

Friday 1 April

Acts 4:1-12 • Easter Friday

For healing a lame man and preaching the gospel Peter and John were arrested and summoned to appear before the council known as the Sanhedrin. This was the same council that, led by Annas and Caiaphas, had had Jesus condemned and crucified. Members of the high-priestly family were also present (see v. 6). Imagine how intimidating this must have been for the apostles, who were, after all, ordinary men and definitely not used to standing before the great and the good to explain themselves.

What must have been going through their minds? Were they terrified and overwhelmed? We witness something rather amazing because, rather than being terrified and overwhelmed, another grace of power was obviously at work in their lives. All the power and prestige of the council could not restrain them: they were, as Luke describes, 'filled with the Holy Spirit' (v. 8). Peter's proclamation is bold and clear: 'by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well...And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (vv. 10-12).

It is striking how the early Church's mission was focused very much on proclaiming the name, works, death and resurrection of Jesus. They were on fire with the name of Jesus. They realized that people could be brought to an encounter with Christ through the proclamation of his name. The name of Jesus embodied the honour and glory of God the Father, and its very announcement or proclamation revealed the power of God. Belief in this name had the power to change people's lives and, most importantly, bring them into a living relationship with Jesus.

Jesus' name has the same power today. It is a name which overcomes sin and dispels darkness. Just as the lame man was bound by his disability, we too can be bound by resentment, jealousy, pride and arrogance or indeed a physical ailment which causes us distress and anguish. In the name of Jesus we have authority to drive out the darkness, standing on the supremacy of our Lord Jesus Christ. As we claim this authority in faith, God's power will be released and will bring us life in Christ.

Lord Jesus, your name is above every other name and authority and dominion: you are the Lord of heaven and earth.

Acts 4:1-12 • Psalm 117(118):1-2, 4, 22-27

John 21:1-14

**Saturday 2 April**

**Easter Saturday • Acts 4:13-21**

Something new was happening right before the very eyes of the rulers, elders and scribes of Israel and they didn't like it. They were clearly threatened and intimidated but also confused and perplexed. Luke captures their reaction perfectly: 'when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they wondered; and they recognized that they had been with Jesus' (v. 13).

Luke uses the Greek word *parresia* which captures the idea of an almost reckless courage, a fearlessness which causes you to catch your breath. These men had had no formal education or training which might have prepared them for this situation. It is true, of course, that they had been with the Lord and during this time had witnessed his miracles, heard his teachings, and seen how he lived and moved among them. However, this had not been enough to prevent them from denying him and scattering once the shepherd had been struck. It was the Holy Spirit acting in them and through them that empowered and enabled them to stand before these powerful men. The cross exposed their weaknesses and human frailty; the resurrection of Jesus raised them up to be the new creation we see before us today.

The Acts of the Apostles is a kind of unveiling of the new creation. Through the witness of the apostles we see the power of the Holy Spirit to transform lives. They show us that a disciple of Jesus Christ relies not on his or her own strength but on the strength of God's grace, in the power of the Holy Spirit. As we walk with Jesus we learn from him, and the Holy Spirit teaches and leads us. We need grace to know God's grace; the Spirit leads us to the Spirit.

The Spirit enlivens and animates every part of our life – our prayer, our reading of Scripture, our adoration of Christ in the Eucharist, and our love and service of others. We can cultivate and develop such a deep and abiding sense of the Spirit of God that we can respond more and more boldly to his leadings and presence in our lives. By the power of the Spirit we can witness confidently to Christ and share our faith in an attractive and winning way.

Lord Jesus, may the Spirit give me the courage and boldness I need to be an authentic and sincere witness of faith.

Acts 4:13-21 • Psalm 117(118):1, 14-21

Mark 16:9-15

## Sunday 3 April

John 20:19-31 • Second Sunday of Easter (C) • Divine Mercy

Thomas, whom we know as 'Doubting Thomas', was blessed to have put his fingers in the wounds on the Lord's hands and to have touched his pierced side. However, he was gently rebuked by the Lord: 'Stop doubting and believe' (v. 27 NIV). Thomas, despite his doubt and unbelief, was led to faith and perhaps should be remembered as 'Believing Thomas', since his subsequent profession of faith was so sincere and genuine: 'My Lord and my God!' (v. 28).

This is the confession of faith that the Lord seeks from every true believer: 'My Lord and my God' or 'Jesus Christ is Lord'. This admission of faith in the Risen Lord is always the fruit of grace in our lives. It is also one which we are called to make every single day. Every day invites a re-dedication of our lives to Christ.

The coming of Jesus Christ can be likened to the announcement of the major theme in a musical performance. Often in musicals, operas and classical works, different instruments give hints of the main theme: first the flutes, then the clarinets, the bassoons, the string instruments and the bass – all take up different variations. In its final climax the whole orchestra sounds the theme towards which everything has been moving. In a similar way, in the coming of Jesus God's eternal plan of salvation is fully and finally revealed, and when we freely accept and embrace this plan we receive God's gift of joy.

Jesus is both the Word and the Event in which the fullness of divine revelation is made known. We can lose sight of what an amazing grace of revelation it is to humbly bow before God's greatest gift – the sending of the Son. We receive in this moment the grace which understands that faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we cannot see (Heb. 11:1). We have not seen and touched as Thomas did, but we are blessed for despite not seeing we believe. As Peter said: 'Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice...As the outcome of your faith, you obtain the salvation of your souls' (1 Pet. 1:8-9).

Lord God, I thank you for the most precious gift of faith, handed down to me from the apostles, my parents and all those who proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father.

Acts 5:12-16 • Psalm 117(118):2-4, 22-24

Apocalypse 1:9-13, 17-19 • John 20:19-31

**Monday 4 April**

**Annunciation of the Lord (Solemnity) • Luke 1:26-38**

It is a remarkable truth of our faith that God chose a young Jewish woman from Nazareth in Galilee to be the Mother of God. Although born in obscurity, her name has become known throughout history as Mary, the Mother of God. Through the holy women of old Mary's mission was prepared. Firstly Eve, who despite her disobedience received a promise that evil would be conquered (Gen. 3:15). Then Sarah, who conceived in old age. God chose the weak and the poor: Hannah, Deborah, Ruth, Judith and Esther. But in the fullness of time God sent his Son born of a woman and that woman was Mary of Nazareth. Her 'yes' to God was a defining moment in the history of the world and in our salvation. Every believer owes Mary a debt of gratitude for her willingness to humbly co-operate in God's plan of salvation. She is truly the Mother of God, our Mother in faith.

The virginal conception is impossible according to the laws of nature and beyond our understanding. But what is impossible for us is possible for God. Mary's virginity is a sign of her holiness and her singular devotion to God. As St Augustine said: 'Mary remained a virgin in conceiving her Son, a virgin in giving birth to him, a virgin in carrying him, a virgin in nursing him at her breast; always a virgin.' Mary's mission to give birth to Christ is our vocation also. Her 'yes' to God is our 'yes' to God, her obedience and devotion a mirror of our high calling to live for God. God is our Father and Mary is our Mother.

Today, on this special feast-day, we remember her faithfulness, the rich depth of her faith. She must have been rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures and have learned to treasure and ponder the deeper truths of her faith. The Holy Spirit was preparing her to bear in her womb Jesus, God made man. Mary grasped the depth of this mystery, and in grasping it she was humbled and then exalted as the Mother of God. Today we turn to her, asking for her prayers and intercession, and recognize in her our Mother in faith.

Lord God, Mary is the 'mother of the living', the mother of the 'whole Christ'. We give thanks and praise to the Father for pouring out upon us every grace and blessing in the spiritual realm.

Isaiah 7:10-14; 8:10 • Psalm 39(40):7-11

Hebrews 10:4-10 • Luke 1:26-38

**Tuesday 5 April**

**Acts 4:32-37 • Easter Weekday**

The early Church was growing at a fast pace. From the small acorn of committed membership grew the huge oak tree of the Church we know today. The Catholic Church has over 1 billion members and is the largest of the Christian denominations. It was true then and is true today that 'the Lord added to their number day by day' (Acts 2:47). Jerusalem thus became the first centre of the Christian Church and remained so until persecution forced some of the believers to flee to other places (Acts 8:1; 11:19).

There is something truly beautiful and striking about the early Church and the way in which it was faithful to the Lord's vision of a vibrant, coherent and life-giving community. Luke paints an incredible picture of unity, love and service, which highlights how attractive Christian fellowship can be. They were faithful 'to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer' (Acts 2:42) and they 'were of one heart and soul' (v. 32). The gift of unity, a fruit of the Spirit for sure, made them able to live together in hope and joy. There was a remarkable sense of sharing and an eschewing of possessions and ownership for the common good.

Very few are able to live like this today but we are called to live in a similar way. We know when we look into our hearts that selfishness, individualism and the lure of possessions prevent us from living in a generous way. Our parishes are places where we worship God and receive the Eucharist, but our commitment is limited depending on our state in life and our other commitments. Was the witness of the early Church for a bygone age and never to be repeated? Are we destined to be overwhelmed by consumerism and selfishness?

The remedy is to thank God daily for his merciful love and repent for our selfishness that breaks down the body of Christ. Unity and love are gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit can soften our hearts so that we seek out unity and strive to be more generous with our time, our money and our resources.

Lord Jesus, transform my heart and mind that I may be an instrument of love and unity in my family, my parish and my workplace. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Amen.

Acts 4:32-37 • Psalm 91(93):1-2, 5

John 3:7-15

Wednesday 6 April

Easter Weekday • Acts 5:17-26

A divine jail break is quite a miracle, don't you think? The disciples' daring escape from captivity shows that the gospel message is impossible to hold down and imprison. What is interesting about today's incident is the message that 'the angel of the Lord' brought to our intrepid apostles: 'Go, stand in the temple courts and tell the people the full message of this new life' (v. 20 Berean Study Bible). Of course, the Lord's angel, through the power of the liturgy, says the same thing to us. Our mission is to share the full message of the new life of Christ.

There can be a lot of confusion about the gospel message today. We can be reluctant to proclaim some of the more unpalatable truths of the gospel – sin, redemption and the cross are harder to share about or witness to than the gifts of the Spirit, the grace of God and social action. But it is impossible to present the full message of new life without addressing some of the thornier issues: the fall of man, the promises of salvation in the Scriptures, the fulfilment of the promises in the coming of Jesus, the cross, the resurrection, the ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit. And then we have living a life in the power of the Holy Spirit and praying for the second coming of Christ.

However, nothing is more important and perhaps more urgent today than proclaiming the kerygma, the basic gospel message. We must be a Church of the Kerygma, inviting people to fall in love with Jesus Christ, whose only desire is to love, forgive and save us. It is then that hearts are opened to moral and doctrinal formation. Witnessing to the joy that comes from friendship with Jesus is the best way to lead people to him. In Pope Francis' words, 'Christians have the duty to proclaim the gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty, and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but "by attraction"' (Evangelii gaudium 111-134).

Lord, set my heart aflame and ablaze with the gospel message. Help me to be an authentic witness, proclaiming the sweet message of the gospel but also the challenge to take up our cross and follow Christ.

Acts 5:17-26 • Psalm 33(34):2-9

John 3:16-21

Thursday 7 April

Acts 5:27-33 • St John Baptist de la Salle (Memorial)

Peter is such an inspiration, isn't he? He was truly a changed man – transformed from a Christ-denier to a Christ-proclaimer. Standing before the Sanhedrin, the highest court in Israel, he proclaimed fearlessly that Jesus is the only One through whom we have salvation and the forgiveness of sins.

Peter had once been afraid of what others thought of him and was terrified of the consequences of being identified with Jesus. But after Jesus had risen from the dead and the Holy Spirit had come upon him on Pentecost morning he saw things differently. He began to realize what Jesus' death really meant and, filled with a new confidence, he proclaimed, 'The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead' (v. 30 NIV). He also knew that his life was to be dedicated to being a witness of this event, which is why he could say with conviction: 'We must obey God rather than men' (v. 29). This is also why some years later this unschooled and ordinary fisherman, destined to be the Rock upon which Christ built his Church, could write: 'By [God's] great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you' (1 Pet. 1:3-4).

We can be transformed in the same way – we really can! How does this happen? In part it is God's work and in part it is ours. For our part, with God's help, we need to identify patterns of thinking which make us act in ways that are destructive and negative, and undermine the life of God in us. In doing so, we open ourselves up to God's transforming grace. Because it is precisely grace that changes everything and everyone. We are not unlike Peter – we care about what others think, we deny the Lord and we can be emotional and impetuous. The Spirit works in the same way in us as he did in Peter. Therefore, 'Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will' (Rom. 12:2 NIV).

Lord, lead me in the way of salvation, the way of life, so that I may turn back and be strengthened by your grace and live a new life.

Acts 5:27-33 • Psalm 33(34):2, 9, 17-20

John 3:31-36

Friday 8 April

Easter Weekday • Acts 5:34-42

'Evangelization' or 'evangelize' can be unwelcome words in many church circles. Some clergy can be fearful of overly enthusiastic parishioners either stepping on their toes in some way or being too evangelical and putting people off. Other clergy are OK with the notion of evangelizing culture or society but less happy with the idea of personal witness. Lay people, on the other hand, console themselves with the idea that as long as they are good, kind and decent, that is a form of evangelization (which of course it is). But if only it was that easy or straightforward!

For clarity we look to the wisdom of the fathers of the Second Vatican Council, which ushered in a new, exciting and dynamic way of approaching evangelization. The Council proclaimed that 'The Church has received from the apostles as a task to be discharged even to the ends of the earth this solemn mandate of Christ to proclaim the saving truth (Acts 1:8). Hence, she makes the words of the Apostle her own, "Woe to me, if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:16)' (Lumen gentium 17). It also taught that 'A true apostle looks for opportunities to announce by words addressed either to non-believers with a view to leading them to faith or to believers with a view to instructing and strengthening them, and motivating them to a more fervent life' (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity 6).

We all need to experience something of an interior revolution concerning evangelization. In today's reading from Acts, Gamaliel, a Pharisee, recognized that what was happening before his very eyes could be from God and, if it was from God, nothing could stop it from spreading. With far-reaching and piercing prophetic insight, the Second Vatican Council had this to say about the power of the gospel to change our lives and transform our world: 'By the power of the gospel the Spirit makes the Church grow...The word of the Lord is like a seed sown in a field (Mark 4:14). Those who hear the word with faith become part of the little flock of Christ (Luke 12:32). The seed they have received sprouts and grows until the harvest is ready' (Lumen gentium 4, 5).

Lord, renewed in faith, strengthened in hope, inspired by love and on fire with the Spirit, I witness to the gospel and share my faith.

Acts 5:34-42 • Psalm 26(27):1, 4, 13-14

John 6:1-15



**Saturday 9 April**

**Acts 6:1-7 • Easter Weekday**

Within the new Church in Jerusalem there were two distinct ethnic communities. The larger of the two groups was composed of Hebraic Jews, who were natives of Palestine and spoke Aramaic, and included Peter and the other apostles. The smaller group was made up of Grecian Jews (often referred to as Hellenists), who came from outside Palestine and spoke Greek. It would appear that tensions and divisions had arisen between the two groups, one flashpoint being that the widows from the Hellenistic community felt overlooked in the daily distribution of food – clearly not a good situation. It was like an open wound which, if not attended to, could flare up into something worse.

Acting swiftly, the apostles appointed seven Greek-speaking men who were ‘full of the Spirit and of wisdom’ (v. 3). The apostles understood that the daily needs of the believers needed to be met but felt that they should not neglect their own ministry of prayer and studying God’s Word. Their conclusion falls a little awkwardly on our ears: ‘It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables…But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word’ (vv. 2, 4). Having taken appropriate action, the apostles were free to study and pray and do what they felt God was calling them to do.

The Church has always had a dual calling to the contemplative life and the apostolic life, and often a tension is perceived between the two. There is indeed a tension but it is a tension of the Spirit, because those called to the contemplative life are also called to have a heart for mission and social action. Equally, those called to the apostolic life, to evangelization and social action, must root their ministry in prayer and study of the Word. God, however, cannot be contained or boxed in by our understanding and it is an irony of the Scriptures that one of the seven deacons, Stephen, would become the first martyr and, as we shall see, his grasp of salvation history and his insight into Christ reflected love of prayer and study of the Word of God.

Lord, by your grace may my love and service be rooted in an abiding love of prayer and Scripture, through which I am able to grow in knowledge and understanding of your love and mercy.

Acts 6:1-7 • Psalm 32(33):1-2, 4-5, 18-19

John 6:16-21

**Sunday 10 April**

**(C) Third Sunday of Easter • John 21:1-19**

Although deeply spiritual and theologically profound, St John's Gospel records some very personal moments in the life of Jesus, such as when he wept at the death of Lazarus (John 11:35) and the incident recorded in today's Gospel when the risen Lord cooked his disciples a fish breakfast, inviting them to 'Come and have breakfast' (v. 12). We learn that God cares for us, body and soul. By death the soul is separated from the body but our hope is that they will be reunited on the last day. The resurrection of Jesus revealed the nature of this new body – a risen body, infused with God's light and life, and not prone to sin and death.

The breakfast story leads into a fascinating exchange between Jesus and Peter in which the fisherman was asked three times to feed the Lord's sheep (see vv. 15, 16, 17). What did this mean? It meant that as the Rock he was called to ensure that believers were fed with the nourishment of Christ. We see this in Peter's first letter, 'Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good' (2:2-3 NIV). One way we can literally feed off this pure spiritual milk is by praying and studying Peter's two letters. When we do this we draw directly from the original rock on which the Church was built, the pure well of our salvation.

If we do not feed we grow weak and unhealthy. The same is true in our spiritual lives and the staple diet from which we feed is: prayer, the Scriptures, the teaching of the Church (the Magisterium) and lectio divina (spiritual reading). Supremely we feed from the Eucharist, food for our soul, and food which is good for this life and the next. God has given us rich sources of spiritual food – we do not live in a parched and weary land, but rather a banquet of teaching and spiritual life has been prepared for us. Just as with our physical bodies, eating on the run is not ideal: we need to carve out time and space to be with the Lord.

Lord, I give you praise and thanks for the table from which we feed – the Word of God, the tradition of the Church, and the source and summit of our faith, the holy Eucharist.

Acts 5:27-32, 40-41 • Psalm 29(30):2-6, 11-13

Apocalypse 5:11-14 • John 21:1-19

**Monday 11 April**

**Acts 6:8-15 • St Stanislaus (Memorial)**

Stephen's detractors and enemies were contrary, obtuse and malicious. Events began to unfold around Stephen which mirrored the Lord's Passion and death: false accusations, charges of blasphemy and being hauled before the Sanhedrin. Like Christ in life, like Christ in death. Stephen is the proto-martyr, the first martyr, and his witness of martyrdom speaks to every generation of believers, in the past, in the present and into the future, until the end of time.

What is most striking about Stephen is the way Luke highlights how he was a man full of grace, filled with wisdom and the Holy Spirit. He was a God-centred man and not a self-centred man. Where did this grace and power come from? How was he able to combine a practical care of the poor with extraordinary clarity on the gospel and its message?

Part of the answer can be found in the opening verses of chapter 6, which recount how Stephen was selected by members of the community because of his apparent virtues and was presented along with six others for the blessing of the apostles. Luke informs us that the apostles 'prayed and laid their hands on them' (v. 6). This was the customary manner in the early Church by which people were invested with the power of the Holy Spirit to carry out special assignments and work. From this prayer of petition and the laying on of hands came the in-filling of the Spirit and the power to serve the Lord (see Acts 13:1-3). This outpouring of the Spirit was clearly the source of Stephen's Spirit-filled life.

We too can be filled with the Spirit, and the reason we need to be filled with the Spirit is because we all leak. Without the grace of the Spirit we labour in vain and serve the Lord in the power of our own strength and abilities. Don't be afraid or shy to seek out the blessing of being prayed over to receive a fresh outpouring of the Spirit. Bishops, priests and deacons especially can make this prayer but so can fellow believers, when two or three gather in Jesus' name. We are called to be Spirit-filled Christians – men and women who live not for ourselves but for others, not in our strength but by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Lord, fill me with your Spirit; fill me with your joy, hope and love that I may be an authentic witness of the gospel.

Acts 6:8-15 • Psalm 118(119):23-30

John 6:22-29

**TUESDAY 12 APRIL**

Tuesday 12 April

Easter Weekday • Acts 7:51–8:1

Stephen, in his speech to his fellow Jews (Acts 7:2-53), had tried to show that rejection of Jesus – God’s anointed one – was a continuing pattern in the history of Israel. He was not trying to condemn his brothers and sisters but to urge them to examine themselves and consider why they had rejected Jesus of Nazareth – the One sent by God, the promised Messiah. He wanted rather to encourage them to believe and come to faith. He was a martyr in the true sense of the word, which comes from the Greek *martus* meaning a ‘witness’: he witnessed to the history of Israel, to the work God had done among his chosen people.

Stephen knew what Israel knew, that God had a plan of salvation which was being worked out within Israel. The role of the prophets of old had been to point to this unfolding plan, which culminated in the coming of Jesus. This time had now come. The problem was that the idea of a Suffering Servant, a Suffering Messiah, did not fit the popular Jewish understanding of the Messiah coming to liberate his people. They also did not appreciate or grasp that the Jewish Messiah was to be for the whole of humankind – Jew and Gentile alike, for Jew and Gentile alike needed salvation. To Stephen Jesus was God’s ‘Righteous One’ who was ‘standing at the right hand of God’ (vv. 52, 56). This message cost Stephen his life. These words were intolerable to his hearers and they stoned him to death. To the very end Stephen was Christlike, praying, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them’ (v. 60).

Stephen’s witness, we can be sure, had some impact on one of his accusers and persecutors, Saul, who was to become Paul. Paul would become the greatest evangelist ever and he too forgave his enemies (see, e.g., Rom. 12:14). This is the power of grace, the attraction of forgiveness, which wins hearts and minds. Our capacity to forgive is related to our ability to evangelize. We forgive all and show mercy to everyone – this is our martyrdom and how we die to self. We pray for the grace to witness to Jesus through our ability to forgive and let go of resentment.

Lord Jesus, so often I want to strike back when others offend or sin against me. Grant me the grace always to forgive, always to show mercy and to be a living sign of God’s love.

Acts 7:51–8:1 • Psalm 30(31):3-8, 17, 21

John 6:30-35

Wednesday 13 April

Acts 8:1-8 • Easter Weekday

The martyrdom of Stephen was a turning point in the history of the early Church. Up until this time the first communities were concentrated around Jerusalem. Stephen's death unleashed a relentless persecution against the believers, causing many to flee to Judea and Samaria. A little history can help us understand the wisdom of the Spirit for everything is under God's providence and care.

The region north of Jerusalem had once been part of the kingdom David had united but, after the death of Solomon, it became part of the Northern Kingdom, separate from Judah. Over the centuries the Samaritans had integrated pagan rituals into their religious practice, particularly after many foreigners had settled in the area at the end of the exile. The Jews of Jesus' day considered these mixed religious practices vile and contemptible. It was into this culture and society that the first Christians brought the gospel. So, in fact, the persecution and dispersion of the Christians became a powerful instrument in God's plan for spreading the gospel.

Comfort, not persecution, is the curse of the Christian faith. Comfort breeds indifference and complacency, whereas persecution gives birth to a renewal of faith and a clarity about the gospel message. The early believers chose their faith over and above their homes; they chose uncertainty and relying on God's providence over and above their own wellbeing. As St Ambrose wrote some centuries after this dispersion: 'Many persecutions mean many testings, many crowns mean many struggles.' No doubt these early believers received their eternal reward.

We too will be persecuted and suffer when we stand up for our faith and witness to our experience of God. Yet if we persevere and hold firm to the promises of Christ we will be richly blessed and receive our crown of grace and blessing – in this life and in the life to come. We take heart from these first believers. They lived in a different time and a different culture but the challenges to faith they faced were the same as we face today. We take heart and we take courage and we shall not be afraid to bear witness to our faith.

'Those persecutors who are seen are not the only ones; there are invisible persecutors as well and far more numerous...The devil directs his servants to stir up persecutions not only externally but within our hearts...How many unknown martyrs of Christ each day confess Jesus to be Lord.' (St Ambrose)

Acts 8:1-8 • Psalm 65(66):1-7

John 6:35-40

Thursday 14 April

Easter Weekday • Acts 8:26-40

Do you ever struggle to understand the Scriptures? Are there passages that just seem unfathomable and, frankly, you need help to make any sense of them? Well, take heart: you are not alone. The Bible has many complex and difficult sections and we all need some assistance in understanding them. In today's reading we encounter an individual who had this very problem.

The man was an Ethiopian eunuch who served in the court of Candace as an official in the treasury department. 'Candace' was the traditional title given to the queen mother. She was responsible for performing the more secular duties of court as the reigning king was considered sacred and therefore above such mundane tasks. Of course, as is typical in Luke's storytelling, the Holy Spirit was very much involved in overseeing proceedings. The Spirit gave Philip very specific instructions about what he wanted him to do: 'Go up and join this chariot' (v. 29). And, lo and behold, he discovered that the eunuch was reading from the prophet Isaiah and had reached chapter 53 which speaks about the Suffering Servant. What a Scripture to be invited to unpack! Philip had struck gold! He was able to explain that it was a prophetic Scripture pointing to the cross of Christ and his sufferings. Jesus is the fulfilment of all the prophecies of the Old Testament and the key to understanding them for in him they are fulfilled.

Are we as open as Philip was to be led to evangelize in this way? If someone asked you to explain Isaiah 53, how would you fare? We must resist the temptation to think that people aren't interested in the Hebrew Scriptures. For sure, they can be hard to understand as the revelation is partial and incomplete, and uses language and ideas that don't fall easily on our modern ears. Nevertheless, they are the inspired Word of God and from them we can gain great insight into God's unfolding plan of salvation.

Just as the eunuch needed someone to unpack the Scriptures for him, there are people in our lives to whom the Spirit is leading us so that we can help them understand God's Word. The Holy Spirit will show us who those people are and give us the words we need.

Holy Spirit, grant me a true love of your Scriptures and a reverence for the Old Testament which points forward to the coming of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Acts 8:26-40 • Psalm 65(66):8-9, 16-17, 20

John 6:44-51

**Friday 15 April**

**Acts 9:1-20 • Easter Weekday**

Hold onto your seat: we are in for quite an exciting ride. So important did Luke consider the conversion of Saul to be that the master-storyteller carries his conversion story not once, not twice, but three times in the Acts of the Apostles. The message is clear: God can change anyone. No matter how bad they are, no matter how stuck or lost or confused, our God saves and our God is the God of surprises. No one is beyond redemption; no one is beyond his love or merciful embrace.

In God's world a person may be diametrically opposed to the gospel and everything it stands for, a person may actually be a sworn enemy of our faith, yet God's mercy is always calling them to turn to him. Saul's conversion is a testament for all time of the power of God's grace to transform a person. We can be so encouraged by today's reading because we all know someone who seems to be far from God and actively opposed to the Church or the teaching of Christ – but it is precisely this person to whom God's mercy and forgiveness is extended, for where sin abounds God's mercy super-abounds.

Now here's the rub, as the Bard used to say: the wisdom of the Church is that when it comes to contrition, repentance and conversion, the focus should always be on ourselves first. Now some may cry, 'But I am converted, I am repentant.' Well, when it comes to those of us who are already converted, the Church always encourages us to seek a second conversion. Our mother, the Church, speaks these words to us: 'Christ's call to conversion continues in the lives of Christians. This second conversion is an uninterrupted task of the Church who, clasping sinners to her bosom, is at once holy and always in need of purification and follows constantly the path of penance and renewal' (CCC 1428).

We are called then to actively seek a second conversion, an encounter with Christ in which we are reminded of our need for mercy, forgiveness and grace. This grace of conversion, the fruit of a grace of revelation, always brings us to our knees, for we are all beggars before the throne of God's mercy.

Lord Jesus, help me to know that conversion is the movement of a contrite heart drawn by grace to respond to the merciful love of your Father who loved me first.

Acts 9:1-20 • Psalm 116(117)

John 6:52-59

**Saturday 16 April**

**Easter Weekday • Acts 9:31-42**

There is a certain mindset prevalent today which when reading the Acts of the Apostles understands the signs, wonders and miracles of the early believers as a kind of 'kick-start' phenomenon – not to be repeated, never to occur again, once in a church-time. However, this simply does not reflect the teaching of the Church, which assures us that the same grace, the same blessing, the same power of the Holy Spirit is poured out upon us today.

For sure, and without any shadow of doubt, Peter, James and John were comets of grace, lighting up the firmament, and were extraordinary examples of discipleship and apostleship. However, to limit this grace to them is to deny the power of God's work today. God's blessing and grace does not change and is poured out upon us continually. The Holy Spirit wants us to be full of hope, expectation and anticipation that the Spirit can build the Church today in the same way that it was built in its nascent centuries.

Luke informs us that during a time of peace and stability the Church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria was strengthened by the Holy Spirit and – and this is the key point – grew in numbers (v. 31). Many dioceses in the West look to amalgamate and even close churches as congregations shrink and church practice diminishes. There is a falling away from faith as opposed to a rush to join. We are definitely living in challenging times. But this shouldn't make us despair – rather the opposite. It is a time to rise to the challenge and step out in faith, just as the early disciples did.

Has God changed? No. Has the gospel message changed? No. Has the Holy Spirit who built the Church in the first century ceased his work? No. The fathers at the First Vatican Council wrote: 'If anyone says that miracles are impossible and that all accounts regarding them, even those contained in the Scriptures, are to be dismissed as fabulous or mythical or that miracles can never be known with certainty and that the divine origin of Christianity is not proved by them, let them be anathema.'

Lord, I believe in miracles. I believe the same grace working so powerfully in the early Church is available to us today. May the Church grow in numbers as we proclaim the gospel and bear witness to the wonders and miracle of God's saving grace.

Acts 9:31-42 • Psalm 115(116):12-17

John 6:60-69



**Sunday 17 April**

**John 10:27-30 • Fourth Sunday of Easter (C): World Day of Prayer for Vocations**

Human beings are frequently compared to sheep in the Scriptures – not, it has to be said, the smartest of animals. In *Animal Farm*, George Orwell depicted the pig as the most intelligent farm animal – for him sheep were easily manipulated and easily led. In his tale the sheep were good at chanting slogans but failed to think things through for themselves. The French poet Jean de La Fontaine said: ‘A certain fox, it is said, wanted to become a wolf. Who can say why no wolf has ever craved the life of a sheep?’

Sheep are vulnerable and needy; they need feeding, guiding and leading. They are prone to stray into danger. They are easy prey for animals such as foxes and wolves (both sly animals). On the more positive side, they are good at recognizing the voice of the shepherd. If we are honest, we have to admit the comparison of human beings to sheep is an apt one. The Anglican Book of Common Prayer includes the following confession in its liturgy: ‘We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.’ We are like sheep in the ways we go astray, but the Lord is the Good Shepherd who leads us through the valley of the shadow of death to quiet and verdant pastures.

How do we hear the voice of the Shepherd? In our prayer, through the Scriptures, through the teaching of the Church and through the light of our conscience. We all err and fall and walk in darkness, but the Lord’s voice is constantly calling us to life eternal. Jesus wants not one of his sheep to be lost. Our lives are a pilgrimage to the safe pasture of heaven and the gift of eternal life.

‘Looking beyond this life, my first prayer, aim and hope is that I may see God. The thought of being blessed with the sight of earthly friends pales before that thought. I believe that I shall never die; this awful prospect would crush me, were it not that I trusted and prayed that it would be an eternity in God’s presence. How is eternity a boon unless he goes with it? And for others dear to me, my one prayer is that they may see God.’ (Blessed John Henry Newman)

Acts 13:14, 43-52 • Psalm 99(100):1-3, 5

Apocalypse 7:9, 14-17 • John 10:27-30

**Monday 18 April**

**Easter Weekday • Acts 11:1-18**

Those who oppose the gospel or are contemptuous of Christian faith often say that the New Testament is propaganda. They insist that its writers were intent on imposing their own world view. It is true that the New Testament writers, the majority of whom were apostles, had a view of the world informed by the Passion, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, but this did not prevent them from telling it how it was. Those seeking to promulgate propaganda would not have aired the dirty linen of the tensions, friction and factions which grew up very early in the Church's life.

As an example take today's reading, which reveals that tensions had begun to emerge between the Jews and the Gentiles who were coming to faith in large numbers. Steeped in the faith into which they had been born, the Jewish believers, Peter among them, wanted the Gentile converts to undergo circumcision. Peter needed to undergo a conversion of heart, a change of thinking to enable him to fully grasp that what was important was a circumcision of the heart, not of the body; inner holiness, not external practices regarding such matters as clean versus unclean food. Through a vision the Holy Spirit led Peter to see things differently and to apply the logic of the kingdom.

The gospel has set us free from the Jewish law – we are justified not by the law but by faith. The bad news is that we cannot save ourselves; the good news is that we are saved through faith in Christ. We are justified through faith in Jesus of Nazareth and reconciled to the Father through his saving death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit led the early Church away from the backwater of being simply a kind of Jewish sect into the beauty of the true Christian faith which affirms that we are made righteous only through, in and with Christ.

'It is through faith that Almighty God has justified all that has been from the beginning.' (St Clement of Rome)

Acts 11:1-18 • Psalm 41(42):2-3; 42(43):3-4

John 10:1-10

Tuesday 19 April

Acts 11:19-26 • Easter Weekday

It is a delicious and wonderful irony that the more the Church was persecuted, the more it grew; the more it was suppressed, the more it spread. Evangelization and persecution went hand in hand: the more the early believers suffered, the more compelled they were to preach and proclaim the gospel. The Acts of the Apostles is a fantastic book to read to capture the sheer power of the gospel message to withstand resistance and persecution. It is also a great book to read to capture how the Christian faith is unashamedly a faith of proclamation and conversion.

We are not too comfortable with this idea today. We easily succumb to a kind of relativism or supermarket approach to faith, thinking that there is no absolute truth and we can pick and choose the bits we like. This wasn't how the early believers thought, and it isn't what the Church teaches. Evangelization and conversion are the *raison d'être* of the Catholic Church. In short, she exists to evangelize.

This conversion is, however, not to an ideology or a philosophy or even a way of life but to a person, Jesus of Nazareth.

Verse 21 is striking: 'And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number that believed turned to the Lord.' Our vocation is beautifully summed up in the book of Proverbs: 'The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise' (11:30 NKJV). In this Year of Mercy the Holy Spirit inspires us, moves us and, yes, compels us to be missionaries of mercy who reach out to others with the love of Christ. Let us allow ourselves to be stirred by the following challenge from the greatest evangelist who has ever lived: 'But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?' (Rom. 10:14-15).

Lord, set aflame in my heart a love for the gospel message, a message which speaks of God's tender mercy and love, and begin in me a revolution of mercy that I may be an authentic witness for Christ.

Acts 11:19-26 • Psalm 86(87):1-7

John 10:22-30

Wednesday 20 April

Easter Weekday • Acts 12:24–13:5

The Acts of the Apostles could equally be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. For it is the Holy Spirit who inspired the words, works and acts of the apostles. The early Church was a Church of the Holy Spirit; today, the Church is the Church of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the first and primary agent of evangelization. St Luke wrote his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles to make us aware in no uncertain terms that the Holy Spirit is Lord and we say Jesus Christ is Lord by the power of the Holy Spirit. Where we have the Spirit we have evangelization; without the Spirit there is no evangelization.

We can glean and learn how the Spirit works from today's reading. Here is no long treatise or complex manifesto but just a simple instruction: 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them' (v. 2). The Holy Spirit speaks to us today in the same straightforward and uncompromising way. The first apostles understood that crucial to their mission and the fruit it bore was hearing from the Lord. They set aside time to pray, read the Hebrew Scriptures, study the apostles' teaching and hear from the Lord.

Perhaps these first believers had a greater sense of their reliance and dependence upon the Holy Spirit than we do today. Perhaps these first believers were more aware of their own weaknesses and limitations and turned more readily to the Holy Spirit for help, grace and strength. Cardinal Leo Suenens, who participated in the Second Vatican Council, had a strong sense of the movement of the Spirit both in his own life and in the Church. He said: 'I am a man of hope but not for human reasons, nor from any natural optimism, but because I believe the Holy Spirit is at work in the Church and in the world, even when his name remains unheard.'

Come, Holy Spirit, and fill the earth with your love and presence, but most of all fill my heart and make it overflow with your tender mercy.

Acts 12:24–13:5 • Psalm 66(67):2-3, 5-6, 8

John 12:44-50

Thursday 21 April

Acts 13:13-25 • Easter Weekday

Paul was a proclaimer. He was a herald of the gospel message and today we join him as he preaches his first recorded sermon on his first missionary journey. It is a masterclass on how to witness and proclaim the gospel.

At the heart of Paul's work was the proclamation of God's great work of salvation. It was this message which compelled him and gave him that fire in his belly to share it, witness to it and proclaim it from the rooftops. When the opportunity to preach was given to him by the synagogue leaders he seized it. We too need to be alert to opportunities to preach and proclaim the gospel. These moments arise more often than we realize. The Holy Spirit can make us sensitive to what we should call 'God-given opportunities' to share our faith.

The knack or key or where we need God's wisdom is to do so in an attractive and appealing way. We don't want to make people feel embarrassed or awkward or uncomfortable. It is possible to have a conversation about what our faith means to us in an easy-going yet sincere and genuine way. Like Paul we also need to be clear about what we are going to say. Paul focused on Jesus, explaining about his teaching, the power of his name, his works, and his saving death and resurrection. Today we see him doing so in the context of Jewish history.

Perhaps the key to evangelism and evangelization is to focus on Jesus. We don't need to be trained evangelists or theologians or even priests or religious: we simply need to testify to what we know about God in our own lives – our experience of his mercy, his forgiveness, his presence. Nor do we need to be especially eloquent or perfect. The gospel message has its own power and grace. Believe that the Spirit has prepared the minds and hearts of those to whom you have an opportunity to speak and you will see minds and hearts opening wide to your message. The Holy Spirit is the primary agent of all our efforts at evangelization – this was true in the early Church and it is still true today.

Lord Jesus, I pray for grace and wisdom to share my faith with joy, enthusiasm and clarity, and to be an attractive and appealing witness of Christian faith.

Acts 13:13-25 • Psalm 88(89):2-3, 21-22, 25, 27

John 13:16-20

Friday 22 April

Easter Weekday • Acts 13:26-33

To understand most things we need to go back to the beginning, the origins, the root, in order to fully grasp their meaning. Never was this more true than with the Christian faith. Many believe that faith is a blind leap into the dark but it is not – faith is certainly a leap, but it is a leap into the mystery of God.

From the dawn of history, that moment when the human race turned away from God, God has always had a rescue plan. God did not wish to leave us alone, trapped for eternity in the throes of evil. So he turned his gaze to Mary, holy and immaculate in love (Eph. 1:4), choosing her to be the Mother of God. When faced with the gravity of sin, God responded with the fullness of mercy. Mercy will always be greater than any sin and no limits can ever be placed on the depths of God's merciful love.

This plan unfolded through a process of gradual revelation within Israel, God's Chosen People, our elder brother in faith. They were the channel through which, in the fullness of time, God's plan and secret (kept hidden) was revealed and made known. Tragically, however, when the time came, God's plan was rejected by his Chosen People. Their thoughts were not God's thoughts regarding the Messiah. To them it was unthinkable and scandalous that the Lord's Anointed would die an ignominious death on a cross. They did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah and crucified him as a common criminal.

Nevertheless, God was faithful to his plan: he raised Jesus from the dead and his plan was fulfilled. This is the radical message of the gospel – God the Father has a Son, the Son who is God became man, and God is revealed as Three Persons in One God. This is the treasure of the Christian faith which we receive through a grace of revelation. For it is in believing that we enter into the mysteries of faith: the incarnation, the Trinity and the cross.

'For I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe – that unless I believe I shall not understand.' (St Anselm)

Acts 13:26-33 • Psalm 2:6-11

John 14:1-6

**Saturday 23 April**

**Acts 13:44-52 • St George (Solemnity in England)**

‘The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit’ (v. 52).

The early disciples and apostles were certainly made of tough stuff. They were subject to violent abuse and were often expelled from the territory in which they were working (vv. 45, 50). The mystery is how, after being so despicably treated, they could still be filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.

The answer lies in the fact that they were rooted in a profound sense of God’s hand upon their lives. They had, we can say, a heavenly perspective. They had a living sense of Jesus’ words, ‘If they persecuted me, they will persecute you’ (John 15:20); ‘Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you’ (Matt. 5:11-12). It seems that it was the blessing of a deep and lasting joy that enabled the first believers to endure the severe suffering which comes with persecution.

We are called to cultivate this same quality of joy – we could call it ‘divine joy’. We do so in proportion to our ability to focus on a heavenly perspective and our eternal reward. Paul wrote, ‘I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of you who are mature be thus minded’ (Phil. 3:14-15).

We may not be hounded from place to place, like Paul or Barnabas, but we are familiar with degrees of hostility and even enmity. We can experience this even in our families, in our parishes and in our places of work. From where do we derive our joy? It comes from a knowledge of God’s mercy and love in our hearts. This sense of God’s presence isn’t just a blessing for the few, but a grace for the many. It is the fruit of our baptism; we received the fullness of the Spirit when we were baptized and this gift was strengthened when we were confirmed.

Today we turn to St George and ask for his intercession and prayers. Little is known of him but we do know that he had the heart of a lion who paid the ultimate price for his faith – he laid down his life in martyrdom only to take it up again in the kingdom of heaven.

Proper of Season: Acts 13:44-52 • Ps 97(98):1-4 • Jn 14:7-14

Proper of Saints: Rev 12:10-12 • Ps 125(126) • 1 Pt 4:12-19 • Jn 15:18-21 or Jn 15:1-8

**Sunday 24 April**

**(C) Fifth Sunday of Easter • John 13:31-35**

Shortly before his death, Jesus gave his disciples, and us, a new commandment: 'A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another' (v. 34). To be a disciple is to be called to a life of love. And in particular to agape love, which is rooted in self-sacrifice, in loving without thought of return, freely and unconditionally. Christian love is probably both the most important of all the Christian virtues and the hardest to achieve. We may have faith, we may have hope, but we don't always have love.

Here's the thing about love: we all want to be loved – more than anything else in the world we crave love. The Greek philosopher Aristotle said: 'No one would choose a friendless existence on condition of having all the other things in the world.' In other words, we were created to receive love and to give love. None of us is an island; none of us is without the capacity to love and be loved. Love, however, is rather like mercy: to show mercy we must first receive mercy; to love, we must first know we are loved.

So we see that to be a Christian is to be called to live a life of love. But how far short we fall. None of us loves as we should love. Our hearts incline so easily to malice, envy, jealousy and rage. How can this be when we are called to love? We cannot love with our old hearts – they are callous and hard. No, a new commandment requires a new heart: the heart of the new creation, the heart of Christ.

This new heart of love is a blessing of the Spirit which we receive when we call upon God's help, grace and strength to love in those situations where we find it hard to love, to forgive where we find it impossible to forgive and to show mercy where we, left to our own devices, are devoid of mercy. This kind of love, agape love, is the blessing and fruit of the Spirit, and to this we are called and for this we receive every spiritual blessing and grace.

Lord God, please give me the grace and strength to love, forgive and show mercy in those situations where in my own strength I find it impossible to do so.

Acts 14:21-27 • Psalm 144(145):8-13

Apocalypse 21:1-5 • John 13:31-35



**Monday 25 April**

**Mark 16:15-20 • St Mark (Feast)**

Today we celebrate the feast-day of St Mark, one of the four Evangelists. Mark was probably brought to faith by Peter as he is referred to as 'my son' in 1 Peter 5:13. Mark, also called John Mark, was a cousin of Barnabas. He accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey and is believed to have founded the church in Alexandria (Egypt) where he was eventually martyred.

As the Church entered into the new millennium, St Pope John Paul II urged us to see in the Gospels authentic and reliable witnesses of faith: 'What we receive from them is a vision of faith based on precise historical testimony: a true testimony which the Gospels, despite their complex redaction and primarily catechetical purpose, pass on to us in an entirely trustworthy way' (Novo millennio ineunte 17). St Mark's Gospel, which was written before 70 AD, has a distinct and dramatic way of gathering the events of Jesus' life into a compelling and fascinating narrative. It is the shortest of the Gospels and reads more like a tabloid than a broadsheet newspaper.

The main message Mark wants to communicate is clear: Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God. His theology is Christocentric: Jesus is greater than John the Baptist; Jesus is the sinless One; Jesus is the Spirit-filled Messiah; Jesus is the Servant of the Lord; Jesus is tested by Satan. Mark is also very much focused on the fact that the kingdom of God is at hand, as indeed the very first verse of his Gospel proclaims: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand' (1:15).

A major turning point in the Gospel is when Peter receives a grace of revelation and is able to confess that Jesus is the Christ (8:29). All preaching, teaching and catechesis must lead us to understand in ever-deeper measure that Jesus of Nazareth is God made man. It is this revelation which underpins our faith and which is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Taking perhaps just a little over an hour to read, St Mark's Gospel can be a wonderful gift to give to someone who is sincerely seeking the Lord.

St Mark, through the grace of God our Father, obtain for me, I pray you, a lively faith, firm hope and burning love for the Word of God and especially the four Gospels.

1 Peter 5:5-14 • Psalm 88(89):2-3, 6-7, 16-17

Mark 16:15-20

Tuesday 26 April

Easter Weekday • Acts 14:19-28

A popular slogan nowadays in the world of sport and business is 'no pain, no gain'. This modern phrase would no doubt have resonated with Paul, who personally experienced that 'We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of heaven' (v. 22 NIV). The apostle understood that the task of spreading the gospel was rarely easy. When at Lystra he had been stoned and left for dead (v. 19), his response hadn't been to flee and never return: he had got up, dusted himself down and returned to the city.

Paul, hero of faith that he was, had a way of thinking about his life on earth that can inspire us today. He had a sense that the treasure of the Holy Spirit lives in frail and fragile bodies, which he referred to as 'jars of clay' (2 Cor. 4:7 NIV). He also had a sense that just as Christ had suffered, so his disciples would suffer: 'For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body' (2 Cor. 4:11 NIV).

We may not be called to suffer as severely as Paul for our faith, but we are all called to some form of hardship and even persecution. Whenever we undergo hardship of any kind we can often feel that God is removed and remote from us, but today we can find encouragement in these words from St Ignatius of Loyola: 'If God causes you to suffer much, it is a sign that he has great designs for you and that he certainly intends to make you a saint.' In other words, holiness is worked out in the midst of trials, hardships and all manner of suffering.

Like Paul, in the midst of our suffering, we can learn to give praise and thanks to God. This can appear strange but God has his hand on every part of our lives, and never more so than when we are hurting. This expression of praise and thanksgiving, which is really an act of faith, brings us close to the Father's heart and draws us into the very heartbeat of God's plan for our lives.

'Life himself came down to be slain; Bread came down to suffer hunger; the Way came down to endure weariness on his journey; the Fountain came down to experience thirst. Do you then refuse to work and to suffer?' (St Augustine)

Acts 14:19-28 • Psalm 144(145):10-13, 21

John 14:27-31

Wednesday 27 April

Acts 15:1-6 • Easter Weekday

Today and tomorrow we will focus on the Council of Jerusalem (c. 48/49 AD), the first of the Church's councils and a key moment in church history. The influx of Gentiles into a predominantly Jewish Church caused major problems for the apostles. Baptism, the grace of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and even the fellowship the first believers enjoyed could not prevent the Jewish Christians forming a powerful lobby which began to insist that all male Gentile converts be circumcised. This posed a very real dilemma for the Church: was the Christian faith simply an extension of Judaism with its rules, regulations and rituals (circumcision being an important one) or was it a radical departure?

Of course, the early church leaders had to take into account the fact that the Christian faith draws deeply from the riches of Judaism but is also a radical departure from the principle of living by the law to the new power of living by the Spirit. The Council was able to recognize from key prophetic Scriptures that God's original plan was the salvation of the whole world, e.g., 'I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth' (Isa. 49:6); 'I will raise up the booth of David...and rebuild it as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name' (Amos 9:11-12).

Conversion and repentance always involve a renewal of the mind (Rom. 12:2) and the Jewish believers needed to think as God thought, see as God sees, and understand the teaching of the Saviour, whose final words before he ascended into heaven had been: 'you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). Indeed, this is the meaning of the Great Commission: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt. 28:19). The Jewish Christians had to understand that salvation is for all, and with God's help they made the shift in their mindset, opening up the gospel to all men and women.

Lord God, teach me reverence for the Jewish people, a burning love for the gospel and the desire to share the Good News with all men and women.

John 15:1-6 • Psalm 121(122):1-5

Acts 15:1-6

Thursday 28 April

Easter Weekday • Acts 15:7-21

The Council of Jerusalem was a watershed for the early Church. At this critical time in the young Church's history, the Council fathers led the Church away from simply being a kind of Jewish sect. As we saw yesterday, the Jewish Christian believers could not understand that Gentile believers did not have to submit to the Jewish law in order to be saved. But Jesus came to set us free from the law. The gospel message requires that we recognize that we cannot save ourselves, as Peter affirmed before the Council: 'We believe that we shall be saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, just as they will' (v. 11).

To really grasp the depth of the confusion these early believers were experiencing and how serious the problem was, we need to look at Galatians 2:11-16. In essence, Peter, the Rock, had himself become confused about the gospel of grace and it took the brotherly correction of Paul to get him back on the right track. This might jar a little: after all, Peter was the leader of the early Church, the first Pope, chosen by Christ. Paul, however, leaves us in no doubt that Peter was wrong in this matter: 'When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong' (Gal. 2:11 NIV). And it wasn't just Peter: Paul points out that Barnabas had also begun to withdraw and separate himself from the Gentile believers.

We aren't saved by our background, our ability or our works – we are all redeemed by the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Council proposed that Gentile Christians be required to abstain from certain marital practices within forbidden degrees of kindred which might offend Jewish Christians (v. 20), but they were not required to take on the full demands of the law. The gospel message was radical then and it is radical now: through the law we become conscious of our sin – the law doesn't save us, but simply confirms we are fallen and sinful. We are saved through our faith in Jesus Christ, washed clean from sin in the sacrament of baptism, through the Holy Spirit who justifies us and reconciles us to God the Father.

'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave his life for me.' (Gal. 2:20)

Acts 15:7-21 • Psalm 95(96):1-3, 10

John 15:9-11

**Friday 29 April**

**Matthew 11:25-30 • St Catherine of Siena (Patron of Europe) (Feast)**

Today both the Scriptures and the liturgy offer us rich fare. Our focus on Matthew 11:25-30, which contains some of the most comforting words in the entire Bible, and the feast of St Catherine of Siena means we are spoilt for choice and blessed with an opportunity to enter into God's mystery.

We know that what gave Jesus joy was the grace of revelation which enables ordinary men and women to grasp hold of the mysteries of the kingdom of God. Our reason can take us so far but we need divine revelation to enable us to enter into the deeper mysteries of faith, and today we find Jesus giving thanks for this gift. It is a mystery of faith itself that often these insights are kept from the wise and learned but poured out upon 'little children'.

One such little child was St Catherine of Siena who, despite not having had any formal education, is a Doctor of the Church, standing alongside the great intellectual heavyweights of SS Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Her fervent devotion to Christ and the visions she received opened up divine truth, and as a result she was declared a saint and the title of 'Doctor' was bestowed upon her.

Through the witness of her life she shows us how to love God and our neighbour. On love of neighbour she said: 'No virtue is obtained except through one's neighbour and their defects.' The faults and weaknesses of others are a form of grace for us, for through them we are given an opportunity to grow in holiness. Her visions, captured in her Dialogues, reveal how profoundly intimate is the relationship into which God calls us with him.

St Catherine was blessed especially with a wonderful insight into God as Blessed Trinity. She wrote: 'With the light of understanding, in your light I have tasted and seen the abyss [a metaphor she used to express God's love] which you are, eternal Trinity, and the beauty of your creation.' In this holy Year of Mercy, and through the intercession of St Catherine, we enter into the abyss of love which is the Holy Trinity.

'O Eternal Trinity, you are an abyss, a deep sea, what greater good could you give? You are fire, ever burning and never consumed, consuming in your heart all the self-love of the soul. By your light you enlighten our minds and by your light you lead us to rejoice in your truth.'

1 John 1:5-2:2 • Psalm 102(103):1-18

Matthew 11:25-30

**Saturday 30 April**

**Easter Weekday • Acts 16:1-10**

The scene before us today is Paul setting out on his second missionary journey, which lasted three years from 49 to 52 AD. It was during this journey that the gospel made inroads into Europe. Paul was a great evangelizer and pastoral leader but it is a mistake for us to think it was easy for him or that we could never be like him. We have the same Holy Spirit and we can learn from him about how to preach the gospel and care for others.

Paul was very thorough and, before leaving on his missionary journey, he first checked up on the communities he had founded (Acts 15:36). He was deeply concerned that the churches he had planted were flourishing: 'Apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches' (2 Cor. 11:28).

The apostle was also deeply practical and shrewd when it came to spreading the gospel. We see this in the way he dealt with Timothy, whom he wanted to accompany him on his missionary journey and who in time became a key member of his evangelistic team (see Acts 16:1; Phil. 2:20-22). Timothy was legally a Jew, despite his father being Greek. Although Paul understood that circumcision was not necessary for salvation, he had the young man undergo circumcision 'because of the Jews that were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek' (Acts 16:3). He felt that circumcision would enhance Timothy's credibility among the Jews he met. This was in keeping with the way he thought about the task of winning others for Christ, as the following passionate declaration reveals: 'I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some' (1 Cor. 9:22).

Acts shows us that Paul was totally reliant and dependent upon the Holy Spirit to guide and lead him in his work. He was open to surrendering his own thinking in order to be led by the Spirit, as when the Spirit closed one door and opened another. We too are called to be Spirit- and joy-filled evangelists, and we seek the help and guidance of the Spirit in this task.

Almighty God and Father, we see in your servant Paul a thorough and practical man who was humble and obedient in seeking the guidance of the Spirit. Create in me the same attitude of mind and disposition of heart.

Acts 16:1-10 • Psalm 99(100):1-3, 5

John 15:18-21