the Eucharist, Jesus comes to be with us, to walk with us. But he wants us to receive the gift of his word and say, "We will do what you ask of us." The Eucharist after consecration does not stay on the altar, Christ needs to be received by us in all reverence, listening to his call on us, the unique ways he wants to use us. We are to become what we receive so that Christ can come to our world. "Take this and eat it, this is my body given up for you. This my blood shed for you." The covenant is sealed when we receive him in faith to empower us to put our life on the line for others and find expression in our covenant with each other.

The devil spoke to God. "You think these people worshipping you will be faithful?" "Yes!" said God, "but you can try." The devil shook the pews, made a terrible screaming noise, things flying everywhere. The people all ran out of Church. "See," said the devil, "what did I tell you?" God said,

“Look behind you.” There was an old man quietly praying. The devil came to him. “Don’t you know that I am the devil? Weren’t you scared with all the shaking and screaming?” “No,” said the old man, “I’ve been married to your sister for over 40 years.”

# Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Hos. 11:1, 3-4, 8c-9

Eph. 3:8-12, 14-19

Jn. 19:31-37

June is the month dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. James MacAuley, the Australian poet, captured the theology well: “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 **(Jn. 7:37-39)**: “From his breast will flow fountains of living water;” **(Jn. 13:23)**: “The disciple Jesus loved ... leaning back on Jesus’ breast;” and **(Jn. 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 humankind, which men so often rejected. She was charged to promote this devotion. Jesus revealed his burning love for 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 by 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, 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.”

# **SUNDAYS IN ORDINARY TIME**

**Year B**

# Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deut. 6:12-15

2 Cor 4:6-11

Mk. 2:23 – 3:6

Robert Louis Stevenson, in the 1860s, coming out of his strict Presbyterian Church in Edinburgh on the Sabbath, said with some surprise, “I went to Church today and am not depressed.” The Sabbath is not meant to be a dour affair but a joyous celebration as it was for the Jews on their liberation from bondage in Egypt. The Sabbath became the Jewish national memorial of their freedom, and a sign of God’s irrevocable covenant with them as his own people. The Jews kept the Sabbath, but the Sabbath has kept the Jews through centuries of persecution.

Of the Ten Commandments, the third was a welcome reprieve from slavery, enabling the people to rest and worship the God who saved them. “The seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord” (Ex. 31:15). “Six days you shall labour and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work” (Ex. 20:8-10).

“God’s action is the model for human action.” If God after six days of creation “rested and was refreshed” on the seventh day, then human beings ought “to rest”, especially the poor who battle for existence. The Sabbath brings everyday work to a halt and provides a respite. It is a protest against the servitude of work and the worship of money” (CCC 2172).

The Gospel reported many incidents when Jesus was accused of breaking the Sabbath. He kept holy the Sabbath, but he challenged the Pharisees who had ringed the Sabbath with so many minute observances that robbed the Sabbath of its joy. If you have been on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, staying at any hotel, every minute action, such as switching on the coffee machine or selecting the floor number on the lift is automated because it is regarded as labour.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus’ disciples are accused of breaking the Sabbath as they plucked ears of corn to assuage their hunger. To pluck and eat was considered reaping, milling and preparing a meal, which took a simple ordinary act out of all proportion. Jesus replied by quoting what David did, doing something that only the priests were allowed to do, eating the show bread in the temple and sharing them with his followers.

“Jesus gave the Sabbath law its authoritative interpretation when he said: ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath!’” He was constantly reaching out to people in need on the Sabbath but also in his everyday ministry. He pointed out the double standard of his critics who would pull an ox or animal out of a well on that day but would not redeem people with severe disabilities by healing them on the Sabbath. He declared that “the Sabbath was for doing good rather than harm, for saving life rather than killing. The Sabbath is the day of the Lord of mercies and a day to honour God. ‘The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath’” (cf. CCC 2173).

We have just celebrated the Feast of Easter which for Christians was the first day of the new creation brought about by the death/resurrection of Jesus. Sunday has the same demand, time to

rest, open ourselves to worship God, deepen our relationships with one another in faith, especially the family, and to pursue interests that enrich us.

We gather as the new people of God in liturgy, especially at the Eucharist and other sacraments to worship God together and refresh our lives: *“The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time, it is the fount [source] from which all the Church’s power flows” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 10)*. What that means is twofold: The Sunday Mass is the source of nourishment for our lives as Christians. But it’s not simply an event or an occasion in which we visit the parish Church on the weekend; it is a celebration of our communal role in the mission of the Church. We need to discover, individually and as a community where Christ is calling us to serve as he did and express it in liturgy. At the end of each Mass, we are sent out to be Christ to those whom God sends into our lives. The liturgy extends from Sunday to the other days of the week, to the places beyond Church where we work, socialize, volunteer to help.

The Sabbath is in a special way, the Lord’s Day which reminds us that God has the first place in our lives, but don’t the other days belong to the Lord, too? We go to Church, not only to be in the presence of the holy and to have our lives influenced by that presence. But we should go to Church to be able to see the sacred dimension of everyday life. Without an effort to incorporate the sacred into life, religion can become so far removed from the human situation as to be irrelevant (cf. **Flor McCarthy, *New Sunday & Holy Day Liturgies, year B, p.207ff***). To leave the world to go to Church (the sacred) and then go back to the world (the secular) is a wrong distinction. The world is where God is at work to save and we need to be part of it, strengthened as we are by the Word of God and the presence of Christ in the community and in the Eucharist.

“For the Jews, the Sabbath was very important. It was a day reserved for the essentials: for prayer, reflection and relaxing with the family beneath the gaze of God. It was not an escape from the work of the other six days, but a time to re-find the energy to return to that reality with renewed strength ... Religion is not about how we pray on Sunday but about how we live every day” (**ibid. p.208**).



# Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Gen. 3:9-15

2 Cor. 4:13-5:1

Mk. 3:20-35

There's a joke about Adam in the garden naming all the animals but none were able to respond to his loneliness. God then promises him a woman who would do all the cooking, ironing and meet all his needs. "Wow," said Adam, "how much would that cost?" "An arm and a leg," said God! Adam replied, "Would a rib do?"

How subtle and intentional is the seduction of Satan. He sows doubt: "Who said you shall die if you eat of the fruit?" Followed by the temptation: "No! You shall not die, you will be like God, lifted high." Eve saw the fruit, how enticing it was. She said yes by her action, taking the fruit and giving it to Adam to eat who could have said no, but didn't. At that moment everything came crashing down, they found themselves naked, hiding from each other and from God. Where was Satan? He left them in the gutter, left them to be cast out. Only God came looking for them. They had broken trust and friendship with God, but God still came looking for them.

There is no nice compromise. "I forgive you, come back in." Adam and Eve had to wear the consequences of their disobedience, called original sin. But God still promised salvation, it's called the proto-evangelium, the first hint of the Good News when God says he will put enmity between Satan and the offspring of the woman. He will crush the serpent's head but be wounded in the encounter. The readings today are about spiritual warfare. Just look at the opposition piling up against Jesus. His own family call him nuts and want to take control of him; the scribes say he is in league with the devil; the family come to the front door calling for Jesus to come away and back into the family. Let's look at the opposition. First, his own relatives were not really concerned about Jesus. They were more ashamed of Jesus mixing and ministering to all these people, the down and outs, people sick from all kinds of diseases. He even ate with them and enjoyed their company. The family is more aware of what people will think of them having a son who is so way-out, according to their standards. They could not see the good he did, telling people the Good News and being restored to their dignity.

Francis Thompson was urged by his father to become a doctor, like himself. But Francis wanted to be a poet. He had no interest in medicine and fled the reproaches of his father, penniless to London, trying to make a living as a writer. He lived on the streets near Charing Cross and slept under London Bridge with the homeless and other addicts, selling matches, doing other jobs. He became addicted to opium, first taken as medicine for ill health. He was discovered by Wilfrid and Alice Meynell who took him into their home and found in his pockets scraps of poetry which were truly beautiful such as *The Hound of Heaven*. G.K. Chesterton wrote that "in Francis Thompson we lost the greatest poetic energy since Browning".

Second, the scribes, sent from Jerusalem to investigate Jesus and finding him casting out

demons, state categorically that Beelzebul is in him. It's in Satan's power that he casts out. These are the teachers of the people. Jesus is not going to let them get away with this statement. He tells them two parables: no kingdom divided against itself can last. The scribes are undermining Jesus' mission to set people free. The fact is, Satan and evil spirits are not divided against one another but are united in opposition against God and God's servant, Jesus.

The second parable deals with how Jesus can burgle Satan's territory setting the captives free. It is because the strong man (Satan) has been overpowered and bound up by an even stronger person, Jesus himself. He gives a stern warning to the scribes who are denying the Holy Spirit in him. They cannot be forgiven if they eliminate the very power of forgiveness that can only come through Jesus. They are caught in their own unrepentant blasphemy.

We need to be aware of the conflicts that can easily arise between us — stubborn insistence on our own viewpoint, jealousy, arguments about different ideologies. In the consistory that elected Pope Benedict, a German and American block of cardinals were pushing for Bergoglio. Bergoglio, later Pope Francis, said he discerned the tail of the serpent and pulled out of the running, encouraging the cardinals to vote for Benedict.

Third, the Gospel narrative returns to the family of Jesus, including Mary his mother. Unlike Luke's Gospel, Mark only mentions Mary twice, here and in **Mk. 6:3**. They want Jesus back into normal and predictable relationships. Jesus heard the calls from the front door, looked at the circle before him and called them his mother, brothers and sisters. They recognised and followed him in whom they saw the will of God.

“Perhaps Mark gives us a poignant insight into the truth that Mary, too, had to suffer the replacement of family ties by the bonds that created a new family of believers. And it is Mary as the first of the disciples, who did this most perfectly as she made the painful journey through doubts and dispossessions. This is the Mary whom we can surely identify with, admire, and thank God for her companionship on our pilgrimage of faith” (**Verna Holyhead, *Sowing the Seed*, p. 122**). Would many a mother be willing to encourage a child to serve in the priesthood, religious life or as a lay missionary locally or overseas? Satan is still at work, offering the good life and discouraging anyone from a generous and faithful following of Jesus. The battle is still going on.

# Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ezek. 17:22-24

2 Cor. 5:6-10

Mk. 4:26-34

Bigger isn't necessarily better. Following the crowd can be fairly soul destroying. Jesus, the Word, was sown alone in the earth of Nazareth knowing every plant and bird, the moods of every human heart, the hurts and yearnings of ordinary people, so that he could speak convincingly of the kingdom of God with images from nature, household chores, family and friendship. He speaks today of the kingdom of God as a seed. Isn't that how it grows?

God's love has been sown in us for a lifetime whether we are five or eighty-five; the Father's sun and rain makes no discrimination between good and bad. You can see the farmer in the Gospel, and scratching his head in wonder at God's love working without his knowledge; which makes us realise how unstinting, unmerited and free God's love and creation is.

When a person truly comes to faith, Jesus described it as small as a mustard seed, something great can happen like in the conversation between C.S. Lewis and J.R. Tolkien. They were great friends and writers of mythical stories. C.S. Lewis held that myths were simply fantasy. Tolkien argued that myths were fundamental truths experienced by people that were so true they stood the test of time. And he said, **the** myth was the powerful story of Jesus, who had an impact of people's lives and on history. They argued to four in the morning until Lewis fully understood and accepted what Tolkien was saying. From being an atheist and an agnostic C.S. Lewis became the foremost Christian apologist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Great things developed from that small action.

A similar thing happened to Bede Griffiths. He was an agnostic who came to see that the scriptures were not just works of literature, but moral truths that changed individuals and nations and behind those moral truths was a person. He became a Benedictine monk and founded an ashram in India — Shanti Vanam.

I am concerned about members of our parish who don't walk with us at present; are you concerned? We need to pray for them. They may not want to be found, but as Augustine said, even if the sheep don't want to be found, the shepherd still has the obligation to search for them because they are loved, lost, and longed for. As in the case of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, friendship is the precondition to share openly and honestly.

Imagine if our parish family could become that little shoot that reached higher, spread out its branches so that others could come and rest, be healed, come to realise their true giftedness and be able in turn to reach out to others. Yet the growth of that shoot comes from a mustard seed, the seed of faith.

Jesus wants to earth our faith in him. Always he creates the occasion for choice, like the rich young man who wanted more than the stereotyped answer, "Keep the commandments," by his further question, "What else?" Jesus brought him down to his particular brass tacks: "Sell what you

have, give it to the poor and come, follow me.” Jesus made faith in him specific. The economic answer was, for that particular man, the way to declare his absolute trust in Jesus instead of in his investments. It was an invitation to change the very foundation on which his life had been built for another one. If he could start off in this unthought of, impossible direction, there was a way through for his life. How does Christ want you to earth your faith? What particular brass tacks does he want to bring you down to?

C. S. Lewis was never offered a professor’s chair in Oxford because of his Christianity but was offered one in Cambridge. That bias is present today. We shouldn’t confuse size with significance. A majority doesn’t necessarily decide what is right. More often than not, minorities have been the great change agents and carriers of truth for the rest of society. Renewal and revival have come through minorities. The abolition of slavery (Clarkson and Wilberforce), the securing of civil rights, respect for human life, care for the environment, have happened through a small dynamic and committed minority. The Vincent de Paul Conference, menAlive and other parish groups are such examples. The renewal and revival that our culture and world need, will come from a minority filled with fire, spiritual muscle, and the truth. They are the future. It is not the number of people who claim the name Christian that will change the world but the intensity with which they live their faith. Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, “Don’t judge each day by the harvest you reap, but by the seeds you plant.” What seeds have you planted or are willing to plant?

# Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Job 38:1, 8-11

2 Cor. 5:14-17

Mk. 4:35-41

The instinctive burst of anger, even hate, when you've stepped on a plank on the scaffold that suddenly gave way or were narrowly missed by a car that was clearly in the wrong: "Don't you care! I almost got killed" ... It's the same outburst the disciples make to Jesus, asleep, oblivious of their plight ... "Don't you care, can't you see we're going down?" When our life is endangered, we hit out.

Mark is writing not only about the disciples in the boat, but for his own community, for us and our community. What's happening in the boat, in our lives? We're in the dark, battling alone, going under (we're in survival mode), who cares? And where's Jesus? Is something like that happening in our lives right now, with Covid 19, businesses going under, unemployment, we're in the queues for help? Chaos, turmoil within, conflict without, unfair treatment at home or work, the feeling of being alone ... you want someone to hear you.

In Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons*, Thomas More is in prison awaiting execution, disgraced; he can hear former associates chatting merrily as they go for a meal, he is totally alone. His uncomprehending wife, Alice, brings him food, a custard dish and Thomas, trying to rise above his situation, compliments her on her cooking. Alice explodes in a tirade against Thomas' stubbornness and its chaotic effect on the household. Thomas says to her, "Alice if you can tell me you understand me, I think I can make a good death ... I think I can go through with it." There are three responses to the turmoil, the suffering that all of us experience: 1. To deny the chaos I'm in, to play it cool. 2. To compulsively try to get this mess under control because of a fear of change, life has to stay the same. 3. Admit the mess, but project it away from me so that I can laugh at it from a safe distance.

These options are really escaping rather than facing the chaos around me honestly and trying to integrate it into my total experience. The Bible offers me an option for dealing with chaos that is positive and healthy. We see this option in the creation story. We are so used to thinking of creation as out of nothing that we miss an important biblical process: "In the beginning was primordial chaos" — *a formless, turbulent waste*, (the sudden outburst of tornadoes or volcanoes) — *waters covered the deep*, (the pounding ocean that destroys huge tankers or oil rigs). The Jews, like the disciples in the boat, were afraid of the sea, as chaos. *This is the process*. In the beginning was chaos, yes! But the Spirit of God hovered over the chaos long before God's creative word was spoken. "Let there be light, earth, sun, humankind ..." And God saw what he had made was good, very good. Note, chaos isn't described as evil, *it simply hasn't been shaped into the order that God has intended which is good*. Quite simply, chaos is possibility and because the Spirit hovers over it, chaos is more than possibility, it is promise. And then that powerful response: "Quiet now! Be Calm."

We all experience turmoil, chaos in some way — the depression before a decision we have to make in these terrible times, like diving from a high diving board; but once the decision is made there is exhilaration, a new mastery. Or it could be consequences we have to face for something that we have done. It seems like a huge mountain within us; who could ever accept us if we told them? But then after speaking to a trusted friend or a priest, the mountain comes down to size.

In the first reading, Job's life had totally collapsed, and was in absolute chaos. He cried to God, "Why me? Why did you let me be born if you were going to do this to me?" His friends try to silence him, you shouldn't say such things, but then God out of the tempest tells Job's so-called comforters, "I will listen to Job with favour and excuse your folly in not speaking of me properly as Job has done."

We've all experienced people giving advice, nice words that prevent the primal volcano within us from spending itself first, so that we might be able then to listen to that other voice which is that of God. Thomas More, as he was preparing to get in the barge to take him to the tower and death, called out to his son-in-law, "Son Roper, the field is won!" In other words, he had made up his mind to face whatever was before him as he sought to follow his own conscience.

Have you ever thought that the revolt you feel at times, might be expressing God's revolt ... God is in all the suffering around us? Jesus could ask his Father "Why? Why have you abandoned me?" because he knew his Father was faithful — "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself in order to make a new creation" **(2 Cor. 5:16,19)**.

The process from chaos to creation is still going on and God is in it. The Why? of Jesus is the Why? of the Father: "My people why do you act in this way? Why do you kill the innocent? Work for profit and forget the unemployed, exploit developing nations, refuse to accept all colours and peoples?" In anger we may think that we are accusing God, while in reality God is sorrowfully questioning the world through us. In response to chaos, we can destroy or create.

Jesus didn't avoid chaos. Constantly he groaned, was angry, before the curing of the deaf mute or before the raising of Lazarus. He was not afraid of chaos when it unleashed in a convulsive boy or pigs charging down a cliff face. Jesus is Lord not only of the areas of human life where we feel in control, but also in those dark, unknown areas that paralyse us.

So, when we suffer, be honest. Call our feelings by their right names — anger, hate, fear. Don't hide what we feel from our self or from your God. Offer all this chaos to God, including all our feelings as they are now, prompted by the Spirit, and see the Spirit hovering over us. And then God's creative word, spoken in Jesus, can speak to the storm within us, just as God spoke to Job out of the tempest: "Peace, be still. It is I."

## Second Homily

We want to be in control, to live in a predictable world. What do we do when a storm surges over us, in the form of physical, psychological, or spiritual turmoil, and our predictable world is gone? Panic and fear take over as we are swept along. Fear makes us realise we are not self-sufficient but vulnerable human beings. Instinctively, we cry out for help and struggle to survive.

But what if there is no other to cry out to, or cling to? If I am fragile, shaped by a revolving wall of mirrors reflecting back expectations, options, with no still-point, no centre of gravity, no constituting other who gives me a sense of identity and endurance. Why do a number of young people and older people commit suicide, rather than face the storm and work through it to a deeper wisdom and a stronger sense of who they are? It is because rather than a multitude of gods, they have no one God who gives them a single identity. They need to experience Jesus, even in the storm.

That's the point Mark is making in today's Gospel. Storms engulf us but divine power is in the boat with us in Jesus. We think that we are gifted with faith; but when our life is endangered, how strong is our faith? God seems to be absent, Jesus asleep. We cry out to God, "Don't you care, we're going under, we could get killed?"

And Jesus hits back, "Why the panic, the fear. Can't you trust in me? Wake me, but don't lose faith in me." If we can solve our own problems, we tell ourselves we don't need him. We can be coasting along, never having it better, but we might not grow. When the crash comes, we find God not on the fringes but at the heart of our lives. When we step out in faith, often after tears and cries and personal wrestling over time, even at the highest point of the tempest, no matter when it is, we can hear spoken authoritatively and with power, "Peace. Be still." Jesus muzzles the storm in us, the way we might muzzle a fierce dog and bring it into submission.

Mark wants us to know who Jesus is. Jesus himself faced the storm of death and the powerful forces of evil that killed him. Paradoxically, he perished as he saved us; he trusted in God utterly and rose as victor above it all. "Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" This is God with us. Jesus asks for absolute confidence in him.

Like Job, we limit God and Jesus to our perception of him. Job was raging against God because of the terrible situation he was in. He called God to account, telling him to justify himself.

God took Job on to a different plane, and let him see how he, God thought. We live in an age of terrible suffering, the answer to which is inexplicable. Job's suffering mirrors Christ's agony on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" If, like Job, we can't explain how God directs the universe, how can we ever explain the deeper mystery of his providence over us humans, and his treatment of those who are dear to him? God is at the heart of our lives, not on the sidelines. Nothing ever happens without his guiding and loving in every detail of our life.

If we could look back and trace all the good times and hard times, our obeying God and our rebellions, we would see God at work in our lives. Paul, overwhelmed by Christ's love, came to believe that this man, Jesus, is the Son of God who accompanied him on his journey to God. Paul discovered that if he was in Christ, he could start his life over. Paul knew that Jesus' presence is no insurance against our own fear and anxiety. What keeps us going is a strenuous belief that Jesus is Lord of all chaos; a stubborn faith which tells us that there is no storm that will not be stilled by the peace of his presence.



# Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wis. 1:13-15; 2:23-24

2 Cor. 8:7, 9, 13-15

Mk. 5:21-43 or Mk. 5:21-24, 35b-43

Do you ever really get over the death of a child? Perhaps some of you have suffered this agony. Long hours of waiting by your child's bedside, the travelling back and forth to hospital, hoping, desiring almost to take their place, only to see your little one die. One of our parishioners, Natasha Johan was twelve when she struggled with leukaemia for three years and died. Hopes were dashed. "I will never be able to walk her down the aisle, never see my child married." Twelve was the marriageable age in Jesus' time. You can hear the struggle between differing voices, the wife and mother in the background saying to Jairus, 'Get Jesus!' and the servants saying, "Don't bother the Master." We cave into the hopelessness of death. But Jesus said, "Do not be afraid, have faith!"

In today's reading we see Jesus' attitude to death. He is bothered by the suffering of Jairus. Jesus' response to Jairus is one of action, not a word spoken. He goes with him immediately. Jesus may have been going to the synagogue to teach, but this plea for life in the face of death takes priority. On the way, Jesus is touched in the crowd by a woman who, for twelve years, suffered severe menstrual bleeding. She is totally spent, likely close to death, except for the saving dream that Jesus can cure her. Twelve occurs twice in this passage. Twelve years of bleeding prevented the woman from marrying, similar today to women in Africa and other developing countries who are shunned by family and community from post-delivery fistula.

Touched by the woman and later, touching the dead body of the child, would render Jesus, according to Jewish law, ritually unclean. That's why the woman came forward frightened and trembling because she had broken a taboo. Her constant menstrual bleeding would have made marriage, worship in the temple or synagogue impossible, and made her a social and religious outcast. Jesus cut through the purity laws to bring life and restore to her womanhood and her rightful place in the community. Jesus, searching the crowd for the one who touched him, is not out to shame the woman but to commend her for her faith and to assure her of complete healing. She was healed by the power flowing from Jesus, but as she shared her story she was healed at a deeper level. For Jesus is delighted when we reach out to him.

That beautiful verse from Francis Thompson's poem, *In No Strange Land*, "Yea, in the night, my soul, my daughter, Cry — clinging heaven by the hems; And lo, Christ walking on the water, Not of Gennesareth, but Thames," applies this text to our own lives. Jesus is not back there, but right here with us who suffer the loss of a child or ailments that cripple us with pain.

At the servant's remark, not to bother the Master, Jesus encourages Jairus to have faith like the woman. With three disciples he goes into the house where professional mourners are wailing. Their mockery at Jesus' statement that "the little girl is not dead but asleep," and again because their livelihood is threatened, corresponds to the mockery of Mark's community and we experience

for professing our resurrection faith.

In one sense, every one of us in this Church has the power to continue the healing ministry of Jesus. I mean that we all have the power to lighten a burden, share a sorrow, speak a word of hope and comfort, and thereby heal a heart. And healing can happen quietly, almost unconsciously, and often takes place where we don't expect it. And when Jesus tells the little girl to rise and sees to it that she has something to eat, it reinforces our commitment to life and to the care of the total person. Here is the risen one who shares his resurrection life with us.

Last week Jesus calmed the chaos, the storm. This week he confronts death to the amazement of all. "Who can this be?" There is power in Jesus, silent, saving power to heal and bring life. Trust him and stand with him for dear life.

# Aboriginal and TSI Sunday

## Readings for National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday, 3 July

The circus had come to town. In one act, the strong man took an orange and squeezed and squeezed the orange till it was totally flat. He then challenged anyone in the audience that if they could get a drop of juice out of the orange then he would give the person \$500. A few strong, tough men responded, but to no effect. Then a tall thin man, with glasses and a bit of a cough came forward. He took the orange and gently squeezed it. Out came two drops. Reluctantly the strong man handed over the \$500 and asked, "What do you do anyway?" The man replied, "I am the chairperson of the parish finance committee." You might like to try the squeeze test after Mass.

Today is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Community Sunday (Abbreviated to ATSIC). It is also the beginning of a week of celebrations throughout the nation, NAIDOC Week, when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people celebrate their spirituality, identity, culture, and survival. The theme from the Aboriginal Catholic community is *Peace and mercy for all*, stressing reconciliation, in spite of past wrongs done to them. In Australia the 2017 census tells us that Aboriginal Catholics number 124,618 or 2.3 per cent of the Catholic population. Between 1991 and 2011 the population increased from 62,000 to 125,000, but housing has not kept up with the increase.

There is a crisis in many remote Aboriginal communities: Indigenous youth self-harm and suicide; overcrowding in houses has negative effects upon the family to do with health, child protection, family security and attendance in employment and education. They have suffered financial cutbacks, the removal of the work for the dole type programs, the taking away of meaningful authority previously held by community councils. This has added to the pervasive anxiety of many Aboriginal people. They find themselves side-lined, shunted to the margins and denied any real measure of self-determination.

That has been their history: Aboriginal people have lived on this land for at least 65,000 years. They lived close to the land. It was their mother, like we heard in the first reading, their life force which nurtured and helped them grow. They saw it alive, full of the living presence of the great ancestors. They named God long before Christianity came. They developed spirituality, ceremonies, lore, kinship, sharing, settling. They wandered like the seventy-two in the Gospel. Deacon Boniface said, "When I read the Gospel, I read them as an Aboriginal. There are many things in the Gospel that make me happy to be an Aboriginal because I think we have a good start. Christ did not get worried about material things; he walked about like us, with nowhere to lay his head. He died with nothing on a cross. So many of our people die with nothing."

All of this was shattered in 1788 when the British came, took over the land and massacred many of the Aborigines, terming the land 'terra nullius' — the land belongs to nobody. Aborigines found

themselves prisoners and refugees in their own land. In 1948, for the first time, Aborigines were regarded as citizens but had no voting rights and no financial grants for Aborigines through the States, and were not counted in the national census, even though they had fought in both world wars. The national referendum of 27 May 1967, (91 per cent of Australians voted Yes), gave Aboriginal people voting rights and financial grants were given to the States to administer to the Aborigines. In 1992 the High Court said that not only had Aboriginal people lived in this land, but their native title continues.

Attempts at reconciliation and recognition of the Aboriginal culture and contribution to Australia and the Church were highlighted at Pope John Paul II's visit to Alice Springs on 29 November 1986, telling us: "The Church will not fully be the Church Christ intended until the Aboriginal people and culture are fully accepted." Prime Minister Paul Keating's speech at Redfern Park on 10 December 1992, during the year of the World's Indigenous People, called on non-Aboriginal people to recognise that they took traditional lands and smashed their traditional way of life; brought diseases and alcohol, committed murders, took children from their mothers. Pat Dodson's march for reconciliation over the Sydney Harbour Bridge on 2 May 2000 stated that after a decade, reconciliation efforts had failed; followed on 13 Feb 2008 by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's sorry speech and apology to the Stolen Generation.

The ***Uluru Statement from the Heart*** was released on 26 May 2017 by delegates to the **First Nations National Constitutional Convention**, held over four days near Uluru in Central Australia. The Convention was held after the 16-member **Referendum Council**, appointed in 2015, had travelled around the country and met with over 1,200 people. The statement was issued after the Convention, and calls for a First Nations Voice in the Australian Constitution and a **Makarrata Commission** to supervise a process of agreement-making and truth-telling between the Australian Government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. (*Makarrata* is a Yolngu word approximating the meaning of treaty) (cf. Wikipedia).

On a more basic level, we Pallottines have had an Aboriginal Scholarship Fund for twelve years which has assisted 140 Aborigines to gain degrees in medicine, surgery, dentistry, law, nursing, journalism, education and child psychology, to mention just a few. The Aborigine Catholic Ministry in Thornbury with its coordinator, Vicki Clark, initiated the FIRE Carrier project and aimed to promote reconciliation in Victorian schools, such as Avila College. FIRE stands for Friends Igniting Reconciliation through Education. It started as a dream and has evolved into something greater. So, let's do what we can at our level to pray for Aboriginal people and support where we can.

# Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ezek. 2:2-5

2 Cor. 12:7-10

Mk. 6:1-6

“Go and tell that group of rebels what I tell you: ‘The Lord God says this’, and whether they listen or not, they will know that a prophet is among them.” This is Ezekiel’s command from God to get up and go. What does a prophet tell such a group, exiled in a strange land, resentful at God for their ending up enslaved in Babylon? Would he tell them, “It’s all your own fault!” That would drive them further into resentment against God and his prophet.

Elie Wiesel, a Jewish survivor, recounts an incident in Auschwitz concentration camp of two men and a boy being hanged. The prisoners were forced to file past them and witness the gruesome sight. The two men who were hanged died instantly, but the boy being so light struggled on the knife edge between life and death for half an hour. One man behind Elie said, “Where is God now?” And within Elie came the answer to ‘Where is God’ “*Here He is — He is hanging here on this gallows.*” What does a prophet tell? He tells even the rebellious, the defiant and obstinate, that God is to be found with them, innocent and weak, in the most horrific of circumstances. God is here, he has not abandoned you, but he calls for a personal response from you and to his covenant (**cf. Bausch, 60 More Seasonal Homilies, p. 257**).

What was it that Jesus said in Nazareth that turned his own relatives and villagers against him? As a prophet, in obedience to the Father who sent him, he proclaimed as he did in every village: “The Kingdom of God is among you, repent and believe the good news.” They marvelled at his wisdom as he spoke to them in the synagogue; they knew of the great deeds wrought by his hands, but to ask them to repent, to change? Who does he think he is? He won’t change us; we won’t let him change either. We’ll lock him in the image we know of him, the carpenter, very skilled with his hands, one of the peasant class, who worked here for the last twenty or so years in Joseph’s shop. We are even doubting where could he have got all this wisdom, this power that came from his hands.

The circus had come to town, but one night a fire broke out in the main tent. The owner, aware that the fire could spread quickly through the fields to the village close by, sent the clown who was all dressed up ready to go on, to go and warn the villagers. They thought it was a great stunt, a way of getting publicity for the circus. He cried out to them, to make them aware of the danger, but they laughed all the more. The fire came and destroyed their village.

Jesus wanted to save his people to tell them the good news, but they could not get past the image they had of Jesus from the past. His relatives and neighbours joined in the negativity. There was so much Jesus wanted to share with them, but his own did not receive him. This rejection by his own is found in all four Gospels.

They were not open to the Good News. Familiarity had kept them enclosed in their own narrow way. Let a stranger, an expert, come from far away and they will receive him, respond to his demands no matter how outlandish. Here is Jesus, with power over the storms and over demons, he heals the sick and raises Jairus' daughter from the dead, but he is helpless before the lack of faith in his own people that prevents him doing any miracles. Here is the human Jesus who, although the Son of God, is ever respectful of human freedom. He could only heal a few people, laying his hands on them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.

Isn't it strange that their refusal to believe, makes some people hardened in their opposition, even to the point of getting rid of the prophet who speaks up for God? Mark tells the men and women of his Christian community, rejected by their own family and society, that Jesus was treated in the same way that they were. His contemporaries judged him not by his words and deeds but on his parentage and status; as Christians they are condemned for bearing the name Christian.

A prophet is not only not accepted but is despised in his own country, among his own relations and in his own house. It's still true today. I have experienced it in interviews with lay missionaries and others called to the priesthood or religious life; their close friends and family call them mad at first. They have their expectations for their son or daughter, to get married or follow in some line of business. At the same time, family and friends are challenged by the decision that they have made, as they step into a different way of life.

Get close to Christ, follow him, speak out and live the truth, in spite of the opposition. If you emerge out of the group, the tall poppy syndrome means that they will try to cut you down to size and minimise your impact. Just remember Jesus is with you. In your weakness you are strong in Jesus who strengthens you.

# Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Amos 7:12-15

Eph. 1:3-14 or Eph. 1:3-10

Mk. 6:7-13

How do you meet rejection — situations that attack your very sense of self and your work? The prophet Amos knew rejection. He was faced with a blunt refusal and dismissal from the priest, Amaziah, at the royal sanctuary of Bethel, “Go, get back to where you came from, go back to the southern kingdom, Judah, make your livelihood there from your prophesying. The prophets here are part of the professional entourage of the king; they don't disturb people as you are doing.” In other words: “Get lost. You are an outsider and an intruder in these parts, stirring up people with your preaching.”

Jesus wasn't an outsider. He was in his own home-town, but he was rejected by his family and place of origin, because now he was seen to be different. Really, he was always the same; it's just they had never seen this side of him and from jealousy or whatever motive, closed their ears to his message.

We meet rejection by being located in something, someone greater than ourselves, that gives strength to our deeper sense of self. To Amos's “Go”, Amos counters with God's “Go”: “It is Yahweh who said to me, ‘Go, and prophesy to my people Israel.’” Yahweh's summons takes precedence. Amos was a simple farmer, but he knew where he located himself — in God's Word, and nothing could shake him from that.

For Jesus, the Father's call on him takes precedence and so he wastes no time. He creates his own family of disciples and summons them to continue his mission, doing exactly what he did. He had summoned them earlier in chapter 3 to be with him and to receive power to heal and cast out evil. It was an apprenticeship, learning from being with the Master; but now in chapter 6, they are summoned to act, to go out in pairs on mission, to travel light with no provision save a staff, a single tunic, and sandals. It was as community, having each other, and the witness of their life together that sustained them. The sandals were the symbol of discipleship, and the staff their support for the road, symbolic of their discipleship on the way. They had to trust in God's providence and people's generosity and create a base from which to spread the good news.

The townsfolk of Nazareth wanted something spectacular, great signs and wonders, and then they might follow, not ordinary people that Jesus sends before him into every town and village. G.K. Chesterton's comments on choosing a jury to determine the guilt or innocence of a person are spot on: “Our civilization ... when it wants a library to be catalogued, or the solar system discovered, or any a trifle of that kind, it uses up its specialists. But when it wishes anything done which is really serious, it collects twelve of the ordinary men standing round. The same thing was done, if I remember right, by the Founder of Christianity” (***Tremendous Trifles*, 1909, p. 68**).

The Gospel passage has great relevance for us. The Gospel still needs to be preached. We can't

leave it to others. Amos was called away from his ordinary work to preach the message. So too were the twelve Apostles. Maybe only a few might actually preach the Gospel, but all of us are called to witness to it. We do it principally by living it, by being disciples of Christ in fact as well as in name.

The Apostles too met rejection, but like Jesus they wasted no time; they shook the dust from their sandals and moved on. What helps us meet rejection is this sense of discipleship, of being summoned. It's not our will that we are trying to protect, but God's will that we are seeking to serve, that helps us rise above hurt and the hateful behaviours of others. If we lose the sense of discipleship and begin to let ourselves take centre stage, then we are prone to hurt, to take umbrage and to lose the stability that Christ gives us. Humble people don't think less of themselves, they just think of themselves less.

There's a deeper and an inner reality that helps us in the face of rejection. In everything that we do, it is not first of all our doing. It is Jesus and God who calls us. I have adapted the words of Dag Hamarschoeld in his diary, **Markings**: "I don't know who or what put the question or when it was put, I only know that at one point of my life I said Yes to someone or something, and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that therefore my life in self-surrender had a goal. It changed the whole course of my life. ... From that moment, once I had put my hand to the plough, there was no looking back."

There is a sense of being chosen; not excluding anyone but an inclusive chosenness enabling us to embrace those that God sends into our life. Ephesians says it beautifully, God chose us in Christ. Let's not analyse every word but surrender thankfully to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

Redemption and forgiveness, wisdom and faith, and the adoption into the family of God are the free gifts of God, who makes us sons and daughters through the Blood of Christ, God's only true Son from the beginning until the ages run their course. We are called and chosen by God not because we are holy, but so that we might become holy, in Christ. Warmed and softened by his love, we take the impression of the Holy Spirit who is both the seal that is a claim of God's ownership, and the pledge of our inheritance to come. This rich inheritance reflected upon and taken in, enables us to face and absorb rejection. Be convinced that there is no life without a task, no person without a talent, no moment without its call.



# Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jer. 23:1-6

Eph. 2:13-18

Mk. 6:30-34

Things were really humming. We were making it happen. We'd come back from preaching, healing, casting out devils. People were coming in through the door, through the windows, even through the roof at times. Where did all these people come from? Women with broken marriages, men with incurable diseases, burdened people with burdened hearts, can't pay the bills, no food, hungry and alone. There's no time to rest, no time to eat. We were doing something helping these people. We're tired but happy, complete, fulfilled. We felt able, powerful, secure with Jesus at our side.

"Come on," said Jesus suddenly. "Let's go!" We need time to recoup, to be alone, to pray, to get our strength back, have time for one another, talk out those tensions after we've got over our tiredness.

Relief ... alone in the boat, just us ... the sighing of the wind ... the creak of the oars and sail, the water slapping the wooden planks of the boat ... Around this point, this promontory ... to a quiet spot we know so well. All eyes were stretching past the promontory to catch sight of the beach.

"Dammit!" (under our breath) ... They had got there before us. Our privacy was invaded. We were suddenly struck by our own resentment, our centered, defensive self. We were upset. We wanted to take it out on somebody, hit back. We were tired, you see, bone weary, tense. No wonder we were defensive.

That's the situation into which Jesus steps. He can bring redemption, bring healing power into hearts and limbs only when we acknowledge our creaturehood, when we admit our centred self, idealized and unreal. "You're a mother, you should know." "You're a priest you ought to know." We shoulder these idealized demands, these 'shoulds', to cover up a self that needs to be loved, affirmed, and healed; so much of our energy is used up justifying and defending ourselves. We can be so preoccupied with what we think we should be that we don't accept ourselves the way we are.

Jesus brings us into the quiet, into this situation of the marketplace to confront us in order to offer us salvation. We are not our own saviours. What does Jesus do? First of all, he unmask the centred, idealized self; the struggle in us to keep up appearances, to get power over others. "With all that crowd we're not so capable." The cracks are showing. When we can talk with another person about who we really are and our struggles, it is no easy task, but it's a gift. The Prodigal Son was unmasked, only knew his real self, when he "came to himself". It was an awakening. He didn't know himself when he claimed his share from his father, went out and lived it up; even when he first took the job on the pig farm. Only later did he realise this unmasking was the difference between the disciples in the boat and the people on the shore. When we can speak like the

disciples on the road to Emmaus, about our shattered hopes and awkward feelings then we are indeed blessed.

Because secondly, we realise the distortion in us. We've been parading ourselves as perfect, sinless, better than the rest, whereas we've discovered destructive forces in us. The Prodigal Son wrote his own self-hating script: "I'm no longer worthy to be your son, your heir. Treat me as a hired hand. I'm not the son of your love. I'm not who I thought I was." We shed the tears of true sorrow.

It's here that thirdly, Jesus wants us to surrender who we really are to a power greater than us; to surrender to a love that loves us more than we love ourselves. It's right here that redemptive power is released in Jesus. The disciples noted that, although they were crushed by the people's demands. "He looked with compassion" on people who admitted who they were, who knew the distortion in their lives and who were lost, alone, alienated, cut off — yet totally open for him. Jesus caught the disciples off guard by the inner power, peace, strength that flowed from him, even though he had ministered more than they — not to make himself important, but to open up new possibilities in these people.

He looked with compassion. He looked with transcendent love, with love that grounds them anew, gives new foundations, that lets these demanding, clamouring people know they are loved, and which lifts them up. Love that gives time, listens for thirty years before speaking to all the woes and worries of human frailty, such love is creative and supportive. So that when Jesus does speak, people find new reserves within the inner core of self that before needed defences that they couldn't let go of; now they can let go, they are forgiven, and they learn to forgive. There's no time to eat. That comes later.

For there was a question facing Jesus: whom do you exclude — the outcast, the person who upsets authorities, the criminal? He became all of these so that transcendent love would not be outside our experience but planted deep within it. On the cross he broke down the barriers, destroyed in his own person the hostility, created a single new person in himself, restored peace and united us in a single Body and reconciled us with God.

And so, fourthly, Jesus gives us new life and new possibilities to be located in life in a new way. The Prodigal had to let the robes be put on before the party could begin. He now grounds his self in God's love for him. That's the vertical dimension: grounded in love. The horizontal is how to use this power in a new way, just as Jesus shows in the Gospel. The Lord wants to ground us in his love, so that we can find new ways to live our lives.

Two brothers met after a long time, one went overseas and was very successful while the older brother was on the family farm, eking out a living. Few words were spoken at tea. The ten-year-old daughter went to her room to read. The wives discreetly moved away. The older brother brought from the pantry a loaf of bread and a knife, the younger one took out a bottle of whisky from his case and they went into the kitchen ... The ten-year-old girl woke early and went to the kitchen, but

they weren't there. She found them outside talking and ran to them. She said: "Wow! You made it all the way to morning." In the dark night that each of us has, the Lord is awaiting you ... your surrender into transcendent love that is the redemptive experience.

## Second Homily

The Gospel today is very short, not even 130 words. In that short text Mark mentions Jesus' compassion twice, in a way, even three times. First, he took pity on his disciples. They were coming back from their first apostolic venture. They had been preaching, teaching, and chasing evil spirits away. They even had been healing, power had gone out of them all the time, a power they had never expected in themselves.

They were excited about it. They told one another and Jesus, story after story. They were sure the world was going to change. It had cost them a lot. They slipped off their sandals, brushed back their hair, they massaged their tired legs and arms. While they were giving their reports, they were constantly interrupted by dozens of people who wanted to see them and Jesus who wanted to be touched, who drew attention to the needs of their sick children.

The disciples didn't have time for a bite, not even for a cuppa. They were eaten alive by those others. Jesus took pity on them. "Let's go, get away. You need rest. You need some time for yourselves alone." They got into a boat and left the crowd behind. But people saw this and walked and ran ahead around the lake of Galilee. The disciples were just getting their breath, sensing the relief, glad to get away. And then as they came round the promontory, Blast! There were people again, hundreds of them, needy, lost, like sheep without a shepherd.

And Jesus' heart went out to them. He took pity on them and sent his disciples off to have a rest, a drink, a meal, while he began to attend to that crowd himself. Jesus pitied the people; he saw their deep hunger for instruction, direction, for comfort. He began to teach them, and his words filled their need.

Where did Jesus get his energy? The source of his energy was his relationship to his Father in prayer; but his relationship to his Father was not "out there" but "deep within". Today's incident illustrates the spiritual bodily energy in Jesus. Although Jesus was thoroughly exhausted from ministry (even more than his disciples) upon seeing the crowds he was moved with compassion and drew on immense energy within to minister to them. The Greek word for compassion *esplagchnisthe* literally means a "quivering of the womb". It meant that Jesus was deeply touched at a gut level by the needs he saw in people. His whole being responded prayerfully and lovingly in compassionate ministry.

Compassion was such a moving force in his life that it's not an exaggeration to say he came into this world because of his pity.

We know two things: the need to get away at times and the need to tap into the deep source of

energy within in order to respond to others' needs. To get away isn't easy — when you slip into the bedroom for a quiet time, your other half is likely to pursue you with the question "Are you sick?" "Is it something I've said?" Alone, we often don't know what to do with solitude and stillness. Create spaces in your life and home to establish a quiet corner, in the house, or in your room, with a candle, an icon or a New Testament: mention to others that you want quiet time for twenty minutes.

Secondly — we are not only spiritual, but we are physical beings. Often, we live in our heads with concerns, things we should be doing, problems we're dealing with. We need to connect head and heart — gain stillness and harmony in our whole being — aware of the tensions in our body, by breathing, and by relaxation and over time we gain selfless devotion to the Lord.

It's into this reflective attitude that we bring what we see. We have all felt pity from time to time. We understand what Jesus felt, when he experienced compassion. But we don't always realise where it comes from. Our compassion for others comes from the fact that we are one — we share a common humanity. More and more the community of lay people and priests are realising the need to do something about justice and peace. Our pity is growing because we see beyond colour, race or outward appearance to the fact that we are one.

The Pallottines, Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and other orders have worked with Aborigines for one hundred years. Fr Wahid's community of St Augustine's walks the streets to pick up young people and bring them to where they receive a meal and clothing. Fr Bob McGuire works with drug addicts and the homeless, and also gives abortion counselling. St Vincent de Paul, and Rosies run a soup van. Now with people out of work, businesses closing — there is a vast network of compassion around us — inspired by the example of Jesus.

## Third Homily

In the hectic rush, sometimes hardly having time for a bite to eat, where are the moments of intimacy in your day — with the Lord, with your wife or husband, or family? Time to relax and get in touch with your deeper self, time to love and be loved, and time alone is so important for us. Children need that time when they singly and alone have the attention of dad or mum; but couples, above all, need time to build their relationship, even just fifteen minutes a day to ask, "How was your day?" over a glass of wine.

There's the tyranny of work or lack of work, and of social demands. One of the first things we drop is prayer, time alone, but also time together. There will be work when we're all dead, mum used to say. We need to live in the present together, not straining to get away from each other because of work's demands.

When the disciples report back from their mission — obviously things were hectic around Jesus — they didn't have time even to eat. What does Jesus do? He makes time. "Come apart and rest

awhile.”

In today’s society when people are carrying such heavy emotional loads, they need time and space to unload, to let anxiety go in order to remain committed to essentials. We all know the exhilaration of getting away from things. We return and the demands are still there, but now we have the strength to meet them. Don’t go away when your marriage is in difficulty. That is when you have to work all the harder at it. Get help. Only have time away when your relationship is sound. Jesus needed to get away — needed time to be ministered to as well as to minister. Remember the Mary and Martha story! At Bethany with Mary at his feet he could simply talk and recoup his strength. He taught Martha to let her anxiety go and be still, to savour times of intimacy with him. We all need these moments when we feel listened to, when we can drop our role as parent or child and have the other focus on us, where, like Mary, we can focus on Jesus.

Where are the moments of apartness, of being apart in your life? It could be the solitary bubble of your car as you drive a while without the radio on, using the road as your focus on God. It could be in a busy shopping mall as you sip a coffee, or the quiet corner of your room where you have a chair, a cushion, a Bible, a candle, and time just to be. It can be the kitchen table when, before you rise to clean up the breakfast mess, you take five to ten minutes to read scripture, your favourite prayer or poem or simply get in touch with your feelings before God. It could be morning Mass here or in the city, or a sickness when you’re forced to drop everything. Yet the effect of this seeming waste of time prayer is that there awakens in us the heart of the shepherd attuned to the unexpected.

As they rowed past the rocky outcrop, there they were, a crowd was waiting. Jesus was not angry. His heart goes out to them, he felt compassion. The Greek word for compassion *esplagchnisthe* literally means a “quivering of the womb”. Our God cares so much! “They were like sheep without a shepherd.” This phrase comes from the prophet Micah’s warning to King Ahab about to go into war. False prophets had given wrong teaching about the outcome of the battle just to please the King. But Michah warns King Ahab that he will die on the battlefield and his people will be scattered, like sheep without a shepherd. King Ahab was not up to the task. He should have waited on God’s promptings.

The two poles of Jesus public life were prayer alone and involvement with people, almost publicly at the disposal of all who came to him. He concerned himself with the crowds who inhabited the populated centres of Galilee. And the crowds flocked to him — especially the oppressed outcasts of society. He welcomed them and healed them.

The healing was more than a mere word to each person. It was the fact that Jesus sought out the company of these physical and moral lepers, affirmed and accepted them, was moved with compassion for them, sat down at table with them and made them his friends. He taught them at some length that all were brothers and sisters, and God was Abba, Father, Creator of the dignity of

each one. Hand in hand with his teaching went his power to heal from infirmities and his power to heal from sin.

As Christians in the modern world, we need engagement with the crowd to awaken our compassion, like the CEOs of big business who shared the experience of homelessness. But we also need time to get perspective on what we're doing, to know what we stand for and be able to withstand so many demands. Jesus speaks to you and me today, "Come apart and rest awhile."

# Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

2 Kgs. 4:42-44

Eph. 4:1-6

Jn. 6:1-15

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are found in Years A, B, and C in our lectionary. John's Gospel, however, is slotted into Mark's shorter Gospel at Eastertide. Today and for the next five Sundays we read chapter 6 of John's Gospel.

Today's Gospel is not simply about Jesus multiplying bread and fish to feed the five thousand. Clues found in the Gospel open up the richness of John's text. Clues such as the words "the Feast of Passover was near". You would expect people to be in Jerusalem for the feast, but instead here they are out in the wilderness. It takes us back to the Exodus from Egypt and God's providing for his people by sending bread from heaven, manna, only enough for each day. Jesus is hailed as the prophet, the new Moses who would lead the people. Jesus gave thanks before breaking the barley bread. The word for giving thanks is *eucharisteo* which means doing Eucharist. A final clue is that the words 'gather' and 'fragments' were used in John's time for the gathering of the people around the Eucharist.

The Gospel begins with Jesus aware of the hungers of the people. He knew what he was going to do, but he appeals to Philip to help. Philip tries to size up the situation but is unable to cope with the enormous challenge. He returns to Jesus saying that more than half the annual wages of a day labourer could only give them a mouthful each. Andrew provides the small details that might help, but even he sees the ineffectiveness of what is offered, five flat barley loaves of this poor young boy and two pieces of dried fish. What good is that among so many?

What does Jesus see? He sees the generosity of the boy, who gives away his lunch, the only sustenance he has out here in the wilderness. He trusts in Jesus to provide. What Philip and Andrew didn't see was the very source of provision, Jesus himself. He trusts in God his Father to provide. In John's Gospel Jesus alone takes that paltry gift and begins to feed the people, getting them to sit down in the grass, first the bread and then the fish. But Jesus is hoping that they would not only take and receive the food. The struggle in this chapter is whether they will receive him, the gift of God that he is and has to offer and become his disciples, or only focus on their own satisfaction. And that is what they do. They want him for themselves alone, whereas Jesus is bread for the life of the world. The condition for that gift is faith in Jesus.

In our own problems do we have the generosity of the young boy to give what we have, surrendering it to Jesus? In our desperation we cling to what we have, but if we can let go and let God work, out of that gift to Jesus comes an abundance. That abundance is evident in the fact that if the people were starving, there would be no scraps left over. But look at that! Twelve hampers of scraps left over. It's amazing! In the first reading the condition for the increase was obedience to

God's word coming from the prophet Elisha. Those twenty loaves fed a hundred people at the insistent word of Elisha, and here is Jesus feeding five thousand men, not including women and children, from five barley loaves and two dried fish.

Today we have Grandparents' Sunday. We thank them for the abundance of their time to listen, to just be there, to witness to the faith by their prayer, how they meet pain and ageing gracefully. I often see grandparents bringing their grandchildren to school and picking them up afterwards with great love and genuine interest in how they are going. But grandparents also have a Biblical mandate to lead their grandchildren to know their faith and very personal love of Jesus, and learn from them how to walk with him wholeheartedly according to **Deuteronomy 4:9**:

*"Take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things you have seen God doing for you. May his miracles have a deep and permanent effect upon your lives! Tell your children and your grandchildren about the glorious miracles he did."*

We bring our grandparents into our Eucharist today, giving thanks for all they are and have done for us so generously, which should lead to our care for them. I think of the tremendous resource of our elderly in nursing homes, who are no longer at the heart of our homes. When I meet them at Mass, I wonder what we can do to help, to bring the young to visit, bring joy and receive the gentleness of their wisdom and love and to listen to their memories, the fruit of their very rich lives. With the onset of Covid and the restrictions in nursing homes they have become very anxious in their frailty and need our love, comfort, and prayer.

## Second Homily

Who were these people who came following Jesus? They came from every level of society, lame and poor, blind, well-to-do who were seeking meaning in life, men, women and children, each with their personal needs and worries, not least the daily grind to make ends meet. They came impressed by the miracles that Jesus did, that he could really help them. They wanted more, a hungry crowd, physically and spiritually, yet sadly many focussed only on their material needs. Jesus looked over the crowd that was assembling, five thousand men, not counting women and children, possibly more than fifteen thousand. His compassion will not let them go away.

He could easily have said, "It's hopeless, send them off home." Instead, he awakened Philip to the need. "Where can we buy some bread for these people to eat?" Philip was confronted by this enormous problem — a denarius was a day's wage, and it would take thousands to give people even a small portion of food. In apologising for the meagre two fish and five flat barley loaves, Andrew missed the point. Jesus can take the things we hold as inadequate and seemingly useless to work miracles.

Jesus got the people to sit down on the grass, took the small boy's bread and fish, gave thanks, (a Eucharistic gesture), and distributed them to the crowd. Jesus took that small gift and made it into a fantastic picnic. People were still holding bread and fish in their hands and couldn't eat



another bite; they were so full. Twelve hampers of scraps were left over from just five barley loaves and two fish. The miracle of the loaves is found in all four Gospels and points to the Eucharist, the superabundant gift of Jesus himself to us. The small boy gave everything he had. When we come to the Eucharist what do we bring? We bring the divine spark that has been given us at Baptism, the gift of the Spirit, who is waiting for us to say yes to his presence and his nudging. He comes to blow that spark into a flame, a fire that burns inside us with excitement, eagerness, daring. The Spirit can awaken us and take us into the adventure of life.

In 1972 in El Paso, Texas, on the border with Mexico, a group of teenagers with their priest, Fr Rick were awakened to the Holy Spirit in their lives. They were discussing the New Testament and discovered Luke chapter 14, verse 13 in which Jesus said, "When you give a big party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind." It was just before Christmas, and they decided to do what Jesus asked.

On a cold Christmas morning they went over the border to a Mexican shanty town and went to the dump where people were scavenging for food. They had brought ham, burritos and baloney sandwiches for the 150 people they knew. Others on the dump heard, and 300 turned up. Fr Rick apologized and said that there would not be enough to go round. The 300 lined up for firsts, seconds and then thirds and still had bags of food to take home. The teenagers and Fr Rick saw the meaning of this miracle; they had to commit themselves to help these people.

Sometimes we have great dreams, our heads are in the clouds while the stuff of greatness lies under our noses, the jobs we don't like doing, the dirty jobs no-one else wants to touch. Awakening to the Spirit is not about knowledge or skills, important as these are. It is the awakening of desire, the willingness to open up to the Spirit, to want to be used and to offer oneself generously. Like the small boy in the Gospel who could have held onto his own small lunch of bread and fish but gave it generously to the Lord.

There was an old minister A.J. Gossip who, as he climbed the stair to the pulpit to preach met Jesus, who asked him, "Is this the best you can give?" Looking back over a hectic week, he said to the Lord, "Yes, Lord, it is." Jesus took that small thing and made of it a trumpet to proclaim the Good News (**cf. William Barclay**). Jesus asked Mother Teresa to leave the security of her convent, put on an Indian sari and go to work in the slums of Calcutta. She went with five dollars in her pocket and see how her work has grown.

# Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ex. 16:2-4, 12-15

Eph. 4:17, 20-24

Jn. 6:24-35

“Lord when did you get here?” The people ask Jesus. They have been following him from the beginning of chapter 6, and after they had been fed, they got into boats and crossed over to Capharnaum. It’s time for another meal and they expect Jesus to supply it. They have lost sight of the giver in their greed for the gift. The words of Jesus apply to us, “You are not looking for me because you have seen the signs, but because you had all the bread you wanted to eat.” The sign Jesus had created, in the multiplication of the bread, was meant to point to him, that they might come to believe in him as sent by God. If we see the sign also as sacrament — the sacrament of the Eucharist, it gives us a window into who Jesus is and how willing he was to give himself for us through his death and resurrection.

The grumbling of the Jewish people in the desert in the first reading is echoed in the Gospel. Are we like that at times when we are unhappy or have lost direction? We go shopping, provided we’ve got the money, for things we don’t need. Just look in your wardrobe. Substance has given way to style; what you have, how you look or come across is what’s important. How to go beyond consumerism to meaning and to the substance beyond the style?

On a deeper level, are we afraid to live simply in freedom? The Jews released from slave camps in Egypt were ready to give up their freedom and return to slavery for the meals they got in Egypt, instead of depending on God in the uncertainty of the desert and finding their own inner resources.

Clinical psychologist Dorothy Rowe said people are looking for the magic pill or word to fix their pain but say at the same time: Don’t change me. Don’t expect me to change, to make the decisions. We’ve lost the wisdom of the Church and the mystics, she said, which offers the way out of the prison of our mind box, out of our depression. Our depressive state of slothfulness, tastelessness is somehow sin. We must ask what is its function in our life — this fear of chaos or personal annihilation? Then we must own it and work through to forgiveness of life, past, present, and future, forgiveness of others and of ourselves (***Depression: The Way Out of Your Prison, 3rd edition 2003***).

Why are we looking for Jesus? Are we like the crowd in the Gospel? “Jesus give us this bread always, this enduring bread, from heaven which gives life? Give us this bread but don’t change us.” Like the Jews, we’d prefer to return and remain in bondage provided our short-term needs are met. What about long-term? That’s what Jesus is concerned about — this lasting wisdom, and that’s why he says, “Work for the things that last!” When the new car is returned to the sales yard, or the house is mortgaged or redundancy has struck, how can we live? His wisdom, if we want it,

calls for a change in us. There's more to life than making a living. Like us, when Jesus offers lasting bread and calls for a change in the people they cry: Prove it!

“Prove we should believe in you by providing manna like Moses did.” Jesus responds: “It was not Moses who gave you bread from heaven, it's my Father who gives you the true bread today.” God didn't bring his people into the desert to die, but to live. He did provide for their day-to-day needs, but it was food that lasted only a day and they were to collect only enough for their needs. It was bread that called for faith in God's providing.

To the question the people asked, “What work must we do?” Jesus said, “Believe in me, open your heart so that I can fill you and change you.” Jesus is the foundational value for our lives. If we could learn to live and act as Jesus, we could treat ourselves and others differently. It requires struggle to establish his values in our lives and families. Christ is a gift received through faith. But once we've received him, then we must work to make his mind, his teaching our own. We know the difference between knowing what Jesus taught and doing it. Our work is to live for Jesus and to work to bring Jesus to others. Jesus' action of feeding was to be a loving sign pointing to himself. “I am the living bread” for the life of the world; this bread from heaven is both a gift and a test of faithfulness.

How do you go beyond consumerism to meaning, to substance beyond the style? Ephesians gives us a practical program:

- Give up living the aimless kind of life that pagans live
- Believe! have a fresh, spiritual way of thinking
- Give up your old ways ... you are created in God's way
- Put aside your old self ... put on the new self.

And the key — put off following illusory desires for things that don't last — see them in their true perspective through taking on the mind and the wisdom of Christ.

When the Vikings of old raided Saxon villages, the first people they would seek out and kill were the village story tellers. If they could remove the stories, then they could rupture the link between their personal lives and their communal memory. This created disorientation and a profound sense of hopelessness. No memory means no future. That's why we come together for Mass to hear the story and break bread. Jesus gives us a future in him for ourselves and others.

## Second Homily

When you cram for an exam, the knowledge doesn't seem to last. It meets the need of the moment. Yet we seem to be cramming all the time. It's a kind of word indigestion. The knowledge

revolution, so much to know, like fast-food places such as Red Rooster, Macdonald's or Hungry Jack's where the emphasis is on speed, not taste or nourishment. Do you find you've got to read faster, listen to different things at the same time, almost as if you have to psych yourself up to attack a book, an article to get the information, get it done and over with, just to fill a gap? Do you feel like telling the person you are listening to, to finish what he or she is saying because you want to speak, so that there's no real time to personally digest what you've read, no real listening, no reflection on the day just past, nor on the people who were part of that day?

When you come to Mass and sit down, how do you prepare to hear what is read in the Word? Do you read the bulletin or other material because if you don't read it now then you won't have time later? At what point in a Homily do you switch off? Do you want a fast-food service, served up easily and quickly, and the beauty of it is you don't have to do anything? Or do you come to hear God's Word? God's Word is like the manna the Jews had to get up early for and pick just enough for the day. It couldn't be stored or mass produced; personal effort was required, and all the while there was dependency on God because God just gave enough for the day.

When I started a young adult community at Millgrove with two young women and a man, we lived by the manna principle. We had to get up, pray and study to run retreats, camps, and leadership courses for young people. We believed God would provide enough to get us through and sometimes we just made it, like when eight joined us the next year, and we had to start building an eight-bedroom community centre with \$284. And we did.

The Gospel is the mouth of Christ; when the Gospel is read Jesus is speaking to us today, offering us in his Word the bread that will last. Ask for the kind of bread Jesus will give. He will feed us with his Word and person, and the effect on us will be lasting, God's Word. *Dabar* in Hebrew is different from the Greek *Logos* — a word conveying an idea we put into thought and action. God's Word, on the other hand, is dynamic; it brings about in us what God intends, "Let there be light and there was light." God's Word is like the sun and rain; it achieves what it was sent out to do.

Have you noticed the effect of your words on yourself, the more you say that you are angry, the angrier you get, or dissatisfied or hurt by someone. What we express in words impresses that hurt deeper into our hearts and spirit. The best thing is to keep your mouth closed and begin to take in God's word that relates to that hurt. You might be surprised at how bitter your words are at some slight from your wife, husband, friend, or children. But if you take in God's Word five minutes a day, such as "He loved me first" (**1 Jn. 4:10**) (I am loveable); and "He has forgiven me, so I must forgive others" (**Col. 3:13; Eph. 4:32**); also, "In all these trials we are more than conquered through him who loved us" (**Rom. 8:48**) — then you'll find a way to speak to others differently because your heart is filled in a different way.

How do you take in God's Word? Firstly, if you love someone, you listen, drink in their words. You read and re-read their letters. You spend hours on the phone or chatting. Your heart is open and

willing to hear. You want to learn more about the person. You can only learn what that person tells you. Secondly, you think about that word and apply it to your situation. Thirdly, you not only work on the Word, but it also works on you. Knowing it relates to a person, you surrender to God, to Jesus. To take and eat God's Word means to interiorize it. But it requires something of us before God's Word begins to change our life. That's why before the readings, we call to mind our sins to be open for God in our minds and hearts. To receive God's Word requires conversion, "unless we turn to the Lord the veil is still over our minds" (**2 Cor. 2:16**). Conversion gives us insight to meet Jesus in his Word. To have the food that will nourish us we need to believe in the one he has sent, Jesus.

Do you really want to take God's Word seriously, do you want the mind and heart of Christ? Then look at your language, ideas, and words. Let God's Word challenge what's in your mind. I'm amazed at how much explicit sex is in the language of young and old. Ideas have legs — what's in our mind eventually is put into action. Your words are the pulse to check the condition of your heart. Jesus said it is what comes out of a person's mouth that defines that person.

But to take in God's Word we need silence and space. Learn as you do it, applying it to your situation. Once you've learnt the nine times table you apply it automatically to questions suddenly posed. Jesus is here in his Word helping you, challenging you, widening your horizons if you will let him. He said, "All those who love, will keep my Word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home in them" (**Jn. 14:23**). That means God will stay with you, shaping you, forming you by his Word. In taking in the Word, we are making an act of faith in Jesus: "I am the bread of life, if you come to me, and believe in me you will never be hungry or thirsty."

The second reading tells us, "Your mind must be renewed by a spiritual revolution so that you can put the new self that has been created in God's way in the goodness and holiness of the truth."

God is speaking to us today in his Word. That Word has the power to change us. But we must displace ungodly words in our heart. Turn to Jesus and take in his Word in faith. Surrender to that Word, surrender to Jesus and he will be formed in you and act through you. We have Mary's word for that, who said, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me, according to your Word." And the Word was made flesh in her for the salvation of the world.

## Third Homily

An Australian on a business trip to Germany, near the Czech border, told me this story. While he was in Germany, the Berlin Wall came down on 9 November 1989. He saw Czechs from the Eastern Bloc walk over the bridge, stand looking in shop windows and weep, and then turn around and walk back over the bridge. They had been told that the advertising for all sorts of goods was simply Western propaganda. Now they knew they had been sold a lie.

One line in the Gospel made me realise that we are being sold a lie in the opposite direction

from the Czech people. With all our things we are in danger of giving up the Christian meaning of our lives for consumerism. The words of Jesus apply to us: “You are not looking for me because you have seen the signs, but because you had all the bread you wanted to eat.” The sign Jesus had created, in the multiplication of the bread, was meant to point to him, that they might come to believe in Jesus as sent by God. Where is the next generation? If we are unhappy or have lost direction we go shopping, provided we’ve got the money, for things we don’t need for ourselves or for our children. Just look in your wardrobe.

On a deeper level: Are we afraid to live simply in freedom? You see that in the first reading. The Jews released from slave camps in Egypt were ready to give up their freedom and return to slavery for the meals they got in Egypt, instead of the uncertainty of the desert, depending on God and finding their own inner resources.

Primo Levi, the Italian writer, wrote of his experience in Auschwitz at the time of liberation: “In the majority of cases, the hour of liberation was neither joyful nor light-hearted. Many suicides occurred immediately after the liberation. By contrast, suicides were rare during imprisonment. In my own case release was a critical moment which coincided with a flood of rethinking and depression.” You wonder why. Elie Wiesel, another Auschwitz survivor, explained why. He said that in the concentration camp, you lived in expectation of a miracle or death. It was after the nightmare was over, that he himself underwent a crisis, questioning his beliefs. Many died soon after release. The dream of freedom gave them the strength to survive the camp, but on release the dream didn’t live up to the reality.

We need to give our young people more than things; we need to teach them the truth that is in Jesus and invite them into the spiritual revolution that is a turning, a conversion to Jesus. It gives them the resilience and the ego strength to resist bullying. It counters the destructive attitudes among some children such as: it’s me first; or not knowing right from wrong. Substance has given way to style; what you have and how you look or come across is what appears important. How do we go beyond consumerism to meaning, to substance beyond style?

Jesus knew the needs of the people and fed them. He knows our needs. Despite the grumbling, God provided for his people. Yet Jesus’ action of feeding was to be a loving sign pointing to himself. “I am the living bread” for the life of the world; a love that could move us to trust him with our lives. He is the bread sufficient for the day but demands faith in him and in his teaching. God promises to provide each day all that is needed. He doesn’t furnish familiar foods or permit the accumulation of reserves for times of Imagined need. Faith is a practical matter of living with no security, save the belief that God’s love and wisdom will fill all human physical and spiritual needs; bread from heaven is both a gift and a test of faithfulness.

There’s more to life than making a living. The people still think in terms of work as they ask Jesus: what do we have to do to earn this bread? It’s the wrong question. Christ is a gift received

through faith. But once we've received him then we must work to make his teaching our own. We know the difference between knowing what Jesus taught and doing it. Our work is to live for Jesus and to work to bring Jesus to others.

That's what the **menAlive** movement aims to do, illustrated by a story: "The village community were having a special feast. The women were to bring food and the men the wine which they poured into a large barrel. When the host drew the first glass to commence the festivities, all he got was water. Each man presumed the rest would bring wine and one bottle of water would not be noticed." Robert Falzon, Peter Shakovsky and a small group of lay men who are married, single, have families and careers, noted the lack of the rich red wine that men could bring. They asked, "Where are all the men?" They founded **menAlive** a national Catholic ministry to men in 2003 out of a response to a great need in the hearts and lives of men, and the Catholic Church.

They hold: "If we can reach the man, we will reach the marriage," and "if we can reach the marriage, we can reach the family," and "if we can reach the family we can reach the Church," and "if we can reach the Church, we can reach the nation." We must admit our Church and our marriage has its back to the wall. Jesus' wisdom, if we want it, calls for a change in us. There's more to life than making a living. Like us, when Jesus offers lasting bread and calls for a change in the people they cry: Prove it.

In Ephesians this belief requires a practical relinquishing of illusions and desires which don't nurture habits of life marked by justice and holiness born of truth.

Exchanging old selves for new selves created in God's image is symbolic of the interior stripping and conversion of life in which those who follow Christ must first be emptied to make room for what is to come.

To live out our Baptism, our change into Jesus, Ephesians gives us a practical program:

- Give up living the aimless kind of life that pagans live
- Believe! have a fresh, spiritual way of thinking
- Give up your old ways ... you are created in God's way
- Put aside your old self ... put on the new self.

And the key — put off following illusory desires for things that don't last.

# Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Kgs. 19:4-8

Eph. 4:30-5:2

Jn. 6:41-51

Fear about what's coming or what people think, exam results or a medical report, can often take the heart out of us and really discourage us. We are anticipating some outcome in the future, instead of living in the present. In our worry we can fill our lives with phantoms real, or otherwise.

The three-year-old couldn't sleep. The baby-sitter, for all her explanations, couldn't get the little boy to sleep — the monster was still in his bedroom and would not stop tormenting him. A friend of the baby-sitter, who was as nutty as a fruitcake, went into the little boy, listened to his story and asked him if he had a gun. The little boy got out his toy gun. The young man sat on the bed beside the three-year-old and asked him to point to the monster when he saw it. "There it is!" he shouted as he pointed. The young man aimed the toy gun at the monster and pulled the trigger. Almost immediately the little boy was fast asleep.

God deals with us like that — he enters into our discouragement, things that haunt us from the past, worries about the future that plague us — he wants us to face them head-on and deal with them in the present, toy gun or whatever, but especially with his help. God only wants to encourage us, to console us if we are living life to the best of our ability.

Elijah, the sole surviving prophet of Yahweh, had taken a strong stand. He had entered into contest with 450 prophets of Baal who, with Queen Jezebel's backing, were leading the Jewish people astray. A sacrifice was to be offered to Baal and to Yahweh. Only Elijah's sacrifice, doused with water, was consumed by fire from heaven. He won the contest, got rid of the pagan prophets and turned the people back to God. But Queen Jezebel was out to get Elijah for killing her prophets, "I'm going to get you Elijah!" Elijah had to run for his life into the desert. Fear of impending danger had overtaken him.

From being strong, he had dropped his bundle. Fear of being killed — the fate of prophets — had become a monster he could not deal with: "I am no better than my fathers." God dealt with him, not with explanation but instead he roused Elijah, fed him, rested him, and set him on his journey to Mt Horeb, Mt Sinai where God had made covenant with his liberated people.

In our own lives, sometimes we are totally helpless. We can't work out the problem. It's beyond us. We have to wait in the dark, with the questions still remaining in our heart, trusting, hanging on to God. Folding the arms of our faith as we wait till the light comes, but not the arms of our action. Right here, right now there is something we can do — whether it's cleaning our room, putting through a phone call, visiting someone in hospital or cooking a meal for someone. The action stops the fear, like a tourniquet or a pad staunching the blood, till we get help. Faith is the opposite of



fear. It gives us the heart to dare something with our lives. Faith is both an understanding as well as a trusting. It gives us a way to look at life.

Discouragement, fear seeks to divert us from our God-given task in this life. Jesus could have been discouraged. He wasn't accepted in today's Gospel, as he offered the most intimate gift of himself to the Jews — himself as Eucharist and as wisdom, as food for the journey and as the secret of life. And the only response he gets from the people is: "Who does he think he is? We know him only too well." They are telling him to break it down. "Look Jesus, we know that each person is a mystery, but don't give us this rubbish that we have to eat you to gain the secret, the purpose of life. Just keep providing the bread, the ordinary things we need, all the rest we can handle." Can we really handle life alone when the crunch comes?

Jesus wants us to come, to be in communion with him. But it isn't something we can grasp simply on a human level. It is gift. We are drawn into communion, into a new relationship with Jesus by the Father. This is where faith comes in. It goes beyond reason. If we can let go and take in Jesus' words, he's the only one who can reveal this relationship, this communion between God and our lives, with all the joys, fears, and discouragements, because only he lives that relationship and wants to lead each one of us into it. He promises to become for us a lasting source of strength, refreshment, and nourishment. "Those who ate the manna are dead. If you eat this bread that is me, you will live forever."

What does Paul say to us in our discouragement? He says like Jesus, Give up the complaining. "Get rid of all bitterness, all passion and anger, harsh words, slander, and malice. Be kind and compassionate. Be mutually forgiving. Imitate God's love, follow the way of love. Paul, like Jesus, invites us to believe. Faith gives us the right view of ourselves. I am sealed with the Holy Spirit for the fullest development of myself. God has forgiven me in Christ. Christ loves me. He gave himself as a sacrifice for me, a sacrifice more powerful than Elijah's, for "the bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world".

# Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Prov 9:1-6

Eph 5:15-20

Jn. 6:51-58

A man just married and on honeymoon was at Mass with his wife, both very much in love. Just after the Consecration he began to weep. She asked him afterwards why he was crying. He said, "For the first time I have understood Jesus' words, 'This is my body given for you'."

Do we really understand the power of the Eucharist, the words and the ritual, to touch our lives and take us deeper into whatever it is we are going through, not only the joy and the love but also the tiredness, the trial and tragedy, to reinterpret it prophetically and allow it to take us beyond ourselves, buoying us up to face what lies ahead?

"During the Second World War in a city in eastern Europe occupied by the Nazis, the Gestapo were sent out early one morning to round up all the Jews from the ghetto area where they had been confined and bring them to the train station. They were told to take nothing but the clothes on their backs because there would not be room in the trains for luggage. Jewish men, women and children were marched down to the station and crammed into cattle cars for the trip to Auschwitz. Inside the cars there was almost total darkness. People were barely able to move, not even to relieve themselves.

"In one of the cars near the back was an elderly woman who had taken with her a single bag, hidden under a long, heavy coat. After several hours of riding on the train, the woman sensed that evening was near. It was Friday and the Sabbath would begin at sunset. She leaned down with great difficulty, opened the bag she had dropped at her feet, and brought out two small loaves of bread and two small candlesticks. She had no matches, but as word spread through the car, someone found a pack in a coat pocket and passed it along. The candles were lit and held by two people; their faces momentarily warmed by the light. Then someone began to sing in Hebrew the words of the great 16th Century hymn, *Lecha dodi likrat kalah, P'ney shabbat nekablah*, that is *Come, my beloved, to meet the Bride; let us greet the face of the Sabbath*. Every man, woman and child joined in, and the sound of voices filled that train moving ever deeper into the darkness of night" (**James A. Wallace, *Preaching to the Hungers of the Heart*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota 2003, p. 70**).

Jesus the Jew, travelling toward death, took bread and a cup of wine. He loved his own and wanted to give them the uttermost proof of his love, he washed their feet, became obedient to the Father's plan to save us, even to death on a cross, and the Father raised him. Sr Edith Stein, Jew and Carmelite nun, as the train stopped briefly at a station in Germany on the way to Auschwitz, gave to a student a card for her mother superior in Echt, Holland.

On it were the words, "We are going to the East" meaning towards the rising of the sun, to resurrection. In taking bread become his body and wine his blood, Jesus wanted us to take in

himself a flesh and blood person, and to join our brokenness with his and to commit ourselves to what God had done and is doing in our lives. The Holocaust put in tension the traditional Jewish remembrance of a saving God. What efficacious or actualised salvation did they experience in their abandonment? As we tell the story which accompanies every Eucharist we have to address this issue, and other crises or celebrations, in meaningful, contemporary ways. Are we ready to give ourselves to him?

In today's Gospel we find Jesus in the Eucharist as living life-giving wisdom and as broken flesh and spilt blood; Jesus is not just in the bread, but in the *breaking* of the bread. In our tradition there have been two ways to understand the Eucharist — by looking, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament — and by eating — to come in faith to receive Jesus, to be changed by him. Augustine's insight revealed that in ordinary eating, food is changed into us, but in eating this bread we change into him. Jesus comes as bread to be eaten, taken in, so that we might grasp the Father's urgent love for us. Jesus is flesh given for the life of the world. Jesus wants us to draw life from his flesh, as we said at the beginning of this Homily. Husband and wife give life to each other in the mystery of two in one flesh, in the intimacy of their love and sacrificing themselves for each other and for their children.

Unlike Matthew, Mark and Luke who have Jesus say, "This is my body," John uses the word, flesh — "This is my flesh" — to signify human nature in all its limitation and struggle that Jesus has embraced. We have to take Jesus in. "Unless you 'chew' (*trogein* in the Greek) my flesh and drink my blood, you will not have life in you." In the pouring out of the Son on the cross, totally at his Father's disposal and given for us, Jesus brings us to see the enormity of sin and the new life he wants to bring us into. Jesus is the Father's desire for us revealed in cross and Eucharist.

If we take part in this Eucharist, we need to bring our story, identify our sacrifice with his, become bread for others as he did, putting ourselves at God's disposal in service for one another; and then we will draw life from the Father and from Jesus, so that we can give life to others.

## Second Homily

Physical presence is a wonderful thing. We don't always realise this until a loved one is absent. And it is brought home more forcibly still when a loved one dies, leaving a great emptiness in us.

Physical presence is a great thing, but it isn't everything. It doesn't always produce the intimacy we long for. People may be sitting side by side without being present to one another. When husband and wife struggle to be present to one another in gentleness, in trust and in love, when they struggle to en flesh the word, "My body given for you" — they are realising in a special way, Jesus' command, "Do this in memory of me." Love needs to find human embodiment.

John's community, the group of people for whom the Gospel was written wanted such a tangible experience of Jesus. Words were not enough. "Don't tell me! I want to experience him!"

You get it with Thomas in the same Gospel, “Don’t tell me the risen Lord was here ... Unless I put my fingers into the nail holes and my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

It’s the concrete experience which the disciples on the road to Emmaus had when they encountered Jesus ‘in the breaking of the bread,’ that John’s community wants. John points his community in the same direction, “You will find Jesus in the Eucharist as living, life-giving wisdom, and as broken, torn flesh and spilt blood. You will find him not just in the bread, but in the *breaking* of the bread.” Although Jesus is not physically present in the Eucharist, he is really and truly present. We call it the Real Presence because it is presence in the fullest sense, it is more than communication, words, it is communion. To enter into communion with Jesus we need faith.

The expressions “to eat his flesh” and “to drink his blood” must not be taken with a crude literalism. Body and Blood stand for the whole person. When we eat the bread and drink the wine of the Eucharist, we are not receiving a body and blood. We are receiving a living person, Jesus himself. He comes to us under the form of bread, which is essential for life, which we take into ourselves and make part of ourselves.

Through the food of the Eucharist, Jesus nourishes in us the undying life of God which we received in Baptism. This is why he says, “Anyone who eats this bread will live forever.” However, we must never forget that the Jesus we receive in the Eucharist is the same Jesus who gave his life for us. Like Jesus, we too must be willing to give ourselves in the service of others.

In our Catholic tradition there are two ways of approaching the Eucharist: 1) as looking, adoration. It’s not magic but there is power in Eucharistic Adoration. Lovers take each other in by looking. 2) The other way of approaching Eucharist is by eating. To come in faith to receive Jesus, open to be changed by him, then, in Augustine’s words, “ordinary bread we change into ourselves, but this bread changes us into Christ”.

Jesus comes to us as bread to be eaten. John uses the word ‘chew’ (*trogein* in Greek), taken in, digested, so that we might grasp the Father’s urgent love for us in Jesus. He is flesh, given for the life of the world. Jesus wants us to draw life from his flesh, as husband and wife give life to each other in the mystery of flesh touching flesh, sacrificing themselves for each other and their children. Jesus giving himself in the flesh is not acting ‘as if’ he were human. The Docetist heresy of John’s time said that Jesus was God, but his humanity was only an appearance of being human, so that when Jesus suffered, the divinity in him escaped and only a shell remained. This heresy struck at the heart of God’s saving plan; it was in his humanity that Jesus gave his life to save us.

John uses the word ‘flesh’ — ‘This is my flesh’, to signify human nature in all its limitation, weakness and struggle, that Jesus embraced. Jesus has already accepted our weakness. As we take Jesus in, eat his flesh and drink his blood, we draw life from him. We must encounter the whole Jesus in each Eucharist to partake, to participate in his pouring out of himself for others, to bring our own story, our limitation, our struggle, and link them to his, to draw life from him, so that

we can give life to others.

# Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Josh. 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b

Eph. 5:21-32 or Eph. 5:2a, 25-32

Jn. 6:60-69

Today, in the readings it's crunch time. No longer the generalised 'we' but 'you'. Joshua said, "Choose today whom *you* will serve ... As for me and my house we will serve the Lord." Jesus and Joshua demanded personal choices from their disciples and from us.

The first announcement of the Eucharist divided the disciples, just as the announcement of the Passion scandalised them. The Eucharist and the Cross are stumbling blocks. Jesus did not water down his message when the disciples said, "This is a hard saying and who can accept it?" and began to move away, muttering their disbelief. Jesus could have said, Don't go, I'll break it down a little. Instead, he let them go, and turned to his own disciples, "Will you also go away? Because I cannot disown my own self and the task that the Father has sent me to do." Peter said to Jesus, "Lord who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we know that you are the Holy One of God."

Thomas More resisted taking the oath of supremacy that Henry VIII demanded. His erstwhile friend, the Duke of Norfolk approached him and said, "Thomas, for the sake of our friendship, why don't you sign the oath, everyone else has signed." Thomas replied, "I hold myself in my hand like sand or water and if I opened my fingers myself would slip through and I would be nothing. And anyway, when we die, and you are sent to heaven for doing your conscience, and I am sent to hell for not doing mine, will you come with me to hell, for friendship sake? No! And neither can I, I cannot go against my own self" (**Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons***). Thomas was a man born for friendship, but he knew where he located his true self. Like him we need to reclaim the fire of who we are before God.

"As for me and my house." We need also to reclaim the fire for our own family. If Jesus were here, he would be asking, What have you done to promote a moral ecology for your children. Take the culture they are growing up in. The secularist agenda is radically altering our society — late term abortions up 600 per cent, the Marriage Equality Bill which would radically alter the nature of marriage and promote same sex marriages.

Instead of trying to understand the Gospel from the point of view of culture (times are changing and we just have to go along with it), what if we understood the culture from the point of view of the Gospel. The covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, is the greatest witness to the Gospel. Here is where the moral ecology is nurtured. Couples represent a tremendous resource. You and your children are the domestic Church, a formidable force for evangelisation.

St Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians to build up the Church and family and not to put down

one of the partners. He modified the patriarchal household codes of the Greco-Roman culture by first insisting that marriage between a man and a woman is *in the Lord*. If Christ is *in* the relationship and both are committed to Christ, subjection gives way to deference and reverence, “giving way to one another”. Second, he cites Genesis 2:25 to recall God’s order from the beginning — “a man must leave father and mother and cling to his wife” — upholding the equality and differentiation of the sexes who become two in one flesh. Third, Ephesians has in fact turned the household codes upside down. The emphasis rests no longer on the duty of the wife to the husband, but on the husband loving his wife the way Christ loved the Church and sacrificed himself for her. This understanding of marriage is one of covenant, the mystical union between Christ and the Church which marriage reflects.

It takes many factors, including faith and courage, for a couple to work at a permanent love relationship. In Christ to face one another and say, “Lord to whom can we go? It is right here that you have the way of eternal life for us.” The basic challenge today is to learn to love, to lay down one’s life for each other. When things were tough, we had to work together to survive. Now with affluence it seems we have to work **at being together** and not too successfully at times.

We’ve made romantic love the main basis of marriage, which means that choice is based on the feeling of love, so that when we don’t feel the same about each other the marriage is in danger. We need to restore the ancient tie between romantic love and all loving, and between all loving and the will. Love is more than intention. Love gets down to concrete behaviour, begins with the small details of everyday life, and that’s where the will comes in **(cf. Edward E Ford & Steven Englund, *Permanent Love: Practical Steps to a Lasting Relationship*, Winston Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1979, p. 6, 16).**

You know the degree of effort that love requires; the willingness to build the relationship, to suffer, to lose, and to start again. Because unless I am willing to promise you that I will stick around long enough for you and me to work and grow in our capacity to love each other, then we will never actually grow. It’s both the grace of Christ and our daily effort, the quality and quantity of our activities together which makes a marriage. Make your marriage your primary commitment, spending some time each day doing things together, struggling to serve the Lord as the basis for you and your house standing firm. “As for me and my house we will serve the Lord.”

# Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deut. 4:1-2, 6-8

Jas. 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27

Mk. 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

“Be doers of the word, not hearers only.” Let your actions flow from the deepest part within you, where you stand before God and listen to him. Live from the heart outwards. These are the words from today’s readings that I wish you all for Father’s Day. I saw the film **Courageous** which is addressed to fathers and to all men who have such a role. It deals primarily with one man, Adam, a policeman who was good at laying down the law but missed out in developing a relationship with his teenage son. Like many of us, after a hard day’s work he wanted to chill out, retreat into his comfort zone, watch the telly and relax.

Adam had a 15-year-old son, Dylan, and a cute daughter, eight-year-old Emily. Dylan wanted his dad to run with him on a special fun run, like all the other dads, but Adam constantly brushed him off, while Emily using her feminine charm, got what she wanted. It led to a growing alienation between the son and his father. In one scene Emily wanted her dad to dance with her in the park while waiting at the shops. It wasn’t the macho thing to do. Adam watched her from the safety of his four-wheel drive vehicle, an onlooker, and couldn’t bring himself to enter the dance.

Emily wanted to go to a party with her friends, got permission and went off, but coming out after the party she was killed by a drunken driver. After a time of grief, Adam decided he did not want to be a good-enough father. “We have a few short years to influence our kids,” he said. He asked his three friends, “When did you first think of yourself as a man?” Some responses were: “When I left home at 21, became legal”; “when I got my license”; “started a job”; “fathered a child”.

Adam resolved, “God wants me to call out the man in my son. I can’t be passive. Spending time with the kids is a given; setting standards by how I live. If fathers did what they’re supposed to do there wouldn’t be half the trouble we have on the streets. Part of being a man is taking responsibility; it’s easy to father a child, but I have to begin the process of building trust with my son.”

He wanted to be a doer of the word. He researched what the Bible said about being a man, a husband and a father and wrote a resolution. He shared it with his friends and invited them to join him. Adam said, “I am not doing this lightly.” They decided to make and take on this resolution. The wife of one of the men said to him, “If you are going to do it, do it right.” After they took it, one of their mentors said to them: “Now that you have made this commitment you are doubly responsible. Be confident. You will face challenges, conflict and controversy and you will need courage to live out this resolution.” They did face many difficulties. Finish well, seek the Lord and trust you will never be alone.



## Second Homily

It was during World War II, at the hasty withdrawal from Dunkirk, when all kinds of boats went across the English Channel to rescue the Allied soldiers suffering heavy casualties in France, that Somerset Maugham, the famous writer, first heard the Word. He was a war correspondent in one of these boats. Water had to be rationed on the trip back and he sipped from an old, cracked cup trying to make it last. It was on that trip back that he discovered that he had a gift, a vocation as a writer.

You can hear something important and then forget it. Years later when Somerset Maugham was 'successful' and there was danger that he would forget his vocation, take it for granted, he would take that old, cracked cup that he kept in his drawer, fill it with water and sip from it trying to relive, to recall that first time he discovered his vocation to write. He wanted to be a 'doer of the Word,' not hearing and then forgetting, like the man who caught a glimpse of his real self in the mirror and then forgot what he saw.

James is talking about the exact same thing, about the Word of God in life, in creation, in the uniqueness that is you and me; God's creation that comes down from the Father. James is especially talking about the Scriptures, God's Word to us, the message of the truth that has power to change us, to make us children of God, the first fruits of a mature harvest.

God's Word is dynamic. God's intent is for our greatest good. God created us by his Word; called us forth, and wants us to be a witness for others, the first fruits of an offering of the harvest to God representing the rest of the harvest. We Christians are to be examples of what God wants every person to become.

There are all kinds of influences on us, some that can pull us down and others that can build up our real true selves if we take them in. There is an influence, a power in God's Word. James asks us to submit to the Word that God wants to plant in our hearts and can save us, bring us to our fullest development as men and women. This planting of the Word in us is not an automatic thing, like seeding or ploughing in a crop so that a yield can come. No! We need to take the Word in, to listen to it like Maugham, and to act on it, and become obedient to the Word. If only we would believe and let the Word take root in our heart, we would discover a creativity from the Gospel, for God and for our neighbour.

Years ago, I went to Trinity College, Dublin, to look at the famous *Book of Kells*. It is a very old Celtic work, a Latin version of the Four Gospels written and beautifully illuminated on vellum (calf skin). The monks and people literally believed in the power of the Scriptures. They put, planted the Word in poisoned water to purify it, put clippings from the vellum into the feed to cure ailing calves or sick people; and cures did happen, the land or water was restored.

They really believed that God's Word was alive and active in their lives right now in every

situation because God was acting behind his Word. The first reading from the *Book of Deuteronomy* is a proclamation of monotheism, not in any abstract form but concretely: “He is near and acting on our behalf today when we call him.” He is a unique God, different from all the pagan gods precisely because he is alive and active, and he has something to say to each of us.

If he is our Maker and the Lord of the Covenant, then his Word speaks to our uniqueness to what we can become, what we are made for. If you had a new washing machine that went awry and started ripping up the sheets in strips, you’d dive for the switch and turn it off. You would contact the maker, and they might say, “Did you read the directions?” “I never thought of that!”

But God did. He planted his Word within us as our conscience which tells us to do right and avoid wrong. It is from within, from the heart, that good or evil intentions come. And we’ve all had the experience of closing our minds when we have not wanted to hear God’s voice. We don’t let God’s word in, so that we don’t have to obey, but rather choose our own selfish interests. It’s so much easier to avoid involvement by sticking to the rules. The person keeping to the rules, comes across as prim and proper like the Pharisees, but a person needing their help is absolutely frustrated because they don’t have a heart. Jesus simply says their hearts are far from me.

When we really hear God’s Word and become doers of the Word, we become contemplative prophets. This is the dynamic calling of each one of us — to root ourselves in God’s Word revealed in Jesus and to speak out for the powerless in our world.

# Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isa. 35:4-7a

Jas. 2:1-5

Mk. 7:31-37

Jesus enters into Gentile territory peopled with many hurt individuals, hungry for the healing word of Jesus, symbolised in the man that they bring to Jesus. It is here that Jesus makes contact with a world that is alien to most of us, the world of the deaf. Jesus enters the isolated world of a deaf man born with a speech impediment which would follow from being born deaf. It is difficult for us to imagine that silent world, not being able to hear what's going on, not being able to hear anyone approach you, unable to discern sights and sounds around you that are so important for survival, and not being able to communicate with ease (**Krempa, ibid, p. 135**).

I wonder why Mark included this incident in his Gospel. Was it because Christians, you and I, were so used to Jesus' words that we could no longer hear them? Just as we so easily tune out from the deeper, underlying feelings in the conversations of people we are close to. On this Child Protection Sunday, so many abused children and adults live in a silent world where they are unable to trust others; they need us to help them give words to their grief and hurt. Jesus wants us to make contact, to admit, acknowledge, and work to heal the hurt by really listening. We are all in this together.

In the old days when morse code was the means of communication, there was an advertisement outside a telegraph office, for a telegraph operator. The office was soon filled with job seekers talking to one another and waiting for the boss to come out and interview them. A young man walked in and went straight to the manager's office. The men said to each other, "Who does this young fellow think he is barging in and going straight to the office? He will soon be chucked out." The young man went to the office door, knocked, and at a voice saying, "come in", entered the office.

After ten minutes the boss and the young man came out. The boss said to the men, "Thank you gentlemen, you can go now, I have my man." They grumbled and demanded to know why he was chosen. The boss said to them, "Listen." Then they heard morse code repeatedly beating out, "If you can understand this message, come in, the job is yours!"

Communication is more than words. Notice how carefully Jesus treats the man. Because this man couldn't hear Jesus words, the Lord touches him, places saliva (almost like his spirit made visible) on him and groans so that the man could experience the vibrations of Jesus' words. And then Jesus says, "Ephphatha, be opened!" and the man could hear. The people were astounded. Here was the reality of the messianic age Isaiah prophesied happening before their eyes, it was a touching and glorious moment.

“Ephphata!” Jesus said to the deaf man, and his ears were opened. In a world crammed with a myriad of frantic frequencies, let us pray that the Lord will open our ears to hear God’s life-giving word for those who are abused. And from whom do we first hear that word? In the National Church Life Survey taken six years ago, one of the questions asked was, “Who were the most significant people to show you what the faith was about?” The responses were interesting. Mothers were top of the list (with 76 per cent), followed by fathers (53 per cent). In other words, our parents are the most significant people in our faith development. The parish priest scores a lowly 18 per cent.

We first encounter the Word of God, maybe not in words, but certainly as a lived reality in our families. A story is told of a little lion cub that got lost. He attached himself to a flock of sheep and soon thought of himself as a lamb, trying to bleat and eat grass like the others. One day there was a roar from the forest, the sheep fled at the approach of the lion. But the little cub wasn’t afraid. The lion took him by the scruff of his neck and let him see his reflection in a pool of water, and said, “Now do you see who you are and whose you are?” So, in the homes of this parish — and the home has often been called the domestic Church — may our children hear God’s word telling them who they are and whose they are.

Our children need to hear that they are loved and appreciated; and in the Church and school that they are safe. “Mary Anne Bird was born with a cleft palate, and when she started school, her classmates made it clear how she looked to them: a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth and garbled speech. When schoolmates asked her what had happened to her lip, she’d tell them she had fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow that seemed more acceptable than admitting that she’d been born that way. She was convinced that no-one outside of her family could love her.

“But one person was to make a difference in her life, her second-grade teacher Mrs Leonard. Each year the students had a hearing test, another source of embarrassment for Mary Anne because she was virtually deaf in one ear. Mrs Leonard was administering the test by whispering something and the student had to repeat it back: things like “the sky is blue” or “do you have new shoes?” The seven words that Mrs Leonard spoke changed Mary Anne’s life. She said in her whisper, “I wish you were my little girl!” (**Bausch, *Story Telling the Word*, p. 194**).

“Ephphata!” On this Child Protection Sunday, may our ears be opened to hear and speak life-giving words to our children!

## Second Homily

It was Simone de Beauvoir who highlighted the power of the look — we become who we are under the gaze of another — too often become “other” and put down; but the look of another also helps us determine who we are. In Zeffirelli’s film, *Romeo and Juliet*, during a dance, catch a

glimpse of each other and fall in love; from rival families, in spite of the enmity between families, they become lovers.

The look of a father can affirm the best in wife and children but can also hurt when combined with angry words. Alphonsus Liguori was the eldest son of an ambitious Neapolitan noble, captain of the galleys that patrolled the Adriatic against Muslim slave traders. Don Giuseppe was grooming his son for noble rank and marriage. A brilliant student he became a lawyer by the age of sixteen, but Alphonsus over the years was drawn to the priesthood. His father was bitterly opposed, and the son endured in silence.

He had to reside at home, and go to college from there; his father, although rich, gave no money for Alphonsus to buy a cassock. So, this day Alphonsus obtained a poor cast-off cassock and arrived home. When Giuseppe saw him as a poor seminarian he jumped sky-high, screaming and threw himself on the bed, wild with sorrow and anger. The father refused to see the object of such bitterness. Yet all this made Alphonsus resolute.

The look and the word of a father can build up or hurt. On the other hand, men can abdicate their role as fathers. Robert Bly in his book *Iron John* speaks of the “father-wound” in young men because they had become hurt from the lack of authority over their lives from their fathers.

So, it's interesting that Jesus pulls the man aside today, taking time with him. He takes time to moisten his finger and put it on the man's tongue; takes time to put his fingers into his ears. We have two ears and one mouth to indicate the proper ratio, that we should listen twice as much as we talk. A couple passed a fish shop and there in the window was a large salmon with two signs — one indicated the price; the other said: “If only I'd kept my big mouth shut.” Sometimes when there was danger of one saying a bit more than a husband really meant with his wife or vice versa, one would say to the other, “poor fish” to tone it down.

Fathers need the special attention that today represents — not things so much as that personal touch and interest that Jesus showed. The crowds were milling around: the demands were great; yet Jesus took him aside and made time for him. Much is expected of fathers. The stereotyped male role of bread-winner taking precedence over intimacy is now reversed. The deeper spiritual dimension of being a man is now addressed by men. Words can also wound a father's heart who may suffer in silence, absorbing the hurt from family or work.

Fathers can be vulnerable — the son in them has to be recognized by their own fathers or other mentors so that they can be fathers; they become sons before being able to be fathers. We live in a world where wealth, age, health, and appearance have become competitive; if we don't measure up, we are often overlooked. It's then that Jesus draws us apart and prays that through his Spirit our inner self may grow strong, and Christ will be in our hearts through faith. A father also needs to hear from his family and others what he has done well and be appreciated. Bernard said to his father, “I love you dad”, and what a change it made in their relationship.

Alphonsus was almost 33 and had been a priest for two years. His father, Don Giuseppe, was returning from the royal palace of Naples when he passed crowds outside the Church of Santo Spirito. He could hear his son preaching and singing; Don Giuseppe got out of the carriage and worked his way through the enthralled crowd in this immense Church and listened. He was moved to tears at the thought of having caused such suffering to his son whom God had obviously called to the Gospel. He was filled with thankfulness, and when Alphonsus came home he pressed him to heart sobbing: “My son, I am indebted to you: this evening you have made me know God. My son, I bless you a thousand times.”

The other side of the coin of the wounding father is the Prodigal father who waits and yearns for the return of his son. Many a father has expressed unconditional love and acceptance of children who have come home. The father, by his acceptance, takes away the self-hating script of the son, “Father, I am not worthy.” In difficulty, the son comes to know himself as son and discovers the father’s heart. Celebration and joy are the response to such an occasion. Did you ever tell your father that you love him?

## Third Homily

We live in a visual age, but in Jesus’ time if you could not speak or hear you lived in a silent, isolated world which is still the experience of many today. Look at what Jesus does, he takes time to be with the deaf and mute man who is a Gentile. He takes him out of the crowd; and with body language that the man can see, he raises his eyes to heaven, puts his fingers into the man’s ears, wets his finger with spit and touches the man’s tongue, and then with a loud groan that the man can feel he says in the man’s language, “Ephphata” — “Be opened”. The man is free to go and live his life. It’s the crowd that makes all the commotion.

A young man who was dying was told, to comfort him, “when you get to heaven you will be able to hear”. He replied, “No! When I get to heaven God will have learned sign language.” In other words, don’t brush over what I have been through; enter my experience of suffering.

We can’t brush over the enormity of suffering, shame, and cover-ups in our own Archdiocese over the last forty years. I was shocked when I read the letter from our Archbishop. I thought it referred to Australia, but it is for all under the jurisdiction of the Melbourne Archdiocese: 90 priests, 22 religious and 19 lay workers have had findings against them; \$34.5 million have been made in redress, and 754 people have been assisted with counselling, health, and spiritual support. There is grief and pain everywhere throughout Australian churches because of the criminal sexual abuse of children. In law, a child is a person under eighteen years of age. Those who have been wrongly silenced for so many decades have found their voice.

As the Church, we are being called to governance and cultural change. One is clericalism, which is the idealisation of clergy and by extension the idealisation of the Church. The trust of people in

their priest or teacher that was sacrosanct has been broken. Now, we need to listen and report any abuse. Archbishop Peter has written: "I am strongly committed to reporting to the appropriate authorities and have already exercised that duty here in Melbourne."

"I am also strongly committed to upholding the seal of confession." Recently Daniel Andrews has stated that if Labour returns to office that priests who do not report sexual abuse confessed in confession will face three years in prison. Archbishop Comensoli told the ABC that the Church welcomed the extension of mandatory reporting to priests but maintained the seal of the confessional could not be broken. "The keeping of the seal in fact might in real ways enhance the safety of children not put them at further risk, because of the anonymity the confessional offered to children." The Coalition also wants to remove the exemption given to churches.

The requirements on all churches mandated by the Royal Commission are: A Child Safety Committee has to produce a Policy on Child Safety that is visible to all, and on the parish website. Secondly, a code of conduct which applies to all who engage with minors in school and the Church: Sunday school, youth groups and choirs. Thirdly, all who are involved with children need a Working with Children Card. Fourthly, we are compliant with the requirements of the Victorian Government legislation. Lastly, in the areas of risk management we have identified the areas of risk, some addressed, and others still being worked on.

Some may be thinking, I'm sick and tired of hearing all this. Let's get back to normal. But there is no normal to get back to. We are all changed irrevocably by these terrible revelations. We ask the Holy Spirit to give us the spirit of fortitude to strengthen our resolve to lead open and transparent lives in today's climate of sexual abuse of minors. Give us the courage and inner stability to name what is wrong and rectify it.

Lead us Jesus, to take time to listen to each person with compassion as you did and be on the lookout for each other. Give us the courage and compassion to pray for the conversion of the perpetrators. Prison chaplains tell us that most pedophiles in jail have their own stories of abuse as young children. We have no reason to believe that this does not also apply to many of the guilty priests. Perhaps this is indeed, "the sins of the fathers being visited on their children". Will we only accuse the past or will we pray to create a redemptive future for our children?

# Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isa. 50:5-9a

Jas. 2:14-18

Mk. 8:27-35

How do you respond to Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am?" It's embarrassing when we know someone and we forget their name, and they are asking us to our face, "Do you know who I am?" Jesus is not asking our opinion of him, how we see him; he is asking us whether we know *who he is in himself*. He is asking for a commitment.

It's vital for Christianity and for our faith that we answer Jesus' question. He himself thought so, in order that his message and mission would be carried on in our times and not watered down to suit our tastes. Do we really know Jesus? Have we met him so intimately that he can ask us, "Do you really know me, do you love me, and will you walk in my way?"

For Jesus it's important that his disciples know who he is. It is a turning point in Jesus' ministry; no longer the huge crowds following him for healing and feeding. Rejection, opposition is setting in. For his Gospel, the message of God's reign of love and justice, for the work of redemption to continue, his disciples need to answer that question.

He begins by asking the twelve, "Who do people say I am?" They mention someone other than Jesus, John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets. All these looked for and pointed to the Messiah. But in the personal question directed at the disciples, "Who do you say I am?", it is Peter who says rightly, "You are the Messiah." It's a leap of faith, still fragile, but spoken.

Jesus is the Messiah and more than the Messiah. In response to Peter's confession, Jesus makes a three-fold disclosure: the Messiah must suffer; his disciples must be prepared to share his sufferings; and his and their suffering will lead to ultimate glory. But that's not what Peter or we want to hear. We may not have heard the word 'rise', but we certainly heard 'suffering' and 'death'.

We want to avoid suffering, pain, self-sacrifice, and acceptance of the seeming incomprehensibility of death. We want all the things that guide us to happiness. And yet in the last twelve months, everything that our global community worships look shaky because of Covid.

"Who do you say I am?" Jesus is a suffering Messiah. Jesus tells Peter and the disciples that this is the way redemption would take place. Jesus is not out to glorify suffering. He embraces the cross as the only way for him to follow God's way, not man's, even if it entails intense suffering and rejection that robs him of his dignity. To pull back from the task his Father has asked of him, will be to deny his deepest self. The road to rising will be through dying. It is his resolve that changes the cross into a sign of glory. If we are to be disciples, we must get behind him and follow.

Jesus glancing at the twelve and summoning the crowd, says to them, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me." It is for Jesus' sake and



the sake of the Gospel that we are willing to lose ourselves. We follow Christ by taking up our cross as opposed to pretending it isn't there. The cross we have, gives a distinctive signature to our discipleship; it's our way of following the Lord.

For a grieving family, for a man facing a grim diagnosis, testing positive to Covid and facing isolation without his family around, these are hard words to hear. Isn't life itself burden enough to carry? But the truth is, only the cross can bear the full weight of human suffering. Only the cross contains the promise that death is not the final word. Only the cross offers real hope in the midst of our despair. Sure, we need others to help us shoulder the cross.

Who do you say I am? In the end, this question does not demand an answer, so much as an action — a journey — a decision to pick up our cross and follow the only one who knows the way home.

# Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wis. 2:12, 17-20

Jas 3:16-4:3

Mk. 9:30-37

We all want to be the greatest, to be Number One whether in study, friends, sport, or work. You see it with the footy stars when they put a goal through; up comes the forefinger as they race toward the crowd for their applause. If you don't promote yourself, who will?

Some developmentalists say that between thirteen and seventeen there's a psychological surge in a young person for greatness; just think of the possibilities in social media or STEM learning. We want to solve the world's problems before we turn twenty, while we still know everything. It may be the dream of a lifetime, but it takes a lifetime to achieve it. It takes time for us to mature.

In the Gospel, Jesus says something different that doesn't sit well with us: "If you want to be first, you must make yourself last of all and servant of all." That's crazy, Jesus! Do you know what you are asking of us? Let's look at what Jesus is asking of us — to *make* yourself last and to serve is a decision not to seek my will, getting my own way by force, but serving society. A lot of young people are doing this. Like the students of Christ the King School in Geelong who designed Gardens of Change out of the old Alcoa aluminum smelter at Point Henry, and who won the First Lego League Open in Hungary with their robots.

If we go to the Book of Genesis, chapters: 37-47, we find the story of the patriarch Joseph who at sixteen literally had dreams of being Number One, and cockily told his eleven brothers. The first dream was that the eleven sheaves of hay that his brothers had cut were bowing before him, with his sheaf standing upright in the centre. The second dream was of the sun and moon and eleven stars doing reverence to him. The family knew it represented them. Joseph didn't realise how his cockiness affected his brothers and parents — his brothers hated him. James said when ambition meets jealousy it creates disharmony. For Joseph everything was black and white. I can do what I like, it's my life — it alienated him from his family for two decades. We are accountable to God for our life. He gave it to us and wants us to make something out of it.

Joseph begins to know what he didn't know. When his brothers met him in the fields, they stripped him of the coat his father Jacob had given him and sold him into slavery into Egypt. He was seventeen. It took a life-changing incident to wake him up and start him on the road to change. He was sold as a slave into Pharaoh's household. When Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him, he kept his integrity, but was wrongly accused and thrown into prison for thirteen years.

It takes time to mature. We don't make ourselves last — life does that. What is important is how we respond, that we do not become bitter but we grow through adversity. Joseph's greatness was formed through trials. He would never have reached his potential if he had stayed at home. To

become great, he had to become a slave and a prisoner.

The next phase is that I grow, and it starts to show. After thirteen years in prison Joseph was called before Pharaoh to interpret his dream of seven fat cows and seven lean cows. Joseph told Pharaoh that it meant seven years of abundant harvest and seven years of drought. Joseph was made second-in-command under Pharaoh for the distribution of grain. Made last, his service began, not only for Pharaoh's nation but also for other nations including his own family, providing grain in times of famine. Joseph didn't seek revenge on his brothers but told them that what had happened was God's plan to save his people **(from John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Most Powerful Minutes in a Leader's Day*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 2000, pp. 37-41).**

Nelson Mandela came out of 27 years of prison in Robben Island and worked for reconciliation between black and white South Africans. Asked by Bill Clinton if he still hated his jailors, he said, "If I did, they would still have me in prison." Instead, he learned to know his jailors, but hated the system of apartheid and worked to change it.

It's interesting that Jesus made his point to the ambitious disciples who knew only too well what he predicted about his death, but were afraid to ask, by bringing a small child into the circle. This child represents me, he said. A child in Jesus' time had no social standing; they were the least important member of society.

I was driving the other day and concerned about a number of things, I found my prayer to be anxious. I asked Jesus: Why is my prayer like an anxious parent and not like a trusting child? When my attitude changed then I entered into greater peace. Then I thought of Jesus who had predicted his own death of terrible suffering but trusted like a child in his Father who would save him, and who served totally, trusting that the Father would raise him from death to bring new life to us all.

Listen to Jesus word to us again: "If you want to be first, you must make yourself last of all and servant of all" and become like a little child in trust and service.

## Second Homily

It's not enough to say God is on our side. We have to be on his side, by having faith in him and by changing our lives. Those are the words of a 17-year-old girl to battle-toughened soldiers, Joan of Arc, before she raised the English siege on the city of Orleans. They are as true for us today. To be on God's side, to live in faith without jealousy or ambition is like becoming a child — disarmed; yet the disarmed child disarms us by its goodness, simplicity, and trust in its father.

But the child image is deceptive. To stay on God's side among people who want to cut you down or compromise you, as the first reading points out, takes courage beyond the ordinary, a strength and a wisdom that really is God's and only is given as we ask for it in prayer with a view to living it in reality. There's strength in us when we are on God's side because we get his perspective on things, and his strength and conviction. Otherwise, we cave into group pressure.

God's side is the power of unconscious holiness, which doesn't live for show, to make a good impression but lives the truth in love. Envy is living on my side, with me always watching me, so that others don't gain an advantage over me. It only takes one spot of dirt in a carburetor to foul up a machine. It only takes one speck of dust in the eye to distort our vision. Why should I be concerned about God? I will not serve! Then you lose your glasses, you fumble your way, try to pick out words on a page or a telephone directory. You feel helpless without something outside yourself to help your vision.

Jesus is talking about laying down his life for us, for his Father, and the Apostles are wrangling among themselves over who is going to be the greatest. How lonely Jesus must have felt. He draws apart to instruct them and ambition closes their understanding. It's the fight between our little kingdoms and God's reign in our lives. So, he invites a little child into the circle, and tells them, "To accept a little child like this in its insignificance to society, is to accept me."

As man, Jesus knew that everything was God's doing, to be used by his Father, no matter what it cost. God is still God. It is he who brings about revival, renewal, a new sense of purpose, but he needs instruments who obey him and respond to his promptings, no matter how foolish it may seem.

Joan of Arc is a case in point. From the age of thirteen she had been hearing voices that she was to lead the army of the King of Heaven and drive out the English and crown the Dauphin Charles at Rheims. At a point of her country's lowest ebb, she left home and waited and persisted until she could see the Dauphin with her dream. Men and resources poured in. Soldiers must fight but the victory is God's, she said. Yet she took no glory in bloodshed and sided for peace.

John Wesley began to ride round England when the country was in moral decay; he preached in response to the Spirit, and he brought about a great revival in England. John Henry Newman began the Oxford Movement when scepticism and rationalism were widespread. It is not argument but holy men and women who are needed. "Men scoff at principles, ridicule books, laugh at the names of good men; but they cannot bear their presence. It is holiness embodied in personal form which ... they cannot steadily confront and bear down" (**cf. C.S. Dessain, *The Spirituality of John Henry Newman*, Winston Press, Minnesota, 1980, p. 32**). People are on the lookout for men and women of God, and when they see rare perfection, they watch it with a mixture of curiosity and awe.

The battle for renewal is right where James put it — in the human spirit. "One little deed, done against natural inclination for God's sake, though seemingly passive like brooking an insult, facing a danger, resigning an advantage outweighs mere words." It is difficult to over-estimate.

An individual trained to practice what he or she preaches may acquire moral power in their own circle over the course of the years. The attraction exerted by unconscious holiness is irresistible and gradually people become aware of God and of Christ's presence. A few highly endowed men or

women will rescue the world for centuries to come.

I think we are at this point. We are passive and dependent on the priest. But we need to listen and respond to God's Spirit, be on his side, and initiate what he is asking us to do.

*Be thou my vision, O lord of my heart*

*Naught is all else to me, save that thou art*

*Thou my best thought by day and by night*

*Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.*

## Third Homily

Jesus again speaks quite openly to his disciples about his death. He is pointing out his future. He is going to be killed. And what are they arguing about? Raw ambition, the top job in the kingdom and being close to the Master. Jesus isn't against ambition but against false ambition, that walks over people to get to the top. It is what we do with that power or prestige when we reach that position that concerns him. We can jealously guard our position against competitors who may be favoured, not necessarily on ability; or we can envy those who seem better and rejoice when they lose.

Rene Girard, the French philosopher, said that the basic drive of human life is to be found in the structure of desire. No matter what we have, this drive remains unsatisfied and open to the infinite. We especially imitate what others desire. He called it mimetic desire: They have a new car ... a Smart phone ... or whatever, I want to have the same.

Envy and jealousy are what today's readings are about. The Book of Wisdom shows us envy and jealousy in action; James' letter is about a Christian community that is being ripped apart by envy and jealousy, and the Gospel reading deals with the wrangling among the Apostles regarding who is going to be the greatest.

Envy and jealousy are not the same. Envy is wanting what someone else has such as money, property, a car, a job or friendships. We not only wish we had what they have, but even wish that they would lose it and, at its worst, we take steps to make that occur. Envy has to do with what belongs to someone else. It has been called the vice of counting someone else's blessings rather than our own.

Jealousy is about what we have and our worry that a rival may take it from us. Jealousy always needs a rival. We can be jealous about a relationship, about our prerogatives, about our position at work and are afraid that someone might take it away from us. We become jealous then of a person we see as a threat to us and may seek to eliminate him or her. It's the cause of many crimes of passion.

Both envy and jealousy twist our souls out of shape. They are one of the seven capital sins that the medieval writers said were express roads to hell. It certainly is true that jealousy or envy can turn our life into a kind of hell on earth. Unlike other capital sins such as gluttony, lust or pride that give some momentary pleasure, envy and jealousy are always sheer torment. We become unable to see any good in the people we envy or are jealous about. We become blind to the good in life and in ourselves, they affect our prayer life and our willingness to forgive, and often lead to the way we speak or act towards others **(cf. Krempa, ibid, pp.141-143)**.

# Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Num. 11:25-29**

**Jas. 5:1-6**

**Mk. 9:38-43, 45, 47-48**

“Stop, stop, stop them!” We have adopted unthinkingly Tony Abbott’s policy, Stop the boats. But Jesus says, “No, if they are not against us, they are for us!” The conflicting voices of today’s readings. What are they saying? They are talking about protecting our own backyard or group. We set boundaries and don’t easily let in the stranger unless they go through the proper channels.

Pope Francis speaking to the joint session of the US Congress challenged them, and us, to reject hostility to immigrants and treat them humanely. Donald Trump promised to deport the eleven million undocumented immigrants when US President. Pope Francis also challenged Tony Abbott’s policy to stop the boats.

Bishop Long who introduced the 2015 Social Justice Statement wrote: “We Australians have rightly felt appalled at the dangers that refugees experience on their journeys, but we seem to have come to believe that harshness and rejection will be enough to deter desperate people from their flight to safety. Yet the presence of the boat people proves that Australia cannot insulate itself from the worldwide movement of people. Every boat we intercept, every child we detain, is a reminder that we can be part of the problem or part of the solution, while we try to bar our doors, millions are fleeing and dying — Rohingyas, Syrians, Hazaras and Somalis — to mention only a few. I don’t know the answer. I suppose it’s why Pope Francis has initiated the Jubilee Year of mercy, 2015, in all parishes that we might learn mercy as Jesus taught us.”

We can claim our rights as residents over immigrant families; they will take our jobs and claim special benefits, get into positions of leadership over us; but the Pope is saying: “We must not be taken aback by their numbers, but rather view them as persons, seeing their faces and listening to their stories, trying to respond as best we can to their situation.” That’s how the Pope responds, not by show of power but by listening and learning by way of dialogue.

Something like this occurs in the first reading. Moses was commanded by God to share his leadership with others at the Tent of meeting. The spirit of Moses fell on seventy elected elders at the Tent, and they began to prophesy. But it also fell on Eldad and Medad in the camp who were outside the regular appointment of office. In response to Joshua’s cry to stop them prophesying, Moses replied, “If only the whole people of the Lord were prophets, and the Lord gave his spirit to them all.”

The Spirit can’t be confined to authorised channels but offers new and exciting possibilities. The Spirit is bound to the Church, but not bound by the Church.

With Moses, the issue was power-sharing in the community. In the Gospel, it is the problem of

exclusivity. A stranger, a maverick exorcist is producing marvellous results using Jesus' name. John, one of the twelve Apostles, calls on Jesus to stop him. He is worried about others outside the group with competing power. Only a few verses earlier the disciples were ineffectual in casting an evil spirit out of a boy. Here, he wants to erect a barrier around the exercise of compassionate ministry in Jesus' name. But Jesus refuses to stop the stranger. He welcomes all who do the works of justice and mercy. "Who is not against us is for us," Jesus says.

The background to Mark's Gospel is of a Christian community facing death and torture for simply bearing Christ's name. It's not safe to just let anyone into the community. And yet Jesus affirms the good that can come from outside and gives three reasons not to stop the exorcist: If he does good in Jesus' name, he will not speak ill of Jesus; If he is not against us, he is for us; Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, will be rewarded. Those reasons speak to us about a community with its back to the wall which receives help from unexpected quarters. There are millions of people displaced because of war, violence and torture. Hearing the horrific stories of death in boats that were meant to be vehicles of hope that became instead vehicles of death, compelled Pope Francis to go to Lampedusa to speak to the survivors. He said: "We are a society that has forgotten how to weep." It's true also for us. The outsiders cast out demons that afflict our community and challenge us. Pope Francis spoke of Martin Luther King Jnr, John Jay and Abraham Lincoln. Pope John XXIII embodied Jesus' attitude when he said, "Where there is good, there is Jesus", as he worked for world peace.

The readings challenge us to see the prophetic, healing activities of others outside our particular group or the Church, which is a genuine witness to the work of the Spirit and the cause of Christ. The Social Justice Statement for this Sunday highlights the issues facing us and the actions we need to take to bring justice to refugees and asylum seekers. Australia rose to the challenge in the past with its generous embrace of migrants and refugees from Indochina. Australia changed for the better, as it always has, with each successive wave of new arrivals. Australia is what it is today because of their determination and drive for a better future. We honour the legacy of this great nation not by excessive protectionism, isolation and defence of our privilege at all costs. Rather we make it greater by our concern and care for asylum seekers in the spirit of compassion and solidarity that has marked the history of our country from its beginning,

## Second Homily

The Bishop's Social Justice Statement for 2018 deals with homelessness. Jesus the itinerant preacher of the Kingdom was homeless. He challenged anyone who wanted to join him with the words, "Birds of the air have nests, foxes have holes, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Are you still willing to join me?

Way back in 1973 I ran a weekend experience in the city for young adult men and women called "All the Lonely People", you know, the Beatles' song. It was a bitterly cold July weekend. We stayed



in a Uniting Church manse in North Melbourne, met on the Friday night with our sleeping bags, had a small meal and a talk from the minister about his experience of the homeless who came to his door. The males went out singly and the females in twos. Each of us had 20 cents and we stayed out all night coming back on Saturday morning for breakfast and a time to share our personal experiences of cold and loneliness and the people we encountered.

After a rest we went to visit the various places for the homeless, The Way in Fitzroy, Mother Teresa's Sisters' place for homeless alcoholics in Gore St, the St Vincent de Paul Ozanam Centre in Flemington Rd, and also the women's refuge. We had Mass on Saturday night and on Sunday went to a talk at the Methodist Church on this topic, and then on to the Yarra Bank speakers' corner. The weekend was a real eye-opener. Today you wouldn't find a public phone for a 20-cent phone call, it's all digital. Mind you, I wouldn't do it now. It is quite dangerous, yet the soup van with young and older volunteers from our and various churches go out regularly.

What's your experience of homelessness? People coming to your door; people sleeping in cars in the street or other parking areas told to move on by the police or reported by the neighbours? I'm no expert, but what's your experience? Can you talk for a minute to the person beside you!

What are the statistics? The Bishops in their Social Justice Statement, ***A Place to Call Home: Making a Home for Everyone in our Land*** ask us to consider those who are homeless or facing housing stress because of skyrocketing rents and property prices:

- \* More than 116,000 are homeless

- \* 875,000 now experience ***housing stress*** — having to pay more than 30 per cent of their income on accommodation. Low-income families are particularly at risk; half of those in the private rental market are experiencing ***rental stress***.

Australia needs more than 270,000 extra affordable homes for low-income families. Currently there are almost 39,000 people on community housing waiting lists and more than 150,000 on the waiting list for state-owned social housing. In 2017, specialist services assisted 290,000 get emergency accommodation but couldn't help a further 53,000 requests for help. The government in all states are lagging in providing low-income housing. What is a home? Having a place to call home is more than having a shelter from the elements. It is about personal security and wellbeing, the social and economic base of living, the formation of families and kinship, the development of personal and social identity. Housing is an essential entitlement to meet basic needs, flourish in community and have inherent human dignity affirmed and upheld by others (UN Declaration of Human Rights and Catholic Social teaching).

What are the causes, aside from a ruthless housing market?

- People whose income is barely enough, or not enough, to keep their families housed and fed.
- An economy that has allowed housing to become out of the reach of so many.

- People experiencing health and family welfare problems such as domestic violence or mental illness.
- Unemployed and low-paid workers or older people on low-fixed incomes, as well as an emerging cohort of older, single women in unaffordable rental accommodation.
- Low-income workers pushed further out, having long distances to get to work. For example, Millgrove is a poor area 70kms from Melbourne but the cost of a house along the river is \$500,000 pushed up by estate agents, despite so many poor in the area.

What can we do? In our society of social and political divisions when it is so easy to cross to the other side of the street when we meet homeless people, the Social Justice statement invites us to follow the example of the Good Samaritan who stopped and helped.

The St Vincent de Paul Society in all our parishes is three times bigger than the Salvation Army which is found in short-term crises, but St Vincent de Paul is in for the medium and long term. We can get involved there. Ozanam House is being redeveloped at the cost of \$47 million; Corpus Christi Greenvale is being redeveloped at the cost of \$24 million — both world-class centres for the homeless who are given every opportunity to access housing, health, and social support relevant to their individual needs.

St Vincent's Hospital have 'step up' and 'step down' services — places where homeless people can recuperate for short to medium periods after leaving hospital and receive help for housing and other problems which deliver positive outcomes. The Australian Catholic Housing Alliance and the taskforce of Catholic organisations committed to eliminate rough sleeping have a responsibility to share their knowledge and insights with politicians until they see from them commitments to adequately address the problem of homelessness or housing stress. The Brotherhood of St Lawrence and other Churches are doing similar work.

Jesus and Moses in today's reading encourage us to collaborate, working together with hearts and minds open to those whom Christ sends into our lives. May we follow the example of Pope Francis who reaches out to the homeless in the streets of Rome and wherever he goes.

# Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Gen. 2:18-24**

**Heb. 2:9-11**

**Mk. 10:2-16 or Mk. 10:2-12**

It's great to be on holidays, but it's good to be home. Belonging is the other side of our identity, who we are and where we come from. Identity is rooted in our nature and in our family where we are accepted for who we are. Identity moves through childhood receiving love, being dependent on mum and dad and older siblings for most things, to struggling to be independent, choosing one's friends, finding your mate, your life partner, then through to interdependence, the constant give and take of married life which is a reflection of the nature of God.

We see in Adam our journey from loneliness to intimacy and the vital importance of healthy marriages for the social fabric of our society. "It's not good for man to be alone." It's a journey from loneliness to intimacy that no power or command over things can fill. Adam names every bird and beast but no helpmate for him was found among these. You can whistle up the dog or call the cattle home but to be able to share your deepest self with another and to have that received and cherished is quite a different thing. We can make an idol of the other, but only God can ultimately fill this loneliness in us. God gave man and woman to one another.

Woman, said Augustine, was not taken from man's head to be ruled over by him, nor from his feet to be trampled upon, but from his side, close to his heart, within the encircling embrace of his arm to be loved by him. Equality and difference. Sexuality is a complementarity inserted into our flesh and bone by God. This is God's doing — male and female God created them and saw that they were very good — a reflection of God's intimate family nature, the Trinitarian life. Two were to journey to become one — truly person and truly community.

Marriage is a unique relationship. Out of the vast array of relationships in our life, Genesis singles out only one and traces it back to the very start of creation. Marriage is older than Israel and more ancient than the Church. It is deeply inscribed by God into the very nature of human beings. Nothing can replace or imitate marriage.

At the heart of marriage is not romance, emotion or feeling, but a vow to be faithful to each other, no matter what happens, until death. Intimacy calls for commitment, a bonding not only of flesh and emotion but essentially of mind, will and heart. In your life together it's the decision of your will that's keeps marriage going. The married commitment is quite different from living together. There's no built-in exit ramp. It is the commitment to leave father and mother and journey to become one — to work at the relationship in good times and in bad. Alec Guinness said that when we were first married, we vowed our life to each other in good times and in bad, hoping it would all be good, not realising that the tough times were equally important for our growth in love.

As you work at the relationship you discover more about the person. We journey towards deeper intimacy with another — to know and be known by that other. Obviously, it's an ideal which is never totally realized. Sailors don't reach the stars, but they set their quadrants by them. And a married couple know quite concretely when they are not together.

In a parking lot late at night were two cars — a big, black, shiny limo and a battered, patched-up, old VW, in which were a young man and woman who were about to be married. The young couple decided to move off. As he reversed there was a jerk on the steering wheel and the axle bearing was rumbling. He had a flat. His spare tyre was flat. He was mad at himself. Just then a stranger stepped from the other car in a slick, black suit and said: "I can help you, but I want something from you." "Are you Satan?" "Yeah, some folks give me that name, I'm Lucifer, you can call me Luke." "You want my soul?" "No, I don't want your tired old soul. I want your dreams because if I have your dreams, I have your life."

When you set out in earlier times you may not have had much, but you had your dreams. How is your dream? What kills our dreams are not necessarily the big issues, but the small, daily stresses: the struggle to pay bills; the stupid misunderstandings that divide, so small yet so important to our ego; the words or lack of communication or sharing that build mistrust; unmet expectations or disappointment on a very human level that seep into us; the feeling that a partner reacts to anything we say by getting angry or bursting into tears. The heart has a long memory for love, and for hurts, that bring us back together or frustrate us. We value independence above relationships and isolate and insulate ourselves from one another.

It's true that many dreams die. There was a time when research said that when a couple are desperately unhappy then they should divorce. Now research is looking at the impact of divorce on children: the disruption of family relationships; lack of emotional support; alienation from one or other parent, and a reported rise in emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. The Church struggles between being true to Jesus' teaching about God's original plan for marriage and compassionate care and welcome of those who have divorced or remarried.

Have you noticed, in the media, how shots of popular people or opponents often depend on the angle of the camera. Becoming one is the way couples see one another and act toward another. It's something to be worked at, to check the angle of our camera. Unfaithfulness is losing the centrality of the other in our life, in our hearts. What builds the dream? Cardinal Newman said: Faith gives us the heart to dare something with our lives. So that if our hearts are broken, a gracious loving God can put our hearts together, in order to love again.

# Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wis. 7:7-11

Heb. 4:12-13

Mk. 10:17-30 or Mk. 10:17-27

He had tossed the question back and forth, back and forth in his mind. He had heard Jesus preach and he was stirred deeply, dissatisfied with all that he had — and he had everything that a man could have going for him, but it wasn't enough. He was used to building his own empire, getting his own way, using all his gifts of management, his smooth, amenable ways, but it wasn't enough! It was only when he realised that Jesus was going, moving on, that he acted, almost out of desperation — running after Jesus and blurting out his question: "What can I do to inherit eternal life?" He must be heard, so he slipped in cleverly: "Good master, what must I do ...?"

Instinctively, because his focus is always on the Father from whom discipleship and mission come, Jesus brushes aside those clever words and asks the man about his relationship to his neighbour. The commandments Jesus cites: adultery, theft, false witness, defrauding and respect for parents are commandments which a rich, powerful man would be most prone to offend. The man replies that he has lived a life of love and respect for his neighbour all his life.

Jesus looks at him with love. This man has the potential to really follow Jesus. Let's face it; we'd be rapt if such a person came to us! I know that Jesus is looking long and lovingly on each one of us and knows our potential. Are we willing to take in Jesus' words for us? Are we ready for the next costly statement of Jesus, spoken to this man: "Go, sell all you have, give it to the poor, and come, follow me." Five imperatives: Go, sell, give, come, follow.

Up to this point the man had been doing most of the initiating. Vocation, as a Christian, isn't our doing. It is a calling. The absolute initiative belongs to Jesus. The other disciples followed Jesus, leaving things behind. Why was Jesus so tough on this man? Because the man was used to deciding his own destiny. He came running to find he's only marking time; he's running on the spot. Jesus is removing the obstacles that are stopping him. The man is asking, "What can I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus says, "Let go of everything that is stopping you following me." Switch off your mobile, your video or computer long enough and listen to me. Forget the status of your car, your house or your lifestyle, or your wallet and let that go. You want to keep all your options open. I ask you for a radical commitment to me.

In the case of this man, what was stopping him was his wealth. For us, it could be something else. Jesus' call does not stay on the level of a dream or a vision. It addresses the nitty-gritty of our own concrete, historical existence. The Word of God is alive and active. The word of Jesus wants to get to the inner core of each one of us. The same words that swept Francis of Assisi off his feet — for this man who first fell at Jesus' feet, now makes his face fall. He went away sad. Would we have failed that test?

The man came running, but Jesus opened up another way to run, beyond doing, beyond law or commandments; but he could not leave the things that tied him down. We cannot put a 'Jesus veneer' over our idols and go on as if we were truly Christian. Has the culture so conditioned us that Jesus is only a thin veneer?

There is no self-made salvation. Nothing we can do, can secure it. What is impossible for us alone is possible through following Jesus and through the Christian community. Living the Kingdom way of life is not just keeping the "shall nots" of the Decalogue but is first an encounter with Jesus that finds concrete expression in love for one another, and care for the very poor without counting the cost.

The cost of Kingdom living is conversion. I was listening to a man who had lost his faith and the direction of his life. He visited an Episcopal Church in Baltimore where the prayer *Desiderata* was found. It was simply a touristy visit, but faith was suddenly returned to him when he sat in that church. Alan, a lay missionary at Tardun, told me he was into Buddhist spirituality. He was meditating under a tree outside a Catholic Church and a voice told him, "Go to church." The sheer gift that faith is, and the direction and vision it opens up is mind-blowing. Conversion is a concrete way of living which is expressed as love, to follow Jesus and to love others.

There's restlessness today for Jesus and for close intimate groups. If our Church is to be effective, to respond to the two-fold need of discipleship and community then perhaps we need to be released from our former ways. How are we going to follow him?

## Second Homily

Christian discipleship, following Jesus is not cheap grace. You get the impression from the rich young man, with money jingling in his pockets, that with a bit of flattery he can buy eternal life. "Good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He had everything, but he wanted what he saw in Jesus.

Let's admit it. If that young man had come to us, we would have been rapt. He was clean, decent, hadn't done anything wrong in his life, was well dressed and looked after his money. He was like any of those bright, young executives in the world of speculation and high finance; he was smart, eager, putting all his mind and heart into it. No wonder Jesus looked with love at this young man who came seeking more. The Gospel indicates he had easy access to Jesus. Jesus was someone to whom he could entrust his essential questions and who would give a true answer. Yet when the answer came, the young man went away sad; he couldn't get away quick enough. What went wrong? Let's look at it.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus is delighted with the question. He takes it seriously. "What must I do?" Do we ever get that level of question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus listens with the heart, and cuts through the flattery: "No-one is good but God

alone.” The only object in this dialogue of salvation is the One who saves, God himself.

So, Jesus probes further with a challenge: “You know the commandments!” The young man has kept the law meticulously. Jesus looked steadily at him and loved him. In scripture, Jesus’ look had a profound depth. He was able to see what people could become. That look was an invitation, a call. With words sharp as a scalpel, Jesus gets to the heart of this man’s life. It’s a direct challenge. “You lack one thing: Go, sell everything your own and give your money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

We’re scared to ask that sort of question to our bright young men and women, and of ourselves. Why was the young man sad? Why are so many sad? Because Jesus issued a call essential to this young man’s spiritual wellbeing; he had known it and turned away. He had asked how to inherit eternal life, but his possessions were in the way. Salvation isn’t a job to be successful, better than others. The young man was highly respected; respectability isn’t enough for Jesus. The commandments he quoted were at the heart of the Jewish concept of salvation.

Jesus confronts him with a challenge. “Get out of this moral respectability. Stop looking at goodness as consisting in not doing things, take yourself, take all that you have, and spend yourself and your possessions on others. Then you will find true happiness here and in eternity.” Jesus’ words are cardio-mimetic, they mirror the condition of our soul; they did that for Francis of Assisi. Sir Kenneth Clark, while making the television series, **Civilization**, had a profound spiritual experience in a church in Rome. He thought of his reputation in the BBC, the reaction of his colleagues if he became a Christian and he closed the door.

Often, we must speak the truth. It creates sadness, but it’s salvific sadness which enables us to face things we thought essential to us, and give them away, die somehow and rise again. Yet many do not. What about us? asked Peter. What about us? We can be spectators and never put the question to ourselves. Hey! Wait a minute. We’re just getting over the financial distress Covid has put us under, our nest egg we’ve just accumulated is the only security we’ve got. Are you asking us ...? Don’t look at me, look at Jesus. You know what your spiritual life lacks: it could be any number of things. The last line of the film *Easy Rider* says a lot: “He not busy being born is busy dying.”

Salvation is a grace which is given through faith in Jesus. But Jesus always seeks to earth that faith by asking us to take an actual step, to make a stand. Otherwise, our questions are only head trips to justify ourselves. Jesus wants to bring us down to our particular brass tacks. Jesus is looking at each one of us and knows what we can become and what the one thing is that we lack. He is offering us grace.

We realise that grace always wounds us from behind at the point where we think we are least vulnerable. We pride ourselves in being a strong family, then a crisis breaks us open to one another at a deeper personal level. Grace is harder than we think, we moralise and say we’re decent enough until God expects more of us. Grace is more indulgent than we think, but God doesn’t let

us ease him out. Our ego can do that, but God's Word penetrates our secret judgments and emotions to lead us into that true wisdom to live our lives by. His grace makes it possible to follow him in down-to-earth, challenging, and self-effacing yet truly joyous ways.



# Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isa. 53:10-11

Heb. 4:14-16

Mk. 10:35-45 or Mk. 10:42-45

Last Sunday's story of the rich young man hit us with the cost of discipleship. There is a cost in following Jesus, in becoming a disciple. But the young man wasn't up to the task and went away sad. This Sunday, despite the fear, and Jesus telling the disciples that he was going to be crucified, and almost oblivious of the danger, two of them, the young James and John, steal a march on the rest of the disciples dragging reluctantly behind, and ask Jesus for a place at his right and left in the Kingdom.

They wanted privilege, position, and power without service. Their request was to share Christ's power when he came in glory. They timed their appointment to begin when the suffering was over. But Jesus brought the conversation back to what happens before the glory. Jesus' Kingdom is not about who wears the crown, but about who bears the cross. He asked them a disconcerting question that turns upside down their request for promotion and status to one of far greater, deeper significance beyond their own selfish interests.

He asks them, "Can you drink the cup that I am to drink?" a reference to the cup of suffering and the death he would undergo in his efforts to convince us of his unfailing love for us. "Can you drink the cup that I am about to drink? Are you ready to be baptised in the bath of suffering that I am to undergo?" They replied: "WE CAN. Yes, we can, that is to say we are prepared to share in drinking the cup that you are about to drink."

St Augustine tells us in his commentary on this short Gospel scene that with this reply of "we can" James and John jumped up to another, higher level of personal commitment to the person of Jesus, stepped up to a greater readiness to sacrifice themselves for the sake of Jesus and his healing mission of mercy to the world (**cf. insights from Dr Michael Jackson**).

Knowing what we do about God's Word — that it is alive, that it is forever present and active among us, addressing us in the here and now — it's clear that this is not just a story about a past event in the life of two of Jesus' Apostles. It is a question God is asking each of us here today: "Can you drink the cup that I am about to drink? You say you love me! Are you prepared to join me in shouldering the suffering of the world in order to bring hope and healing, to bring my mercy to the world?"

In the present pandemic, we can't help asking: "What's happening to us, to our world, the hopes we once held for our future and the future of our children? The world we used to know, that world with some semblance of peace and order seems lost." In the growing separation between religion and our increasingly secularised culture, "It's as if," in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the

Lutheran pastor, killed by the Nazis days before liberation, “It’s as if God is being forced more and more out of the world and on to the cross.”

Rarely, perhaps, has there been a greater need than today for each one of us to heed this call of Jesus and step up to a higher level, to utter our own personal ‘WE CAN’ to greater commitment to the person and mission of Jesus in the face of the suffering of today’s world.

Jesus’ teaching on servant-leadership is a hard lesson to learn in these days. Jesus’ response to James and John is simply to remind them that, paradoxically, they will gain a place in the Kingdom by renouncing privilege, position, and power. The way to greatness is primarily serving the weakest or the smallest.

That’s what Fr Damien de Veuster did. Canonised on 11 October 2009 by Pope Benedict, he was a native Belgian, priest of the Sacred Hearts Fathers, he came to Oahu, Hawaii, and chose to work in the leper colony of Molokai. He knew it was a living hell, where his people were dumped and abandoned, and once going there, one could not return. “I will go to Molokai,” he said. He lived closely with the lepers whom others shunned and ministered to them for eleven years. He was an expert carpenter, and helped build their cottages, built a hospital, blasted a dock for landing, gave medicines, kept vigil with them when they were dying, and dug their graves. In his twelfth year he caught leprosy and stayed with his people, experiencing their plight. At Mass he simply said, “My fellow lepers” and they knew he was one of them.

On the way to America in 1986, I stopped at Honolulu. There, before the state capital, is a statue of Fr Damien, his body like a coffin with his head on top, signalling that his life was marked by death. I went by small plane to Molokai, to the settlement, nestling under the huge cliffs of volcanic rock. Even there, I found some of the tour guides trying to discredit Fr Damien and his work. It is a beautiful location and developers want to get rid of the memory of Damien.

Arriving in the States, I found the same hysteria towards those suffering from HIV/AIDS. Elizabeth Kuebler Ross opened a farm for children with AIDS and experienced attacks from the surrounding farmers. One hundred years after Fr Damien’s death, Sr Cecily, a Cluny Sister, and lay workers embrace those living with leprosy in the leper colony at Tindivanam, South India. The Sisters found that many of the leprosy patients were also testing positive for HIV/AIDS.

Pope Benedict wrote in the Church there cannot be those who are forgotten or looked down upon. “Love of neighbour is a path that leads to encounter with God.” And Pope Francis said, “For those who stand by Jesus, evil is an incentive to ever greater love because from the cross of Jesus we learn the divine logic of self-sacrifice as a proclamation of the Gospel for the life of the world. By Baptism we have received the mission to bring the Gospel to everyone. At the heart of the Church’s mission is the infectiousness of love, where joy and enthusiasm become the expression of a new-found meaning and fulfilment in life.”

Lord, may we learn from you, who gave your life as a ransom for all, to truly be mission in word

and in deed.

# Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jer. 31:7-9

Heb. 5:1-6

Mk. 10:46-52

It's getting near the end of the Church's year (four more Sundays and we're into Advent), and in Mark's Gospel we are at the end of a journey narrative that begins in *Mark 8:22* with the slow, gradual healing of a blind man and concludes with the instantaneous healing by faith of Bartimaeus in *Mark 10:46*. Within those two incidents we capture three moments that depict the blindness of Jesus' disciples and their reluctance to follow him to Jerusalem.

Bartimaeus is on the side of the road, off the track, begging. He had lost his sight. But he hears the crowd and picks up the name 'Jesus of Nazareth'. When we are in a crowd and hear our name yelled out, we automatically react. That's what Jesus did as Bartimaeus intended. For him it's a do or die moment. Bartimaeus doesn't just shout "Jesus". He adds the messianic title "Son of David" and the lament: "Have pity on me." The disciples try to shut him up. He will not be cowed and shouts out the louder. Faith often begins with a cry of helplessness and yet of hope, even in the hopelessness of our situation.

Jesus stops; takes control of disciples and crowd and commands, "Call him." We need people to help us respond to the call of Jesus. They say to him: "Courage! He is calling you! Get up!" There's one thing stopping Bartimaeus, his cloak that he spreads out to collect alms, that keeps him warm at night and that covers his filthy rags and nakedness. But he casts it aside and leaps up. Contrast the rich man who couldn't leave his riches to follow Jesus and went away sad. Not so Bartimaeus. He comes to Jesus, hopeful, eager. Jesus speaks. The word of Jesus is non-violent, inviting — it is mission in reverse — not imposing faith but asking: "What do you want me to do for you?"

Bartimaeus reaches down to his deepest desire and asks earnestly: "My teacher, Rabbouni, if only I could see again." How many in our congregation cry that prayer in faith, "Lord, that I may see!" There is rich irony here: even before his sight is restored, Bartimaeus already sees much more clearly and perceptively than the disciples do.

"Go," says Jesus, "your faith has made you well." And immediately his sight returned. The faith of Bartimaeus, identified by Jesus, is the trigger for his cure. As soon as there is faith there is an instantaneous miracle. But Bartimaeus doesn't go. Unlike the disciples of Jesus who are blind and fearful to follow, he follows Jesus. Discipleship is belief transformed into a pattern of living. Here is a man who started at the side of the road, on the edge, who, when cured follows Jesus — he is on the way with Jesus.

The journey of faith expressed in prayer is to begin to see with the eyes of Jesus and to see ourselves with the eyes of Jesus. To see who I am, that I am loved despite my peculiarities, limitations, and sins. To be compassionate toward ourselves; to appreciate the gift of life, who we are and the life we live. Gratitude is healing. What can I be grateful for? To notice, to understand, to

feel the resonance in us to be a whole person. To allow ourselves to be loved and be healed. Many things we need to be healed we are not conscious of; they are deep within our subconscious, we're so busy, we need to relax, to see ourselves with the eyes of Jesus and be open to be healed. Christian life is receptive (contemplative) before it is active, doing.

Also, to see others as Jesus sees them, to love as God loves. We are called to relate well to those we live with, seeing the other with compassionate eyes, in a life of love. Not to let the other's anxiety create anxiety in me, but to work through anxiety and pray for them. To assess and integrate our relationships. To look at what our tiredness is when we're tired; what our boredom is when we're bored; what is the frustration we're feeling; what gives us energy and creativity. We have a relationship with God, the Father, Son, and Spirit to know that we are loved and called to be creative in our relationships. We need to walk in the truth of who we are and the family and community that God has placed us in. All of us are on the way.

There was community of ageing monks who were worried about their decline in numbers and fearful of the future. They sent one of their number to ask advice from a wise old rabbi who lived in the forest. The monk poured out his worries and those of the community. The rabbi listened and then said, "One of you is the messiah."

The monk returned and the brothers crowded round him: "What did he say!" Only this: "One of you is the messiah." They began to look at one another: is old brother John who is so grumpy, the messiah? Or is Hans hidden behind all the pots and pans the messiah? Or Francis repairing the roof? They began to see each other differently — the atmosphere in the monastery changed; the fear left them. There was hope and joy. People began to be attracted because of the way the monks' respect and love towards each other, and guests. There were picnics and children played round the monastery, and young men joined the community.

We are called to see ourselves and others as Jesus sees. Lord that I may see again — myself and those I live with and am committed to. Amen.

## Second Homily

It's so easy to say, "I didn't see it, I'm not responsible." To see carries a responsibility. The disciples' inability to see the true nature of Jesus' messiahship and that it entailed great suffering is framed between two incidents of Jesus curing physical blindness. The first in Mark 8:22 just before Peter's confession in faith in Jesus as the Messiah, is a cure of blindness in stages. "What do you see?" Jesus asks, "I see people like trees moving about." Jesus lays hands on him again and asks, "Now what do you see?" and the healing of blindness is complete. Then follows three predictions of his Passion. Jesus is trying to get the disciples to see, but they are caught up in questions of power and position.

Immediately after the sons of Zebedee's' grab for power we have this Jericho incident. The blind

Bartimaeus sensing who Christ is, professes Jesus as Son of David, the title of Messiah; he sees, and joyfully follows him. His response is quite different from the disciples who out of fear hang back from following the Master.

This is the last journey of Jesus; he is 15 miles from Jerusalem and the danger and tension is almost tangible. Sensing this, Bartimaeus nevertheless asks to see and to follow. Do we sense that as Christians we are called to profess Jesus in a more personal way? Do we sense the tension, the inroads of secularism that corrodes religious belief in our families, business, school and the Church? Needs are before us on a grand scale: how are we able to close our eyes?

Today we're concerned with many things, such as the Covid pandemic. We worry for the safety for our family, whether we will lose work, its effect on our security, our concerns for health, we pray for an effective vaccine to ward off the infection. Have the words of Jesus deeply affected us so that we need to shout, Jesus, Son David, have pity on us? It is only when we feel as deeply as Bartimaeus, fearing that Jesus will pass by unless we stop him. Bartimaeus starts an uproar. The disciples, thinking that Jesus will be affronted, or the authorities might catch the sniff of messianic rebellion, are trying to shut Bartimaeus up. But he will not be silenced!

In all this uproar where is a Church that is truly missionary? Right between Jesus and Bartimaeus. The Church has to be Bartimaeus. Otto von Bismarck, the German Chancellor from 1871 to 1890, wrote: "I listen for the rustle of Christ's garments through history so that I can reach out and touch his healing hem." We need to listen for Jesus that is in the cry for salvation within the question: "I want to know what to do with my life that makes me fully a person, so as to enable me to contribute meaningfully to society today." It's a listening for Jesus, so that our eyes may be opened, and we can serve the dignity of others and discover our own dignity.

Look at Jesus, how he acts, because that is how the Church, you and I must act, to be missionary. You and I make Christianity effective or a thing of derision to the degree that we bring Christ to the Bartimaeus' of today. To see carries its own responsibility. "I've got my own worries." If anyone could have said that Jesus could. Jesus could have hurried on — he had so much to do in so little time. Instead, he stopped, looked and asked: "What do you want me to do for you?" It's the same question Jesus asked of the rich young man and the sons of Zebedee. He wants us to learn from him as people on mission.

Do I really listen, accept the people in my life, and really receive them with concern and love? Do I look, not to have power over them, but to let them exert power over me — their needs, their condition? Do I let their needs affect my heart; cause me to do something for them? Sometimes we have to feel what others go through before we really see or hear.

In Jesus we have the compassionate one. He accepts us, wants us to know his love and healing in order to follow after him even in difficult situations. All of us, not just the authorities or those in charge have to be responsible for what we see. The Church needs repeatedly to encourage small

groups, Gospel based, where we listen to the needs of our brothers and sisters, listen to Jesus and come to really see the needs around us; where each one has a part to play in this mission entrusted by Jesus. The quality of our missionary outreach is often in the little things beneath our noses, to see and do a loving action. It prepares for greater things, like the heroic sacrifice of Maximilian Kolbe, in a concentration camp during World War II. He saw ten men singled out by the Nazis to starve to death in an underground bunker to deter further escape attempts. One of the selected men Franciszek Gajowniczek cried out, "My wife! My children!" Kolbe heard his cry, saw, became responsible and volunteered to take his place.

# Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deut. 6:2-6

Heb. 7:23-28

Mk. 12:28b-34

If your house was on fire and you had no time to lose, what would you save first — the children, passport, bank card, family photos? It would highlight where your priorities lay. The honest question of the scribe was like that, sorting out his priorities: “Out of the 631 laws that the Jewish religion prescribes what is the most important law, that I can build my life on and that sums up all the rest?” He asks it of Jesus, the teacher, who presents him with two commandments that are really one: the Schema, “Listen O, Israel” of Deuteronomy 6:4; and the love commandment of Leviticus 19:18, which are two sides of the one coin.

What was the Schema O Israel, and what did it ask of every devout Jew? “Listen O, Israel, the Lord your God is one God, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your understanding and strength.” Three times a day the Jewish people say it from the age of thirteen. It was prayed by many as they went to the gas chamber; it was whispered by the deathbed of loved ones. They put it in little leather boxes, called phylacteries, and attached it on the door post which they touched as they were going out. For the Orthodox who took it literally, it was tied on the forehead and on the arm near the heart, to keep it before their mind and heart, with the strings going down to the hand, signifying it must be put into action.

I realised how powerful the Schema O Israel was from the story of the Austrian psychotherapist Victor Frankl, who was imprisoned in Auschwitz’s horrific concentration camp. He was totally stripped of his identity and was known only by a number tattooed on his arm. His first manuscript, that he tried to hide, was taken away by the guards and burnt.

He was given the clothes of a Jew who was killed that day. Totally depressed, his hands stuffed into his pockets, he shuffled out into the prison compound. Then his fingers felt a piece of paper. He opened it. The old Jew had left him, the Schema O Israel. He realised that even if they stripped him of everything he still lived and knew himself under the all-embracing loving care of God. He also thought, instead of just writing his manuscript, now he had to live it — to live the truth in charity and to listen to God in his struggle to survive. “If you have a why to live for, you can suffer any how.”

The second law from Leviticus 19:18 which Jesus attached to the Schema was, “you shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.” St John puts it clearly: “How can you say, ‘I love God’ whom you cannot see and fail to love your brother whom you can see?” (**I Jn. 4:20**) St Augustine comments: “The love of neighbour sharpens the eye to see God.”

The scribe’s comment is also interesting that this one commandment of love was more important than any ritual sacrifice. You see it in the story of the Good Samaritan, in which the priest and the Levite going to the temple hurry past the man lying close to death by the side of the road.



The neighbour, the one who needed help, was the one truly loved by this outsider. We're obliged to love family, but Jesus widens the concept of neighbour to include the one whose tree falls on my fence or who throws rocks at my pigeons.

At times you don't know how best to respond to conflict. When the scribe put that question, "Which is the first of all the commandments?" Jesus said "Listen!" With one word he said it all. It summed up the love for God, the love for the other, and the love for self. Just think of your everyday experience. Isn't the one who loves you the one who listens to you? You have a problem. You go to a doctor, a priest, a lawyer, a psychiatrist, your father, your mother, or someone you thought was your friend.

The problem is serious, your anxiety great. But they say they have no time, they are too busy, that you don't have the money. Even when they listen, you see their eyes turn away from you in other directions. You feel their minds turn away. They don't love you. Think of the one who listened, really listened to you, and who responded to your need.

Pope Benedict in his listening seeks dialogue with the concerns of the modern world. It's a dialogue, thinking what you can say in response, but also thinking what God's answer might be. John Shea said he used to pass a beggar with no legs, and he'd throw a coin into his hat. One day he saw a woman sitting beside the beggar talking animatedly, "So you used to live in Chicago?" And he realised how paltry his coin was.

How do we live the three-fold love that Jesus challenges us with today? Let me finish with a story. A couple had been arguing for years. When he said something, she contradicted him; when she said something he contradicted her. In desperation, after years of this, she packed her suitcase and made for a motel down the road, saying "I can't stand it anymore!"

He quickly went to his room packed his suitcase and hurried after her, "I can't stand it anymore either, I'm coming with you." Friends paid for the couple to visit a psychotherapist. When they came into his office, the arguing began again. The therapist looked at the woman, took her in his arms and kissed her passionately. He said to the husband, "This is what you must do twice a week!" "Very good," said the husband "I'll bring her in next week!"

# Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Kgs. 17:10-16

Heb. 9:24-28

Mk. 12:38-44 or Mk. 12:41-44

God is the agent of our holiness, but we don't always like the way he does it — we suffer loss and hurt in very many ways. Grief at the loss of health, home or job, a partner dies, we go through a divorce and our dream dies. Grief is something we must work through, not suppress and hope it will go away, because suppressed grief affects all our relationships.

The two stories of the widows in the readings today, expresses for me two poles of the grieving process. The first widow picks up a few twigs for a fire to cook the last meal for herself and her son, and then wants to die. When we suffer loss, the taste for life, the things we once enjoyed suddenly disappears. We cry and cry out in denial, "No it can't be!" We bargain with God, we are angry, then turn that anger inwards to guilt, "If only we had done this or that." We lose the taste for living; we no longer know where we are going. The poem **Lament** by Edna St Vincent Millay captures some of the disorientation:

“Life must go on and the dead be forgotten;  
life must go on, though good men die;  
Anne eat your breakfast; Dan take your medicine;  
Life must go on — I forget just why?”

I am so enveloped by grief that I can't see the way forward. I need others to help me, to listen while I pour out my grief, feel and express the immense loss of a loved one, wondering how I can cope in the future.

We hope that we can meet suffering in the same way that Jesus did, who emptied himself and suffered more intensely than we ever will. The process of emptying, of letting things go, does not come face on, but often indirectly from the side. It takes us by surprise; such as breast cancer that robs a woman of mothering aspects of her person; prostate cancer that hangs like a sword over a man; leukemia in a child; all this takes away aspects of our person that make us who we are, complete and whole. Like the prayer of an old man, "Lord, I can accept losing my teeth, my hair and my hearing. I find it hard to lose my eyesight or the ability to walk. But please God, not my mind."

The jar of oil is emptying, only a meagre handful of flour is left. I want to collect my few belongings then crawl away and die. Suffering can drive me into myself, make me withdrawn and sorry for myself, asking 'why me?' while looking for someone to blame. It's when the Lord sends people into my life, in a similar situation to myself, that I am taken out of myself in response to the

other's need. The first reading speaks of Elijah being sent to the widow of Sarephath, but it's possible that he also was starving as he asked for something to eat and drink.

Willa Cather wrote: "Poor soul!" murmured Kathy. She put grandma's feet in the tub and, crouching beside it, slowly, slowly rubbed her swollen legs. Mandy was tired, too. Mrs Harris sat in her nightcap and shawl, her hands crossed her lap. She never asked for this greatest solace of the day; it was something Mandy gave, who had nothing else to give. Neither spoke. Mrs Harris dozed from comfort, and Mandy herself was half asleep as she performed one of the oldest rites of compassion."

Although we may not be aware of it at the time, the loss of something or someone we love, despite the grief and pain, can be a hollowing out of the heart for God and his love. If we can begin to take the little that we have and offer it in service of others, God can change our outlook and really care for us. The older widow came to that point of acceptance. There's a deep trust in God and a willingness to risk the future for the concerns of God. She didn't hang onto her suffering but gave it all to God, in her simple but total offering. She emptied herself in her trust in God. It gave her new freedom and joy. She might have said, "My heart broke long ago but serves me still."

I remember my grandmother, a widow, working as a cook in the big houses, found herself out of work with only two pence left in her pocket; she went to the chapel, lit two candles and expected that God would get her work, and sure enough it came.

The Lord doesn't want strutters on the stage of life who make a big show of the things they do. God wants people of faith who give out of their substance.

It's what we do with suffering that's important. Jesus faced suffering and trusted in God. He redeemed suffering itself and gave it a positive meaning, opening up a new dimension, a new order: the order of love.

Pray when you are well. It's very difficult when we are ill, wrestling with pain and discomfort, times of darkness, feeling God so far away. Teilhard De Chardin prayed: "Lord, let me know it is you who are parting the fibres of my being in order to bear me away within yourself." The fruit of suffering isn't people falling away but people emerging, like the widow, who have really grasped the essentials of their faith in God and our Church, and who live it in a way that forcibly speaks to our age.

Finally, the American author Flannery O Connor writes: "I have never been anywhere but sick. In a sense sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it's always a place where there's no company, where nobody can follow. Sickness before death is a very appropriate thing, and I think those who don't have it miss one of God's mercies." May God give us faith to preserve the place we give to God in our lives, to hear him speak to us in Christ: "No matter what happens, remember, it is you I love."

## Second Homily

It struck me that the widows in the first reading and the Gospel stood somehow for the two poles in the complex process of grief and separation. The absolute helplessness, almost despair of the widow of Zarephath expresses the early stage of grief — shock, panic, the numbness when one experiences the loss of a loved one in death, divorce, the loss of a home or business, or the loss or maiming of a limb.

Everything suddenly loses its meaning, life loses its savour. “I want to gather the few things I have left and lie down and die.” Why me? The sense of injustice at those out there ... doesn't anyone know what I'm going through — God can you hear? The feeling that I am coming apart inside. The blaming and the self-condemnation ... what if I'd done this, if I'd seen the signs earlier? Got help earlier for a sickness or a breaking marriage?

“To part is to die a little.” Mourning over a loss is sometimes accompanied by self-destructive behaviour because death, separation means the letting go of the old self, of the memories, of the relationship that one is part of, that's part of oneself. People can try to weaken the conflict that's going on, whereas what is required is to strengthen the self and self-awareness so that the real self can grow in the real world as it is. Elizabeth Kubler Ross has highlighted five stages of self-awareness that see-saw like the widow: we are caught between nostalgia and the terror of the future; we try to make time stand still, to keep things as they were; to go back to a more secure and familiar place by a way we have always known, rather than through the valley of darkness. Grief and separation are dark times of testing.

Many of us are living through grief over some loss. One example is very dear to me. Jim was the father of a young leader on my camps Mark, who was a medical student, loved rock climbing and was doing all sorts of work to raise money to go to Mt Cook and to build his strength. A few days before setting off he borrowed his father's car and had an accident.

Jim demanded that Mark pay to repair the car while Mark fought and pleaded to go to New Zealand. Angrily Jim let him go. Mark was killed with his friend, Andrew. They fell hundreds of metres into a crevasse and their bodies were never found. I gave Jim my Profession crucifix and said, “Jim, here is the body of your son.” Jim later had a breakdown. He wanted to finish the conversation and make up, because he loved his son, Mark. Tragically, we all have unfinished business, yet the death of Jesus can heal the generations.

I don't know how long it takes for you, but it can be a long time involving many struggles before you can give up the one you love in order to live. It involves working through to the discovery of a new purpose for life, and a fresh reason for being independent of the deceased person, home, marriage. It is a decision to live again. The prayer of Hannah (**1 Samuel 1:10**): “In the bitterness of her soul she prayed to Yahweh with many tears, complaining to God but not without tears.”

An old Italian had lost his wife of many years. The grief lasted a long time, until one day at table with the family he began to sing from the heart again and his grief was overcome. Grief is not abnormal. Far from it: grief is a normal part of life, of becoming an adult, of “putting away childish things”. That’s what I experienced in the shattering experience of death and separation. I felt I grew from being an adolescent and becoming an adult. Somehow, new life can be resurrected by handing over to God the oil and the flour, the sign of dying, and that symbol, once I’ve handed it over, becomes a flow, a source of new life that goes on and on.

The second widow in the Gospel expresses the alternative to nostalgia and fear — a courageous faith. Faith is the commitment to grow through events like bereavement and separation by reliance upon a living God who is always renewing life, through faith’s response to the claims of growth. I know immediately after mum’s death; it was the cry of my sister’s baby to be fed that brought us back to reality.

God is asking me to grow, and I don’t want to. Our life, torn apart, is healed not by nostalgia but by translating our terror of the future into reverence for God and faith in God. The old widow in the temple put in everything she had ... all she had to live on. Her whole life, her security, was made a donation to God. It is the culmination of Kubler Ross’ five steps from **denial** — this isn’t happening to me; **bargaining** — God, if you don’t let this happen, I’ll do anything you want; **anger** — at the injustice of it all; **guilt and despair** — if only I had noticed, done something; to **acceptance** shown in the action of the second widow.

It’s that same faith that John Henry Newman prayed, and I pray each day: “Lead kindly light amid the encircling gloom, lead Thou me. The night is dark, and I am far from home, lead Thou me on. Keep Thou my feet I do not ask to see the distant scene, one step enough for me ...” He wrote this as he left with a great sense of loss the Anglican Church he grew up in and went into the Catholic Church he had come to know was true. He has enriched the Church by that faithful step.

# Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Dan. 12:1-3**

**Heb. 10:11-14, 18**

**Mk. 13:24-32**

Pope Francis told a huge gathering of the Italian Catholic Church on 10 November 2015, including clergy and lay people from all the dioceses, to look ahead to the next ten years, and said: “We are not living in an era of change but in the change of an era.” An era is a period of stability and unity of thinking and behavior. Pope Francis continued, “The situations we live in today bring new challenges that for us are difficult to understand.” He warned against seeking solutions in “obsolete conduct and forms that no longer have the capacity of being significant culturally”. Historical change is pushing beyond formulated tradition; we need new language and actions to reach and speak to people today. We need to “see living problems as challenges and not obstacles: The Lord is active in the work of the world!”

In today’s Gospel, Mark’s community was living in the change of an era, in a situation which called for a radical following of Jesus. The seemingly abrupt shift in Mark’s Gospel with its frightening apocalyptic images is not a door out of the situation but an historical window into the socio-political situation to which the Gospel is addressed, and in which Mark is asked to give a Christian solution.

The Jewish-Roman war forms the most immediate background for this text, written about 69 CE. The revolt was launched in June of 66CE and quickly spread to the provinces. In November 66CE, Cestus Gallus, the Roman legate of Syria marched on Jerusalem to put down the insurrection. He occupied the northern part of the city but was turned back in his siege of the temple mount. Stunned, he retreated in disarray, and sustained severe losses as Jewish guerillas pursued him to the coast. Gallus sent an emergency message to Rome and there was euphoria in Jerusalem. Palestine was liberated. Against all odds, out-numbered and out-armoured, the rebels had turned away the oppressors. But the liberation was short-lived. Vespasian, probably the greatest general of the time and soon to become emperor, was sent to subdue Palestine. He gathered legions from Egypt and Syria, and with six thousand heavily armed troops, began a march through Galilee, and by June of 68CE was ready to begin his siege of Jerusalem.

But the unexpected happened. Nero died. Four contenders were vying for power and Vespasian was called back. It gave the Zealot coalition eighteen months to regroup and be ready for the final battle in view of ancient messianic hopes. Titus began the siege in April 70CE and after five months of pitched battle, Jerusalem fell, was sacked and the temple burned to the ground, leaving the wailing wall. The destruction of the temple signalled the change of an era for Zealots and Christian Jews alike. Before the arrival of Titus, Zealots tried to recruit members of Mark’s community. There was only one voice that could match the persuasive call of the rebel recruiters: Jesus the living

teacher. The disciples turned in a desperate plea to this Jesus for clarity on the meaning of the historical moment.

Jesus gave the fig tree as a parable, that is, an image to read events by. Earlier in Mark 11:12 he cursed the unfruitful fig tree, symbol of the temple that revolutionary groups were rallying to defend or restore. Jesus, then, cleansed the temple. That era has gone. Don't hang on to it with grief-stricken nostalgia. Now in chapter 13, the fig tree is a sign that summer is near, the new era, brought about by the death of Jesus, Son of Man, gives us hope. He is at our gate, right before us. Death, suffering, prayer, and forgiveness lead us to Jesus, the source of our transformation. We will survive. Hang on to his words, but don't speculate about the end. Even if heaven and earth pass away, Jesus' words will not pass away. When we see these things know that Jesus is near, that's the Good News, Jesus comes disguised as our life. Everything that happens to us can work for our good.

Pope Francis is asking us to bring a new humanism into society, to face change by grafting ourselves and rooting ourselves in Christ, allowing ourselves to be guided by the Spirit so that all will be possible with genius and creativity. He is asking us to "go forth into the streets and go to the crossroads, all who you find, call out to them, no one is excluded. Wherever you are, never build walls or borders but meeting squares and field hospitals. I would like a Church that is unsettled, always closer to the abandoned, the forgotten, the imperfect. I desire a happy Church, with the face of a mother who understands."

In the struggles, even disasters, that happen in our lives, with the falling apart of everything we relied upon, do we see catastrophe or Good News? The Book of Daniel makes the point that in times of the final distress, God's grace will be present. You, the chosen of God, shall escape. Michael will come not as avenger, but as protector. That's not a threat but a promise. In the Gospel, after describing the signs at the end, Jesus says, "The Son of Man will come to gather his chosen ones, calling us to act out of a profound faith based on his Word and Beatitudes, to bring his values into this new era on behalf of all."

## Second Homily

How do you awaken outsiders to the plight of your community if you are a minority, except by strong and evocative images which tell that your world is coming apart? Mark does it at the start of this Gospel — the sun and moon have gone out, the stars are falling, the sky is falling in; they are apocalyptic words to describe people's pain. The Good News of today's Gospel is not to canonize pain. Apocalyptic mean 'revealing' and presupposes in us an ability to see and understand. To see what? The end; gloom and doom? Is the cartoon true? The one that shows a bearded man in sandals carrying a placard which reads: The end is near. Behind him are war planes and all sorts of calamities, and in front two men talk to one another — "they're not laughing at him anymore!" No! The Gospel is not about doom and gloom, but about hope and faithful courage to Christians in the

midst of persecution who are crying out, “My God, when will it ever end?”

This was surely the experience of Mark’s Christian community in Rome as Christians found themselves subject to intense hate, diabolical torture, false accusations of setting fire to Rome, and of undermining Roman society and its gods. Nero needed a scapegoat. He made a spectacle for the crowds of numberless Christians dying by horrible methods in his amphitheatre. The death of Christians became mandatory, especially when the Roman State understood what a power Christianity was rapidly becoming; the Roman State forced people to choose between paganism and extermination. The persecution of Christians lasted for more than two hundred years **(Cf. Brian Incigneri who in his book, *The Letter to the Romans*, argued that the Christian community for whom Mark wrote was in Rome, not Palestine).**

How does Jesus console? Not by saying your trials are not really so terrible; they are terrible, and he sees them as terrible. Nor does he promise miraculous intervention, nor the end of it all. History has its time and its power, also history directed against God, and he does not cancel them. But over and above earthly reality, he gives us a glimpse of heavenly reality. Over and above the press of historical power, appears the one against whom it is directed, the silent, waiting Christ. Eternity is his.

Mark gives his Christian community Jesus’ vision of the future. It is a vision of hope in the midst of suffering. Christ is right here with his Christians, in them, strengthening them. They face death because Jesus himself went first and showed us the way. It gives us an idea of the raw courage of Jesus who gathers us, associates us with his pain, but especially his victory. Jesus used two images to show what was happening to him. One was the cloud-riding Son of Man drawn from Daniel 7:13, first applied to good-living Jewish people who in the face of persecution, mass defection from the faith, remained true and died believing that even as they went to their death God would have the last word. Jesus applied this image to himself, that as he went to death true to his mission the Father would vindicate him. The second image to show how close was his death was the fig tree. It is a sign that summer is near; the new era brought about by the death of Jesus, Son of Man, gives us hope.

At a home Mass one man described the suffering he was going through like a small tsunami (those tidal waves that rise suddenly and devastate people’s lives). Jesus in the midst of our tsunamis, like the emergence of Covid, or the deadly blast in Beirut, does not spell out how he will rescue or vindicate his chosen ones. He only predicts a gathering of the elect, of all who have suffered through these terrible days — a gathering to heaven of followers who endured to the end under persecution. Jesus comes in a hidden way to empower the believer. As he did with Perpetua and Felicity, a Roman matron and a slave, at a later date. Felicity was screaming in pain as she delivered her baby in jail. The jailor ridiculed her: “If you are in pain now, how will you go when they



throw you to the beasts?” Felicity replied, “It will be different then. He will be in me.”

For Mark the heavens will be shaken, Rome and its deities in the heavens, shaken, when the Son of Man will be revealed through his followers. Jesus will be near when the moment of crisis comes suddenly. He will be standing at the gate, ready to accompany the Christian to court. It was said in the account of Perpetua’s death that Perpetua entered the arena, true bride of Christ, her gaze shaming all who looked at her. She spoke to the presiding procurator, Hilarion: “You judge us; God will judge you.” Thrown to the lions and before their throats were cut, they gave each other the Christian sign of peace.

It was this vision of Christ who sees everything and weighs every deed that gave Christians hope. Christ will live on even when everything ceases to be. All will appear before him. This is God’s consolation, the comfort of faith for all who hold to Jesus’ words to the end. This hope extends beyond today and tomorrow, beyond death to eternity. It empowers us, provided we have the faith to be aware of God, Christ and eternity. Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away. Hold on to them with steadfast faith and hope.

Fr Edward Farrell, who visited South Africa during the Apartheid Era, witnessed violence against blacks. He felt powerless and helpless before the violence, until he spoke to black teachers who had been political prisoners. “I could not understand their joy, peace, faith. Theirs was a radiant joy: they were convinced that the future was theirs. For the first time I began to understand the mystery of redemptive suffering. In each of us there is a violence which cannot, will not, be overcome with words or even with prayer. They had overcome their violence by suffering. It was only in their suffering that the violence, the hatred within themselves was overcome and they were freed to love, to love those who were oppressing them. They were the most extraordinary Christians that I had ever met” (**Edward J Farrell, *Can You Drink this Cup*, ibid p. 115**).

# Our Lord Jesus Christ, Universal King

**Dan. 7:13-14**

**Rev. 1:5-8**

**Jn. 18:33b-37**

What is truth? asked Pilate, and dismissed Jesus, acquiescing in his death. What is truth? What is the truth of Jesus? Do we realise who he is; who he wants to be for you and me? He is the Son of God, the image of the Father, the pre-existent Logos through whom everything was made.

Paul speaks of him in Colossians chapter 1:15: "He is the image of the unseen God and the firstborn of all creation, for in him were created all things in heaven and earth: everything visible and everything invisible, all things were created through him and for him. Before anything was created, he existed, and he holds all things in unity."

This eternal Logos took flesh in a moment of time so we could see God, see what God is like. The incarnation, the enfleshment of the Son in Jesus of Nazareth, tells us that God is where we are and only there is God to be found. God is in you and me. You can't get better than that. We have immense dignity because we are created by love itself.

Scientists tell us that in 2004 the NASA Explorer was at the outer rim of the helio-sphere of our solar system. It took 27 years to get there. And now travelling at one million miles a day it will take 40,000 years before it reaches the nearest star. It strikes us with awe; our universe is totally amazing, mind-blowing. It makes us see the goodness of creation, this entire chain of Being. Everything is a footprint, a fingerprint of God. This created world is an extension of Jesus. Jesus is the outer visible pattern of God; the inner pattern of God, Father, Son, and Spirit is a total giving, no matter the cost.

Every moment our sun is dying to itself at the tune of 400 tonnes of gas. Nothing lives unless something dies. Love is self-giving. The incarnation is the logical love affair of God with creation. What you love is what you give yourself to. God loves us, his creatures. God was destined to become a human person.

What has this got to do with the Feast of Christ the King? Just think of the awesome power of the universe. We are suspicious of power, no matter who it is exercised by. We think of power as dominant, oppressive, asserting its authority, even destructive of those who oppose it. Power linked to love cannot be destructive — a wife caring for a sick husband or child, doctors saving lives; there is power here but it is power as love, as self-giving.

God in creating the universe, creates it in love, not just once but every infinitesimal moment, every nano-second holding it in being. This is Love, God, pouring himself out and creating through the Word, the Son, in the power of the Spirit. The Father loves Jesus in you and me; the Father loves the Son, and that means that you are a child of God.

If Jesus is the outer visible pattern of God, then Jesus' kingship is not an exercise of power, even though he said to Pilate, "If my kingdom were of this world, my men would have fought to prevent my being surrendered." Pilate threatened him: "I have power to release you and I have power to crucify you." Jesus replied: "You would have no power over me if it had not been given you from above."

The kingdom Jesus spent himself to bring about was the release of captives, letting the blind see, welcoming the poor and the marginalised, bringing life to sinners, their shackles broken. The ultimate sign of his being poured out was the cross that set us free at the very depths of our being. There we see the inner pattern of God poured out and made visible in the total emptying of the Son, to his last drop of blood, his humanity ripped to shreds by scourging, spitting, humiliation and death on the Cross. Jesus is poured out for love of us, totally given as God, Father, Son and Spirit are totally given; the pattern of God poured out becomes visible for us in Jesus.

Jesus, you are my truth, my way, my life. We, who belong to this king, are responsible for extending his kingdom in our time. We must recognise who this Jesus is, who he wants to be not only for us, but in us for others. Are we going to dismiss him as Pilate did or commit our lives to him in dedicated love?

## Second Homily

In one sense, Jesus, bound before Pilate, was a nobody. Nothing like the devotional paintings we have of him. Yet in another sense he was king. He was the greatest source of goodness, light and hope in his dark world and ours — he is the Christ who in today's liturgy we acclaim as our king. Christ was indeed a king, but not in the ordinary sense of the word. He had no army or territory. He had no throne or crown. Yet he came to earth to establish a kingdom — the kingdom or reign of God, to let people know they were the sons and daughters of God.

Jesus, who led a blameless life, showed us how to live up to our dignity. Jesus was a man of truth. He made his presence felt by the way he lived. For those who were searching, he opened their minds and led them to a new way of seeing and of judging. He had the gift of being able to unlock people who were closed up. He made them feel they were important, that they mattered. For the first time in their lives, they were taken seriously.

To stand before powerful forces as Jesus does before imperial Rome, before Pilate, with nothing but the truth renders us vulnerable, but there's hidden power in that. The truth sets us free to take a stand. Take Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero who lived non-violence in the face of violent hatred. When kingdoms or juntas pass, their message lives on. Ghandi prayed to Jesus, although a Hindu: "Teach us to love as you did and to see others as you did." His message satyagraha, the Hindu word for truth, meant the inner victory that comes before the outer victory. Vincent Pallotti taught: our external actions must reflect our inner intent.

Jesus showed us how to treat others, even the very least, in a way that encouraged them to believe in their dignity and to live up to it. But the light of goodness was so bright that it blinded some, showing up their darkness. Jesus had to be killed. Unwilling to follow this light they were determined to extinguish it.

Jesus came to bear witness to the truth. It was terrifying to some who had much to hide and hid behind anger, fear or cynicism. In November 2006, Alexander Litvinenko, a former Russian spy who defected to Britain, was murdered by radiation poisoning to prevent his uncovering the truth about the murder of Anna Politkovskaya, a Russian investigative journalist. As Alexander was dying, he said: "This is what it takes to prove that one has been telling the truth." His writing indicted the ruthless, barbaric policies that keep Russian President Vladimir Putin in power. For us, the truth can be poisoned or covered in different ways, small or bigger.

Jesus' kingship is not an exercise of power. His kingship is two-fold: a human life personally given over and a clear awareness of the enemy's attacks. Without a clear recognition of that enemy, you allow a detente under which the enemy makes ground, and Christians go to sleep. The kingdom of God has to do with human lives, and refers to what Jesus, the God-man brought, and won for us.

He came, "so that we may have life to the full". It is a life which has been snatched away from the kingdom of Satan and restored in a new way. The kingdom of God is diametrically opposed to Satan's rule in human lives; the presence of the kingdom of God in Jesus means that the dominion of Satan is ended. Jesus said, "If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (**Matthew 12:28, Luke 11:20**). All the miracles and works of power that Jesus did express the truth, the Good News, that God's grace is in our lives, restoring and transforming us.

We are tainted by rationalism and that worries me. In the smoke-screen, the enemy isn't condemned outright, and so we don't really need Jesus and the real truth of Jesus is gutless. The kingdom of God isn't something brought about by force or human achievement, it is the action and gift of God alone, and only given in Jesus. Jesus taught with authority; was confident in the exercise of authority but it was an authority to set people free and to love. He neither became a victim nor made victims of others, in spite of how he was treated. His throne was a cross and the power he chose to use was the power of his love, manifested in his pierced heart. He does not compel but invites. Some object: If he is king why is the world in such a mess? The world is in a mess not because Christ is not exercising his power to love, but because many of his subjects are not exercising theirs.

By the way we live, especially by our attitude to truth and justice, we declare each day where our loyalty lies — whether we are on the side of Christ and his kingdom or whether like Pilate we take the way of evasion and cowardice, thus betraying him. It is not possible to remain neutral. But

what a joy it is to belong to Christ and his kingdom. To let our lives be ruled by his Spirit and in our own small way to work for the spread of his kingdom — a kingdom of justice, truth and love.

## Third Homily

You can take the feast of Christ the King as a devotional acknowledgment of Christ as my Lord and my king. But it's more than that. When Pope Pius XI instituted the feast in 1925, after the terrible First World War, he was aware of the rise of totalitarian regimes: Communism, Fascism and soon, Nazism, under brutal charismatic leaders. He wanted to assert the centrality of Christ as king who stands for truth, justice and peace. It's urgent in our day with the rise of new dictatorships who abuse their power with seeming impunity. If there is nothing above us, we will be consumed by everything around us. Devotion to Christ must lead to involvement in the wider society. The way we make a difference is by personal integrity, the truth, as Jesus witnessed before Pilate.

Integrity means we live out what we believe. If Christ is central to our lives it has to show. In Robert Bolt's play, ***A Man for All Seasons***, about Thomas More, there is a scene in which Henry VIII is trying to convince Thomas to agree to his divorce from his wife, Catherine of Aragon. He told Thomas that everyone agrees with him. "How is it that you cannot see, everyone else does?" Thomas answers: "Then why does your Grace need my poor support?" And Henry comes back with those powerful words that every one of us would like to hear, "Because you are honest. What's more to the purpose, you're known to be honest ..."

That's what Pilate met in Jesus. A man totally honest who stands for truth, whereas Pilate does not know where he stands, he is caught between the crowd and the truth of this man before him. Jesus tells him his kingdom is not in opposition to Caesar, it has a different origin, not of this world, but with the power to change hearts and so bring about change on earth.

There's a difference between authority and influence on one hand, and power and control on the other. Some of the people with the greatest moral authority are quite powerless, and the most influential have no need to control those they influence. So, it was with Jesus. Pilate had power over people; Jesus had influence on them. Jesus made his presence felt simply by the kind of person he was. There was a quiet authority about everything he said and did.

And he did speak of a kingdom, the reign or rule of God, which stands for all those things which the world doesn't stand for but deep down longs for — all that is right and true, all that is beautiful, just and good. His kingdom will come when God's will for us and for creation will be done.

But why a feast of Christ the King? Because the things we really believe in we then pray about, they get rooted deep within our spirit and exert an influence on us and what we do. A feast touches the mind, heart and will, Pius XI reasoned. It places something great before our eyes to reflect upon; something beautiful for our hearts to love; something noble for our wills to strive for.

Retired Senator Brian Harradine of Tasmania, an Independent, lived out his Catholic faith in

politics. He held the balance of power, was ridiculed for the stance he took; but he studied the issues, consulted his electorate and stood for values. Since he has gone many anti-Christian laws are being pushed through. If there is nothing above us, we will be consumed by everything around us. How do we respond when bribes are quite acceptable in business; in evangelising, there are three stages: befriending, sharing of life stories and sharing Christ's story, but often we avoid the third stage.

Being Catholic in Australia requires great courage and great faith in a society that no longer believes in Christian values. That courage and faith will come ultimately from the Lord, but also from the support and encouragement, the understanding and compassion, the forgiveness and the love we show each other and draw from each other as a Christian community. The danger is that we are afraid to speak about our faith. Now we are called to an adult faith.

Central to the new evangelisation is that Christ is at the centre of our lives and that those lives are shared and nurtured in community. Pope Benedict instigated the Year of Faith in 2012, acknowledged the growing void of faith, but said: "There is a thirst for God, for the ultimate meaning of life, still evident in people today, evident in signs such as the growing popularity of religious pilgrimages."

People are searching for places and events that deepen faith. But getting together in small groups to share scripture, the documents of Vatican II and the Catholic catechism are ways to establish a firm basis of faith. We strengthen our faith, discover our giftedness, and move out to build the kingdom of God, a kingdom of truth, justice and peace.

# **FEASTS**

**Year B**

# The Birth of St John the Baptist

Jer. 1:4-10

1 Pet. 1:8-12

Lk. 1:5-17

John the Baptist straddles the Old Testament and the New Testament. He is the last of the prophets who proclaims the coming of the kingdom without fully entering in. Jesus called him the greatest of the prophets, yet the least in the kingdom is more blessed than he. Already chosen from his mother's womb to be the precursor of the Messiah, he leapt for joy in his mother's womb as Mary, carrying Jesus, greeted Elizabeth. People experience dramatic events surrounding John's birth — his father Zachary struck dumb contradicts the family's expectation, wrote on a tablet 'His name shall be John' (gift of God) and then burst into a song of praise blessing God. Zachary got back his voice, giving birth to the voice of one in the wilderness, and people express their wonder: "What shall this child turn out to be?"

The only child of ageing parents it's quite possible that John grew up with a highly developed sense of spirituality at an early age. We can imagine his parents encouraging John to read scripture and helping develop in him a strong uncompromising nature, as they fervently prayed and discussed what God's will might be for their troubled society. John by his preaching prepared the way for the Messiah and the kingdom of God, calling people to uprightness in their various vocations. He baptised Jesus in the Jordan River and pointed his own disciples toward Jesus with the statement: "He must increase, and I must decrease."

What is John the Baptist saying to us today? Pope Francis said, we are not into an era of change, but into the change of an era. Today's culture is not only secular but hostile to religious belief: segments of our political world are hitting the Church hard, trying to relegate it to the margins of society.

With what is going on in our lives and in the Church, we feel we are in swampland. As priest I need to put on my gumboots and walk together humbly with people trying to find a path through. It's like coming to a T-junction in a country road and being unsure which way to go. In Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, he describes himself "in midlife I am in a dark wood, the path I thought was the right path is totally lost. But in the midst of that experience, I re-found myself, rediscovered myself."

John discovered his call in his years in the wilderness. We don't know the agonising hours he spent, perhaps in a group like Qumran, waiting and praying for the Day of the Lord. We only know that his calling was to prepare the way for the messiah. He came out with a powerful uncompromising message that called on people to change and to repent of their sinful lifestyle that attracted crowds from all walks of life.

When important changes happen in our lives, welcome or unwelcome, we often feel disoriented. Change has an impact on us emotionally and physically. But we need to know what



we've lost, and deal with our grief or it will deal with us.

One response to loss and grief is what Mary did — she pondered, she stored the feelings and thoughts in her heart and thought of them often. She was trying to put two and two together to make sense of what God was doing in her life. We need to get closure on our past in order to live in the now. Often, we do what we think others expect of us, rather than act from a sense of who we are. We need to be self-defined, not other-defined to have a positive self-identity.

John the Baptist had that. He was a fearless preacher; he challenged Herod for marrying his brother Philip's wife; and Herodias used every ruse and opportunity to silence him. Where John spoke to Herod's conscience, she worked on his licentious body and proud, self-seeking, accommodating mind. If we tell the truth, we need to be around to pick up the pieces.

We need to live in the here and now: "Be quietly attentive to God's grace in our lives, those simple yet courageous acts of love and care." At the same time as the present culture is trying to muffle the voice of Christians and the Church, we need to know what our Church actually does in society. The Australian Catholic University produces more teachers and nurses than other universities. Notre Dame University in Broome graduates 72 per cent of all Indigenous students.

The Catholic school system touches 1.4 million students; 60,000 aged care beds are run by three Christian Churches; Catholic social services serve 1.3 million people through 500 Catholic social services centres. The Church is at the forefront of palliative care; St Vincent de Paul is three times bigger than the Salvation Army who are found in short-term crises, but St Vincent de Paul are found in medium- and long-term care; and 662,000 Catholics (84 times the size of the MCG crowd) attend Mass every Sunday (**Statistics from Richard Leonard 2018**). So don't let discouragement be a bad spirit in our Church. "Don't be afraid," Jesus tells us. "I will be with you always!"

# The Sacred Heart of Jesus

**Hos. 11:1, 3-4, 8c-9**

**Eph. 3:8-12, 14-19**

**Jn. 19:31-37**

June is the month dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. James MacAuley, the Australian poet, captured the theology well: “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. In adoring the Sacred Heart, we are adoring the God-Man, Jesus Christ.

The biblical foundation for the feast comes from **(Jn. 7: 37-39)**: “from his breast will flow fountains of living water”; **(Jn. 13: 23)**: “The disciple Jesus loved ... leaning back on Jesus’ breast”; and **(Jn. 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 on a personal grace for her own growth in holiness, but rather on 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 for 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 by 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, 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, 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.”

# Saints Peter and Paul, Apostles

**Acts 12:1-11**

**2 Tim. 4:6-8, 17-18**

**Mt. 16:13-19**

Today's feast of Peter and Paul emerges from the ancient Church of Rome, the mother of all Christian Churches in the West. Peter and Paul did not bring the faith to Rome. It was there already. But it did have a double foundation in the Petrine and Pauline missions to Jewish and to Gentile Christians. They died at different times, Paul in 62CE and Peter in 64CE during Nero's persecution. Nevertheless, 29 June was chosen by the ancient Church to honour these two great Apostles and martyrs at its beginning, a fact the community regarded as a unique privilege. In the foundation of the Roman Church, they represented a double dimension: apostolic leadership and evangelical energy, both marks of the Church today.

We can restrict too narrowly Peter to the institutional dimension and Paul to the charismatic. Peter was open to the Spirit, as when he was led by the Spirit to Cornelius' house, and witnessed, as a result of his preaching, the Spirit coming upon pagans. He promptly baptised Gentiles into the Christian faith. He and John went to Samaria to confer the Spirit on converts baptised by Philip. He was instrumental at the Council of Jerusalem in supporting the mission to the Gentiles through Paul. Paul for his part had institutional concerns, founding communities and having, as a constant burden, the maintaining of these churches in the faith.

What is decisive, for me, is Christ's choice of them, Peter during the lifetime of Jesus and Paul after Jesus' death. Peter whom Jesus chose to lead the community, who spoke up confessing Christ. Peter, impulsive, outgoing, and strong was rebuked by Jesus when he acted from too human a motive, seeking to divert Jesus from his task; rebuked by Paul when he seemed to be backing off from the Gospel freedom and was being pulled back into a Jewish law-mentality. Despite the authority conferred on Peter, he was humble, and could be pulled up and corrected.

Paul, the feared persecutor, who rejected a crucified messiah and his followers, met the crucified and risen Lord on the way to Damascus that wiped out for him the scandal of the cross and gave him the blinding realisation of the redeeming and freeing power of Jesus. He had seen the Lord and he was convinced that he was an apostle equal to the 12. The lack of acceptance of his apostolic credential was a cross for Paul.

Who would have chosen a fisherman to head his Church or a persecutor to spread the Gospel? God's design for them was different from our human perspectives. Peter was schooled by Jesus. He had the energy, persistence, and patience of the fisherman. He came to see and believe in Jesus as the fulfilment of Jewish hopes and expectations; and as Son of God who could undo a lived denial by love.

Paul, a Jew from Tarsus, very much at the crossroads of Greek and Roman culture, steeped in his Jewish tradition, was used by God to bring Christianity out of its Jewish narrow confines into

the Greco-Roman world. We need intellectuals like Paul who can think through and present Christ's teaching, and challenge present thinking. We need Apostles and evangelists to tell the Good News of Jesus for today.

In 2008, the Church celebrated the 2000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Paul's birth. Pope Benedict called 29 June 2008 to 29 June 2009 the Year of Paul. He invited us to read and reflect on the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of Paul. It is well past 2008 but we could still take, for example, the Letter of Paul to the Philippians. You would find it very rewarding. Don't be satisfied with just what you hear at Mass. At home re-read the passage in its context.

Let the word enter your mind and heart and influence your life. It will. Start by letting the word in, no big commentaries at first, read the word, reflect on it, a little at a time. Chew over what you have read, perhaps in the car before you turn the radio on. Read a short passage at table and share it together.

# The Transfiguration of the Lord

Dan. 7:9-10, 13-14

2 Pet. 1:16-19

Mk. 9:2-10

I wanted to find out why the feast of the Lord's Transfiguration came on 6 August when we celebrated it on the second Sunday of Lent, preparing us for Easter. As a feast of the Lord, it was celebrated by the Eastern Orthodox Church to highlight the divinity of Christ and the *theosis*, the participation in divine life, by Christians through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Moses and Elijah, the law, and the prophets, bore witness to Jesus as messiah and pointed to Jesus' sonship, and his future glory. Pope Callistus III ordered a universal celebration in the West to commemorate the victory over the Turks at Belgrade, Hungary, on 6 August 1456.

August takes us into winter, into snow in the southern hemisphere and into an intriguing chapter written by Caryl Houselander, titled *Inscape of Thabor*. She explains 'inscape' as a word given to us by the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Inscape is "the pattern of the universe within a little thing, like a flower, the ring on a bird's feather, a fish scale, and so on. The pattern within it, not reflected on it, but integral to it, and whole and complete in it, so that in a sense it is true to say of such a little created thing that its very being is the pattern of its Creator's mind ... every flake of snow is an inscape of the universe" (*The Passion of the Infant Christ*, London, Sheed and Ward, 1949, pp 28-29).

In 1885, Wilson Bentley, a farmer in Vermont, USA, was the first known person to have photographed a snowflake. At 19 he photographed his first snowflake and a further 5000 of them in his lifetime. He perfected a process of catching flakes on black velvet in such a way that their image could be captured before they melted. The snowflake with its perfection of pattern and rhythm is a showing of the law of God, caught by the touch of frost, and held still for the time that it takes to melt away. Every snowflake is unique, not seen until photographed and magnified; each one a minute mandala, a circle of vibrant light radiating from a cross at its centre.

The infinite variety and uniqueness of each snowflake and the cross at the heart of each one, spoke to me of Francis Thompson's words: "Ah Designer infinite! Must Thou char the wood ere Thou canst limn with it." Charring the wood was necessary so that the divine artist could use it for charcoal drawings of sky, sea, and mountain. The charring is the suffering that Christ and we have to undergo, before God can really use us. It is the cross on Tabor suddenly illumined in glory so that, as Jesus intended, the disciples could see the divinity shining forth in Jesus prior to Calvary, and ultimately see God and humankind transformed by the mystery of the death, the resurrection of the Son.

"... the pattern of the snowflake is a miniature of the design of the whole universe, which repeats it, radiating round it, wider and wider, vaster, and vaster, beyond our world, until the sun is its shining heart and the burning constellations its petals and tendril; circle upon circle of visible and

invisible beauty ... we cannot reach its vastness for the end of both is God ... It is the pattern in creation of the Creator, in whom is the being of all that is. ... It is a symbol of the beauty of Divine Love ... It is the inscape of Tabor" (ibid p.29, 30).

"There was one dazzling moment upon Mt Tabor when those Apostles, who were to see Christ in his dereliction, suddenly and briefly saw the radiance of his Divinity, like a blaze of snow in the light of the sun: He was transfigured in their presence, his face shining like the sun, and his garments white as snow (Mt. 17: 2). The Apostles knew Christ as a man, one in whose presence they were remarkably at ease; in that moment they saw his glory, the very garments that he wore burning with his beauty, just as the world that he has made burns with the beauty that he is.

The Trinity is powerfully present in the cloud of the Spirit overshadowing Jesus, acclaimed as divine Son, and the Father's hearty endorsement in words of love, "This is my Beloved Son, Listen to him." The Trinity would be present in a hidden way on Calvary with Jesus enmeshed in the depths of our weak, fragile, sinful humanity, crying out to his Father, equally suffering, "My God, My God why have you abandoned me?" And the Spirit? The Spirit in the bloody, racked, contorted body of Jesus, upholding him as he stays true to the end.

"This is God's way with us, to hide and reveal himself at the same time, to show his desire for our love, making himself accessible, even ordinary, that he may come close, yet at the same time playing a game of hide and seek saying: 'Seek and you shall find'; saying this with his human voice and saying it with the things that he has created."

And she comes back to the inscape of a snowflake. "Who can think of the mystery of the snowflake, its loveliness, both secret and manifest, its gentleness, the moving lightness of its touch, the humility of its coming, and not think of the birth of the Infant Christ?"

"... a son whom he has appointed to inherit all things, just as it was through him that he created the world of time; a son who is the radiance of his Father's splendour and the full expression of his being ..." (Heb. 1: 2-3) (ibid pp. 40-41).

# 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

In the first reading of today's feast of the Assumption, we often go straight to the woman and the frightening dragon and miss "the ark of the covenant seen" in heaven. The ark and the woman are similar images and point us to Mary. That God would locate his presence in the ark of the covenant and dwell there in power, meant that God was in the midst of his people to save them.

God's presence was visible in the overshadowing cloud or brilliant light leading them through the desert. Similarly, Mary became the locus of God's redemptive presence when God asked her to cooperate in his plan to send the one who was to save us, asking her to become the mother of God's Son, Jesus. The sign for her was: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you: therefore, the child to be born of you will be called Son of God" (**Lk. 1:35**).

Mary today is assumed up to heaven, but first, God's Son came down to earth, and assumed, took on our human nature in Mary's womb. Just as the ark of old was the redemptive presence of God for the Israelite people, so now Mary is the new ark of the covenant. As David brought the ark from Ain Karim to Jerusalem dancing before it, so in the Gospel, Mary, the new ark of the covenant, hastened to Ain Karim to visit her cousin, to the dancing of John in Elizabeth's womb at Mary's greeting.

This image anchors Mary to the earth. She is not above, remote from us. She is the first of the redeemed and shows us the way to union with God. Woman and place are caught by **Isaiah, chapter 62: 11, 4-5**: "Say to Daughter Zion ... you shall be called 'My Delight' and your land 'Married,' for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. Like a young man marrying a virgin so will the One who built you wed you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride so will your God rejoice in you."

Mary is linked to places, alerting us to a coming spiritual danger or calamity. All the contemporary apparitions of Our Lady have been in places: Guadalupe in 1531, to lift up the Aztec people; La Salette in 1846, Mary weeping prior to the potato famine in Europe and Ireland; Lourdes in 1858, a time of widespread loss of faith in France; Fatima in 1917, before the Russian Revolution; Medjugorje in 1981, before the Serbian and Croat massacre of Bosnian Muslims, to name only a few. Mary appears to the world in key moments in history to help, but makes herself known through the poor, the illiterate, the unsophisticated, as if to call the Christian community back to its primary identity with the poor. And the sign of authentic devotion in all these shrines is the depth of devotion to the Eucharist (**cf. Farrell *ibid.* p. 128**).



Mary visits Elizabeth to help, support and encourage. At Cana in Galilee, she alerted her son asking him to help, “they have no wine” and initiates Jesus into his apostolic ministry by her words to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” The woman, the new Eve cooperates with Jesus, the new Adam and Bridegroom, at this bridal feast, to bring the best wine of the Spirit, to undo the knot humanity had got itself into. Mary cooperates with Jesus throughout his ministry until under the cross as the woman she receives us as sons and daughters, Jesus’ final gift of himself through his death. God wants to espouse us to himself through Mary.

Mary assumed to heaven through the foreseen merits of her Son continues her mission to help her sons and daughters here. Just as God visited Mary with the words, “Greetings, highly favoured one” (***kekaritomene***) inviting her response, no matter how demanding, so Mary in Guadalupe spoke to Juan Diego with genuine courtesy and then made her request. It was the same with Bernadette Soubirous in Lourdes, and with the children at Fatima.

Like a mother, once they had agreed, her demands were firm. Her apparitions continue the same message of her Son, Jesus, of conversion, prayer, and sacrifice, not for themselves but with quite specific requests for the conversion of nations, the end of war, evil and other disasters. As mother of the Church, she invites us to fight against Satan, and bring about God’s reign. She appears clothed with the sun, standing on the moon, and with the twelve stars, standing for the twelve tribes as a crown. She is the new Daughter of Sion and the ark of the covenant, taken up to heaven. As the Church she constantly battles to bring Christ to birth in people in the face of anti-Christian forces. The Assumption calls us up and out of ourselves to respond to God’s invitations and the requests of our Mother to rouse people to joyfully strive to make the reign of God a reality.

# The Triumph of the 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? We humans shy away from pain. Even Jesus prayed to his Father that his cup of suffering might pass him by.

In the alternative Gospel for the 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday, Jesus asked Peter and the disciples, "Who do you say I am?" Peter, like us, wanted a leader who would deliver him from pain, not one who would experience pain and death himself. He wanted a warrior-messiah who would hit back at the occupying forces and drive them into oblivion. We are experiencing that kind of retaliation from both West and East today. Bomb for bigger bomb: the work of restoration is a more painful and costly affair. Is that where the triumph comes in — to work to restore and heal?

When Jesus predicted that he would suffer and die, there began a pitched battle about the Cross between Peter and Jesus. Peter tempted Jesus as Satan did in the wilderness. Peter rebuked Jesus (it's the same Greek word for getting rid of evil spirits). Jesus even more strongly rebuked Peter — Get behind me, Satan. Nothing and no-one could divert Jesus from his mission, entrusted to him by his Father. Jesus turned from Peter and challenged the disciples: "If any want to become my followers, let them take up their cross."

Jesus unfolded the radical implications of proper confession of Jesus as messiah. 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 Gospel, paradoxically results in making life more secure (saving it).

The triumph of the cross is the heroic quality of Jesus' human spirit which, while immersed in suffering, rises above 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 the readings for today's Mass, we see in Jesus lifted up, the mystery of love: "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends." But this man is also God — something unthinkable! That God would suffer for us: our sin, weakness, pain, he has taken on himself, working it through in his own person. A scandal to Jews and a source of ridicule for Greeks for whom God is unmoved by us. 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 and orphanages ... but it isn't just inspiration with Jesus as our model. Jesus also empowers us when we call upon him. Jesus compares himself to a strange incident in Israel's history in the Exodus, the

bronze serpent. The Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert. Do we understand the psychological import of the image?

When we sin and conceal it, it continues to work in us destroying ourselves and others. But when we face the ravages that our sin has created then there is an openness to change, to 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 then 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, bloody and in pain, we recognize the ravages our sin has caused. Jesus hangs there out of love for us. When we acknowledge our sin — “O my God, what have I done, please forgive me!” — then 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 — once we acknowledge and call for help.

# Feast of St Teresa of Avila

**Rom 8:22-27**

**Jn 15:1-8**

“I am a daughter of the Church” (Filia Ecclesiae) were the last words of Teresa of Avila. The last words of a person are significant; you treasure them and ponder them often. What did Teresa mean when she uttered those words, “Daughter of the Church.” They summed up what she fought for. It spoke to me of the tension between charism (a gift or grace of the Holy Spirit) and institution. Instead of a woman battling against the patriarchal forces of state and the Church, we have a holy daughter of the Church who was gifted with a vision and charism by God, trying to make it a reality. Her age was one of exploration, a time of turmoil and reform.

She was born before the Protestant Reformation and died almost 20 years after the Council of Trent. It was an age of political, social, and religious upheaval. The gift of God to Teresa in and through which she became holy and left her mark in the Church and the world is threefold: she was a woman, she was a contemplative, she was an active reformer. She was a woman. Teresa was beautiful, talented, outgoing, adaptable, affectionate, courageous, enthusiastic, totally human. She was no fool. She was wise yet practical, intelligent, in tune with her own lived experience; a mystic, yet an energetic reformer. A holy woman. A womanly woman.

She stood for the emancipation of women in a man’s world. With the discovery of the New World from 1492 onwards, the time of the Conquistadores, many of the men of Spain had gone to South America for gold. Spain was a dangerous place for women. Many parents put their daughters into the convent for safety. Teresa built 17 convents with the grill helping women who sought God, a safe haven where the sisters were friends of one another and friends of God. Many of the sisters were ordinary women, some were Jewish converts, so friendship not purity of blood-line was what Teresa emphasised. Her father was a Jewish convert. Instead of the long name which indicated one’s racial origins, Teresa called herself simply, Teresa of Jesus.

Secondly Teresa was a contemplative, a woman for God, a woman of prayer, discipline, and compassion. At a time when women were told just to say the rosary, it was considered dangerous for women to explore the depths of the spirit. Teresa herself was led by God through contemplation to deep union with God. She was troubled by what was happening to her and sought help from priests. Some of them told her that she was deluded by the devil. On the subject of contemplative prayer, she dealt with her own experiences which her deep insight and analytical gifts enabled her to explain clearly. In the end those same priests came to her to ask her to teach them how to pray. She is now declared a doctor of the Church by Paul VI. She and Catherine of Sienna were the first women to be so honoured.

Teresa’s heart belonged to God. Her ongoing conversion from the age of twenty was an arduous, lifelong struggle, involving purification and suffering. She struggled with her own

mediocrity. The convent of the Incarnation was quite lax. There were many visits from the idle well-to-do who came to chat in the parlour. There was little time for the richness of her own inner spirit to which Christ was calling her. She was seriously ill for six years, three of these she was paralysed and could only move one finger. In the midst of all this she clung to God in life and in prayer.

For twenty years she was frustrated by her inability to pray, according to the ways suggested by the spiritual writers of her time. It came to a head in Lent 1554 before a picture of Jesus scourged. She was so distressed at her failure to pray that she threw herself on the floor and refused to get up. To her surprise Jesus bent down to her, raised her up and embraced her. She had the sense of being loved and valued as the person she really was. So, at the age of 39, Teresa's life began to change from within. From being an immobilised young woman, she became a dynamic older woman who became the spiritual mother of many children. She could be the patron of mid-life transition.

Thirdly, Teresa was a woman for others. Though a contemplative, she spent much of her time and energy seeking to reform herself and the Carmelites to bring them back to the full observance of the primitive rule. She was misunderstood and opposed in her efforts at reform by people who were suspicious of change, even for the good. Teresa's convents were for prayer leading to transformative union with God. "My me is God," she said, "Jesus has no hands or feet but yours, no hands but yours."

Teresa travelled to every province in Spain in rickety carts, in all weather, to found centres of prayer. She wrote, fought, always to renew, to reform. In herself, in her prayer, in her efforts to reform, in all the people she touched, she was a woman for others, a woman who inspired and gave life. "I am a daughter of the Church", was her way of re-confirming her fidelity to the Church. Her first love was Christ. If you honour God, make time for prayer, confession and Mass then God will honour you. "Let nothing trouble you, Let nothing frighten you, Everything passes, God never changes, Patience obtains all, Whoever has God Wants for nothing, God alone is enough."

# All Saints

Rev. 7:2-4, 9-14    1 Jn. 3:1-3

Mt. 5:1-12a

Parents can be rushing around, not wanting their child to miss out on any and every experience yet miss a fundamental attitude which is to develop a wonder-filled life, to be lost in wonder which is the spiritual art of attentiveness. And that means stopping and seeing with a child's eyes. If learning can take on that sense of wonder, that makes us really present right here with all our five senses; seeing life as a gift, seeing the ability to read and write as a gift, do maths as a gift. It is the gift of being in a Catholic school where enquiring minds and hearts, also for God are fostered, not shying away from the challenges of a Christian calling.

Do we tell our young people stories of great heroes? I read the story of Sr Mary Glowrey who cared for India's poor thirty years before Mother Teresa. She was born 1887, in Birregurra just past Anglesea and Colac in Victoria. She graduated as a 23-year-old from the University of Melbourne with a Bachelor of medicine and a Bachelor of Surgery. After a year of residency in Christchurch, New Zealand, she returned to work in the Royal Melbourne Eye and Ear Hospital and St Vincent's Hospital and had a successful practice in Collins Street by 1914.

During World War I, she took on the work of the male doctors who had signed up for war service. Mary became the inaugural president of the Catholic Women's Social Guild in 1916, and by prayer and action worked to address the social inequalities faced by women at the time (**cf. Tom Elich, *Liturgy News*, Vol 50/1 2020 p. 16**).

In 1915 she went to Mass at St Patrick's Cathedral, picked up a pamphlet about the appalling death rate of babies in India and the need for medical missionaries. She fell on her knees and knew that God, whose will she had constantly sought to do since an early age, was calling her to a life of medical mission work in India. "To do God's will from an early age": Who inspired that in her — parents, teachers, the Church? It prepared her to respond to God's call when it came in St Patrick's Cathedral. There is a surge to do great things that come on young people between 13 and 17 years, that does not come again if we have everything, don't have to struggle, then a vital grace is lost.

"There is a tide in the affairs of men which taken at the flood leads on to fortune," Shakespeare has Julius Caesar say when he burned his boats at the River Rubicon to march on to Rome and win. Here we want our young people to win, in the sense of becoming the person God wants them to be.

Mary set about preparing for her mission to work with babies and mothers, by doing further studies in obstetrics, gynaecology and ophthalmology, and graduating as a Doctor of Medicine. In 1920 she made her way to the east coast of India and in 1924 joined the Congregation of the Society of Jesus, Mary and Joseph which provided the spiritual framework for her work as a doctor in India and she prayed constantly for the guidance of the Holy Spirit (**ibid**).

She began in a very simple dispensary with few drugs, studied traditional Indian remedies and built on them, training local women to be nurses, midwives, and pharmacists. Mary visited the terminally ill in outlying villages, crouching down on the earthen floors of their straw huts to care for them and soon she was able to open a hospital. In 1943, she helped found the Catholic Health Association to promote and safeguard Catholic values in the practice of medicine. In her quiet, selfless way she pioneered new ways, initially when religious and women were not allowed to practice medicine.

Mary died of cancer in 1957 after two years of severe pain, at the age of 69. Her cause was taken up by the Bishop of Guntur and after three years of investigation in 2013 was able to announce her as a *Servant of God*. The diocesan inquiry was concluded in 2017 and the documentation was formally dispatched to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in Rome (**ibid**). Mary would be our second Australian saint, but there are others who in the great Australian spirit met the needs of struggling people.

Parents, do you wonder what your child is going to be? At Baptism you were called to be the first and best teachers of your child in the ways of faith. To educate, (*educere*), means to draw out the latent potential in your child in God's eyes. But parents can't do everything. The African saying is true, "It needs a village to educate a child". "To do God's will from an early age": Who can inspire that in your child — parents, teachers, the Church? It prepared Mary and can prepare your child to respond to God's call when it comes.

## Second Homily

"For all the saints who from their labours rest", are the words of our first hymn on this feast of All Saints. The Second Vatican Council put before the whole Church (the People of God) a two-fold call: to holiness and to mission. In talking about holiness, we can no longer depreciate our calling by saying, "Yes, but you're a priest or a sister, you're much better than we are". The vocation of priest and religious is no longer seen as an elite vocation but is to be situated among the people of God in service to them, in a common passion for bringing about the reign of God. We are all called to be saints in the vocation we have been called to: marriage, single life, religious life, priesthood, being a young person; five states of life, each with its dignity and value before God.

The lives of the saints teach us that holiness comes in all shapes and sizes: rich and poor, warriors and peace-makers, hermits and organisers of charities, parents and celibates, scholars and those who can't read. Every era has its saints. The struggles may change; the heroes are still among us. In some ages the heroes stood for doctrinal truth; today they stand for the sanctity of life; justice and peace, and ecology.

It's good to recall how this feast originated. At first only the martyrs (including the Apostles) were venerated on the anniversary day and at the place where their deaths occurred. This practice

was extended to places where relics of the martyrs were venerated. During the persecution under the emperor Diocletian at the beginning of the 4th Century, the number of martyrs was so great that a separate date could not be assigned to each one, so the Church established a common feast day for all the martyrs on the Sunday after Pentecost.

At first only the martyrs and St John the Baptist were honoured by special feast days. But then other saints were added, the great confessors of the East, such as Anthony of the desert, Athanasius; and in the West, Martin of Tours, Ambrose and Augustine, to mention a few. The first mention of a feast to honour all the saints on 1 November seems to have come during the pontificate of Pope Gregory III (731-741). In 732 he consecrated a chapel in the Basilica of St Peter dedicated to "all the Apostles, martyrs, confessors, and all the just and perfect who are at rest throughout the whole world" and fixed the anniversary for 1 November. A century later Pope Gregory IV (827-844) extended the celebration to the universal Church.

The feast of All Saints is a wake-up call. Do you feel as I do that Christianity is not touching our lives? The culture we live in with its pull towards getting things, success, the erotic, booze, has a greater pull on us than the demands of Jesus Christ. If you have a quiet half hour which wins out — the quiet or the TV? It's only when there's a crisis of some proportion that we know we need him; and then we put time in to finding him. There's an energy in the saints for the things of God. They see what has to be done and they do it.

Last week, we read of the beggar Bartimaeus, who asked to see; one of the hidden saints who became a disciple of Jesus. Holiness is seeing with the eyes of Christ. Holiness is being Christ. Saints are those who see and act on what they see. In so doing they see what is important, what matters, what takes priority, and hints of the divine (**cf. William J Bausch, *The Word, In and Out of Season*, Twenty-Third Publications, Bayard, Mystic Ct., 2000, p. 141**). There are saints around us, who at crucial moments in our lives, were there for us.

They listened, held, supported and challenged us, providing just what we needed at that time to be healed and to grow. Yet the saints act in character, sometimes in spite of their character: Matt Talbot the alcoholic; Therese, extremely sensitive; Dorothy Day who came from a Bohemian background; trying to shape their character in the light of the Beatitudes, to be gentle, merciful, forgiving, hungering and thirsting for justice.

The Beatitudes in today's Gospel get us to look at not just at what we do, but at the sort of people we are. What part does gentleness and compassion play in our lives? What example can I offer of hungering and thirsting after justice? In the Beatitudes there is a strong underlying urge to identify with the poor paradoxically through the recognition of our own weakness. Looking at how we have been helped in our weakness increases our understanding of how we can respond to those in need. We strive for holiness, not imitating the saints, but in the uniqueness of our own situation. The saints are there to encourage us as we pray to them for help, guidance in the choice



of our vocation, and our particular way to holiness.

“Father, may we receive power through your Holy Spirit for our inner self to grow strong and may Christ dwell in our hearts through faith” (Eph. 3: 16).

# The Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed (All Souls)

Is. 25:6-9

Rom. 5:5-11

Mt. 11:25-30

Caught up in the hassles of life, the shattering disappointments that rob us of our dreams is there a sense of thank God it's all over? Death is the end. When we're dead, we're dead, full stop. If that's the case, where then is God, where is the hope that this is not the end, but somehow, gropingly, a glimpse of something greater, more wonderful, awaiting us?

When we think of great people holding the aspirations of their people, people like Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jnr, Oscar Romero, all of them assassinated, was their life for nothing? Did their aspirations die when they died, living on only through their monuments or in tributes on remembrance days? I don't think so! They continue to inspire us even beyond the grave. What about the aspirations of our own human spirit? The aspiration to live on, still breaks through the clutter, like a flower pushing through the concrete.

We learn from Jesus how to live and how to die. The fact that God in Jesus became incarnate, became one of us, lived and died to release the human spirit in people who were bound up, and even in his dying, showed us a human spirit rising beyond suffering and rejection, to absolute trust in his Father, and because of that trust was raised up by the Father, taking us with him.

On this Feast of the Holy Souls, it is 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" (**Phil. 2: 7**). 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. 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. Today's feast 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. 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, the death of those we love, can be a numbing experience.

Because we love people, we miss them when they die. And we can feel disabled for a long time. But it can also be a joyful experience because of the spirit in which the person we love met death.

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 will 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. In Jesus we find mercy. And as the Latin word for mercy, *miserericordia* tells us, God has a heart for all our misery.

What is Purgatory? The 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. Francis Thompson said it well in his poem, *The Hound of Heaven*, of God desiring a love response from the human person who runs away, "For though I knew his love who followed yet was I sore adread, lest having him I must have naught beside," and searches for satisfaction in other things, afraid of God's love. "Fear wist to evade, as love wist to pursue." And at the end when there is surrender, God reaches out his hand and says, "All that thy child's mistake fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home. Arise. Clasp my hand and come." Purgatory is 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 God who loves us unconditionally and who is dying even now to welcome us home. The souls in Purgatory are saints just 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 sufferings our loved ones undergo at death are the final stages of letting go and surrendering to God, not to be cut short, because of our inability to face death. Our expectation of eternal life is founded on the unconditional love that God has for us.

The Guatemalan poet Julia Esquivel writes: "Because of this marathon of Hope, (living even in the face of killings), there are always others to relieve us, who carry the strength, to reach the finish line which lies beyond death. Join us in this vigil and you will know what it is to dream! Then you will know how marvellous it is to live threatened with Resurrection! To dream awake, to keep watch asleep, to live while dying, and to know ourselves already resurrected" (**from *Threatened With Resurrection: Prayers and Poems from an Exiled Guatemalan***).