

**Tuesday 1 December**

**Luke 10:21-24 • Advent Weekday**

Jesus was the living embodiment of human perfection. He is the supreme example of what it means to be fully human, fully alive. He was also, of course, fully divine, and truly one of the greatest mysteries of our faith is that God became man. The man Jesus was like us in all things: he worked with human hands, his beating heart pounded through his chest and, like us all, he was tempted. But he never succumbed. So how interesting and fascinating for us to learn in today's reading what it was that gave this perfect man a deep sense of joy. Luke records it in these words: 'At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit...' (v. 21 NIV). Imagine the scene that this great storyteller places before us: a man overflowing with a profound joy, his face lit up by the joy of the Holy Spirit.

What gave Jesus such great joy? We learn that his joy was rooted in the knowledge that his heavenly Father was pouring out his grace upon his disciples so that they could grasp the hidden mysteries of faith. We learn that this gift of revelation gives God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, joy.

What gives you joy? The gift of joy is staring us all in the face. It is right before our very eyes. We receive God's abundant joy when we seek to understand the hidden mysteries of faith and experience the Father opening them up to us. These hidden mysteries include: the Immaculate Conception; God becoming man in Jesus of Nazareth (the Incarnation); the miracle of the Virgin birth and; the Son of God, Jesus Christ, made real and present in the Blessed Eucharist. When we set out to discover the riches of our faith contained in these mysteries of faith a wonderful thing happens within us: we receive the gift of joy.

Try it: step out in faith and ask the Holy Spirit to open up your heart; study the Scriptures and read the section of the Catechism of the Catholic Church which teaches on each of these mysteries. God's good pleasure will rain down on us and we, like Jesus, will be full of joy through the Holy Spirit.

Lord, send forth your Spirit and renew the face of the earth but also my own heart that I may seek you and find you, and in finding you give praise and thanks to the heavenly Father.

Isaiah 11:1-10 • Psalm 71(72):1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17  
Luke 10:21-24

**Wednesday 2 December**

**Matthew 15:29-37 • Advent Weekday**

There are many things in the Bible which are hard to understand. From the beginning holy men and women have studied the Scriptures and written commentaries in an effort to shed light on both their explicit and implicit meaning. While they are the fruit of prayer and study and are rich in insight, these commentaries are by no means intended to be regarded as definitive. There are portions of Scripture, however, on which the Magisterium, the teaching authority of the Catholic Church, stamps its definitive interpretation and authority, and we can be confident that in these cases its interpretation can be relied on. One such Scripture is the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves, about which the Catholic Church teaches: ‘The miracle of the multiplication of the loaves, when the Lord says the blessing, breaks and distributes the loaves through his disciples to feed the multitude, prefigures the superabundance of the unique bread of the Eucharist’ (CCC 1335). This miracle, marvellous and wonderful as it was, pointed to another miracle, the miracle of the Eucharist.

For that is what the Eucharist is: a miracle of faith. The priest, through the grace and power invested in him by the sacrament of ordination, changes bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. For Catholics, this is no mere memorial offering or ceremony, but a miracle in which a change is brought about by God’s intervention. The reason the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life is that through it and in it we are being nourished and fed by God, and the food we receive is God himself.

The Eucharist is truly a scandalous and shocking sacrament, and just as Jesus fed the multitude then, he continues to feed the multitudes now. The Eucharist is the greatest gift we can ever receive, and through it we are justified through faith for none of us deserves this gift of God in us, the hope of glory. The Eucharist is food which is good for this life and good for the life to come. If we grasped how wonderful this sublime gift is, we would evangelize the world because we would be filled with Eucharistic wonder, awe and joy.

‘What Christ gives us is quite explicit, if his own words are interpreted according to their Aramaic meaning. The expression “This is my body” means “This is myself”.’  
(Karl Rahner SJ)

Isaiah 25:6-10 • Psalm 22(23)

Matthew 15:29-37

**Thursday 3 December**

**Matthew 7:21, 24-27 • St Francis Xavier (Memorial)**

Pope Francis dedicated a section of his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* to the importance of the homily in building up the church congregation, clearly indicating that he considers it to be a key to understanding the relationship between a priest and his people. He invites the clergy to speak to their people as ‘a mother [does] to her child’, explaining that this is ‘encouraged by the warmth of his tone of voice, the unpretentiousness of his manner of speaking, the joy of his gestures’. He also stresses the importance of devoting a prolonged time of study, prayer, reflection and pastoral creativity to preparation for it, despite the busy lives parish priests lead. He states, ‘A preacher who does not prepare is not “spiritual”; he is dishonest and irresponsible with the gifts he has received.’ Too harsh? Maybe, but as the Pope, he is the shepherds’ shepherd, the servant of servants, standing in the shoes of Peter the fisherman.

The Pope’s teaching shows how vitally important the homily is to the parish community and how its delivery requires skill, grace and self-knowledge. He continues: ‘Some people think they can be good preachers because they know what ought to be said, but they pay no attention to how it should be said, that is, the concrete way of constructing a sermon. They complain when people do not listen to or appreciate them, but perhaps they have never taken the trouble to find the proper way of presenting their message.’

So we need to pray for our clergy, that they may preach with hearts on fire with the love of the gospel and, most importantly of all, practise what they preach. However, even if our clergy don’t preach as they should and our hearts are not warmed by their words, we take solace in the greatest sermon ever preached – the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 5–7 is the only sermon we ever need to hear and take to heart. It was delivered by the One who is Priest, Prophet and King, and his words hold out the key to what it means to live the Christian life in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Lord, we ask for God’s grace to be poured out upon our clergy that their hearts would be renewed and their lips anointed to proclaim the gospel creatively, with imagination and the love of God burning in their hearts. St Francis Xavier, pray for us.

Isaiah 26:1-6 • Psalm 117(118):1, 8-9, 19-21, 25-27

Matthew 7:21, 24-27

**Friday 4 December**

**Matthew 9:27-31 • Advent Weekday**

The appellation ‘Son of David’ was a popular one in Jesus’ day. There was a real sense in Israel that the Messiah was about to enter human history. The title captured the idea that the Messiah would be a successor to King David, Israel’s greatest military leader, and would restore the stature of Israel as a powerful nation, establishing dominion over its enemies. While the crowds referred to Jesus as the ‘Son of David’ he himself did not use the title. He was a King but a Servant King and his kingdom was not of this world. His kingdom will not be revealed until he comes again in glory.

The blind men might not have fully understood who Jesus was, but although not gifted with the blessing of sight, they had the light and sight of faith. They were poor men but rich in faith. The question the Lord asked them, he asks of us all: ‘Do you believe that I am able to do this?’ (v. 28). Perhaps at the end of the day this is the ultimate question the Lord asks of us all. This is because faith is the gateway through which we all have to pass in order to enter the blessings of the kingdom of God.

The blind men were rewarded with their sight and we are rewarded also with deeper and deeper insight into the mystery of Christ. We can berate ourselves for our lack of faith but often what we lack is ambition and expectation. We are encouraged by Paul to be ambitious for spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:31). The Holy Spirit is constantly at work to awaken in us a living sense of God’s closeness and willingness to bless and pour out his grace into our lives.

But do we believe that God is able to do this? Do we believe that we can receive fresh insight into the gospel message? Do we believe that we can be physically and spiritually healed? Advent is a wonderful time to grow in faith. Advent is a special time when the blind – and there are none more blind than those who think they can see – can have their eyes opened and hearts filled with a new and living sense of God’s love and mercy.

Lord Jesus, you are the Messiah, the Lord’s anointed. Anoint my heart with your Spirit, my lips with your words and my mind with the light of your truth.

Isaiah 29:17-24 • Psalm 26(27):1, 4, 13-14

Matthew 9:27-31

**Saturday 5 December**

**Matthew 9:35–10:1, 6-8 • Advent Weekday**

Do you ever wonder what it must have been like to be one of Jesus' disciples and to receive the commission to go out, not only preaching but healing sicknesses and diseases and even casting out evil spirits in his name? We probably don't ever stop to think about it from the disciples' point of view. They had obviously seen Jesus ministering to the sick, perhaps even witnessed him raising the dead. But to go out on their own and do the same thing, that was a whole different matter. We can imagine their trepidation. They must have thought to themselves, 'What if nothing happens? We'll look pretty foolish!'

It is likely that they had seen enough of Jesus' activity to realize that something very new was happening. Indeed, as Jesus had said to them, 'the kingdom of heaven' was clearly 'at hand' (10:7). A new power and presence of God had come among them in the person of Jesus. The evidence of this was plain to see. And now Jesus was asking them to proclaim the kingdom of heaven, so that God's power and presence might continue to be seen and experienced by others.

How they overcame their natural fears and hesitations we do not know. But later in the Gospel we learn that they came back to Jesus rejoicing because of what they had seen: the sick had been healed, the dead had been raised to life and evil spirits had fled. It must have been a heady time for them. In fact, Jesus had to warn them not to get carried away with this, but to realize that in some way they themselves were being caught up in the very reality of the kingdom of heaven now being manifested.

Perhaps we are meant to notice as something very significant that Jesus' instructions to them began with asking them first of all to proclaim that the kingdom of God was close at hand. First there is the proclamation, and then – and perhaps we should say 'only then' – will the healings and deliverances follow. It is as though the proclamation of the kingdom is what makes the kingdom's power present! Proclaiming God's presence appears to provide a channel or a vehicle for God's saving power. If we proclaim God's kingdom or proclaim the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection in our daily situations, we, like the disciples, shall witness God's power!

Isaiah 30:19-21, 23-26 • Psalm 146(147):1-6

Matthew 9:35–10:1, 6-8

## **Sunday 6 December**

### **Luke 3:1-6 • Second Sunday of Advent (C)**

John the Baptist is the person we most readily associate with the season of Advent. All four of the Gospels, which are the accounts of the coming of Jesus to our world, begin with the life and ministry of John the Baptist. His message, of course, was precisely an announcement of the coming of the Messiah. As we noticed in the reading yesterday, there seems to be a link between the proclamation of God's presence and the actual manifestation of that presence. In a similar way, it is as John begins announcing, proclaiming his own role of preparing the way for the Lord, that the saving action of Jesus begins. The former seems to precipitate the latter.

In the season of Advent, the Church wants, as it were, to replicate the ministry of the Baptist. In a special way during these four weeks, the Church, especially through the liturgy, focuses on announcing, on proclaiming. But the goal and purpose of this is that it would promote or even provoke a new coming of Jesus in our world and in our lives. How might this happen?

In those days of John the Baptist, it is clear that his presence and his announcement raised expectations among the people. They began to pay more attention. They thought more about the messianic prophecies in the Scriptures. Clearly also, they reflected on their own lives and experienced an awakening to the absence of God's closeness and power and perhaps a greater awareness of the possible barriers and obstacles there might be in their lives preventing a fuller knowledge and experience of God.

All of these things create the possibility of a new coming of the Lord. They create a new sense of seeking, expecting and, most of all, desiring. Significantly also, the people, on hearing the Baptist, wanted to confess and turn away from anything they saw as sin – dulling their hearts and keeping God at a distance.

Can we let this season of Advent be a similar occasion for ourselves? Can we hear, in the liturgy today, the Church's announcement and allow it to awaken in us a new desire for the Lord to come into our lives? Will we allow it to make us conscious of anything in our lives that might provide an obstacle or block which keeps the Lord at a distance? Awaken in me, Lord Jesus, a new expectation and desire for your coming in my life.

Baruch 5:1-9 • Psalm 125(126)

Philippians 1:4-11 • Luke 3:1-6

**Monday 7 December**

**Luke 5:17-26 • St Ambrose (Memorial)**

You'd imagine that Jesus would want to heal the man's paralysis before talking about forgiving his sins. His paralysis was something very visible to everyone around and certainly for the man himself there wouldn't be a moment when he wasn't conscious of his predicament. As if to exaggerate this even more, his coming before Jesus couldn't have been more dramatic. His paralysis and all the other obstacles, including the crowd blocking the entrance to the house, meant that the only way his friends could bring him to Jesus was through the roof!

But Jesus chose to focus on a rather less obvious obstacle to the man's encounter with him. He knew that the most important obstacle to letting him into our lives – more important than the physical barriers of walls and crowds – is the barrier we create ourselves, namely our sin. In this incident, Jesus seems to be saying that, once the barrier of sin is breached, then he can come in and transform our lives.

The mistake we make is that we fail to recognize where the real problem lies. Like the paralytic, we may think there are much bigger difficulties or needs. Sometimes our sin may simply be the way we are reacting to the other difficulties – leading us into resentment or anger, even blaming God. Holding on to such things can create the barrier that impedes us from letting God more deeply into our lives. And so Jesus wants, first of all, to set us free from the sin, so that he can enter in and transform us ever more deeply – even into his own likeness.

Like the scribes and Pharisees in today's reading, it is possible to take offence at the thought that our sin is our problem. But Jesus is the Son of God, the true physician. He sees more clearly our condition and our need. We can trust him for a true diagnosis. Jesus is the very incarnation of God's loving mercy. He has come so that we might receive that mercy, and receive it to the full.

Today is the eve of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, and the eve of the inauguration of the Holy Year of Mercy by Pope Francis. The Pope invites us to welcome divine mercy more deeply within us. Who better than our Lady to teach and model the receiving of divine grace?

Isaiah 35:1-10 • Psalm 84(85):9-14

Luke 5:17-26

**Tuesday 8 December**

**Luke 1:26-38 • Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Solemnity)**

The account of the visit of the Angel Gabriel to Mary in the Gospel of Luke is probably one of the most well-known and well-loved texts in the whole of Scripture. It is not surprising: as a piece of scriptural text, it has the form of an encounter between God (or God's agent) and a human being. In the encounter, God reveals something of himself, his heart and his purpose for the human race. In making this revelation, God is also inviting the human person to play a part, to undertake a mission, to co-operate with God as he fulfils his plan.

On the one hand, God, through the angel, is revealing the very heart and centre of his saving plan for the human race. That centre and heart is the very incarnation of God's love and mercy towards the human race. God's love and mercy are contained, revealed and fully incarnated by his Son, Jesus Christ. On the other hand, we see in Mary the tenderest, most open and most willing co-operator. It is as though Mary is somehow able to reflect, in the loving perfection of her response, the very image of God himself. In Mary, God finds a human being who seems to mirror himself.

The deep joy of this, from our point of view, is that this mirroring of God by Mary is the result of God's loving grace in her life. Indeed, God's loving grace has been at work in Mary since the moment of her conception in the womb of her mother. It is a grace so wonderful and so powerful that it produces the woman we see in the text of the Gospel, the woman who so lovingly and yet so humbly gives her assent to co-operate with God by becoming the mother of God's Son.

We are perhaps not surprised to learn that the grace that had been at work in Mary from the beginning is the grace of Jesus, preserving her from all sin and rebellion against God. In the fullness of time, when she is invited to welcome God's Son, she consciously receives what in a mysterious way had always been present in her life – God's mercy embodied in Jesus!

Today the Year of Mercy is inaugurated by Pope Francis. May our blessed Lady open us to the fullness of God's mercy revealed in his Son, and may we become, like Mary, vehicles to bring God's mercy to others.

Genesis 3:9-15, 20 • Psalm 97(98):1-4

Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12 • Luke 1:26-38



**Wednesday 9 December**

**Matthew 11:28-30 • Advent Weekday**

As the Year of Mercy begins Our Lord speaks to us clearly about his deep desire both to draw us to himself and to give us his rest. He goes on to speak rather more enigmatically about shouldering his yoke and learning from him. What are we to make of all this? Because Scripture is a living word and not simply a word in and from the past, we understand that this Gospel is the word God wants to speak at this very moment of the beginning of the Year of Mercy. Receiving divine mercy is essentially about coming to Jesus with our burdens and receiving rest. But what exactly are our burdens and what is the rest Jesus speaks about?

Another Scripture which speaks of rest is Genesis 1 – God’s rest after the work of creation. Rest here has the much richer meaning of the completion and fulfilment of God’s plan and purpose for our lives – his purpose in creating us! We are meant to realize that coming to Jesus is the way to bring about God’s plan for us, to achieve our purpose and destiny. This suggests also that the burdens are in some way linked to the achieving of our purpose and destiny. They may indeed be the things that are preventing us reaching our purpose, obstacles that weigh us down and cause us to stumble. On the one hand, our burdens could be our sins; on the other hand, they could be our responsibilities threatening to overwhelm us. Perhaps, even both!

In the light of this, how are we to understand Jesus’ following words? At first sight it seems strange that Jesus, seeing us overburdened, should invite us to shoulder his yoke. But a yoke is not itself a burden, it is a piece of equipment – a double collar – by which two beasts of burden were linked together. Being linked physically together meant that neither beast carried a burden on their own. Through sharing the same burden, they experienced relief and rest!

At the heart of divine mercy is the reality that Jesus has come to join himself to us and to lift our burden upon himself, whether it be the burden of our sin and guilt, or the weight of our responsibilities, which he makes light by empowering us with his strength and his Spirit.

Jesus, I join myself to you and shoulder the yoke with you. My burden is already lightened.

Isaiah 40:25-31 • Psalm 102(103):1-4, 8, 10  
Matthew 11:28-30

**Thursday 10 December**

**Matthew 11:11-15 • Advent Weekday**

For the second time this week the Gospel speaks to us about John the Baptist. In fact, the Gospel recounts one of those rare occasions when Jesus himself speaks about John the Baptist. Jesus' words about him were occasioned by the fact that John had sent a message from prison seeking from Jesus a final reassurance that John's ministry had not been in vain. He had prepared the way for the coming of Jesus and, as he faced death, perhaps there was a moment of doubt. Jesus reassures him.

Jesus then begins to speak to the people glowingly of John: 'among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist.' And yet, as if in contradiction, Jesus goes on to say, 'he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he' (v. 11). Jesus is highlighting the transition from the Old Covenant to the New. Up to the time of John was the time of prophecy, of preparation for the fulfilment of God's plan of salvation. With the incarnation of Jesus, the time of fulfilment has arrived: the kingdom of heaven is among us. John, as it were, straddles the threshold of the kingdom of heaven. As such, he was the greatest of all who had gone before and were part of God's preparation. Nevertheless, he cannot be compared with those who have the privilege of being part of the fulfilled plan. There is a sense in which John carries in himself all of God's preparatory and prophetic activity – perhaps this is what Jesus means when he says that John is Elijah who is to come!

Now Jesus introduces another note into the scene: 'From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and men of violence take it by force' (v. 12). Is this a sort of prophetic allusion to Jesus' own coming suffering? But what is meant by 'From the days of John the Baptist until now'? If he is speaking of John's public ministry, this is a very short period of time. What violence has taken place – other than John's arrest? Perhaps we should think of the birth of the Baptist. It is Matthew's Gospel that records for us the massacre of the Holy Innocents following Jesus' birth. Were these the least in the kingdom of heaven?

Lord, we intercede for all who suffer today because of their faith in you.

Isaiah 41:13-20 • Psalm 144(145):1, 9-13

Matthew 11:11-15

**Friday 11 December**

**Matthew 11:16-19 • Advent Weekday**

‘There’s no pleasing you, is there?’ We’ve all heard it said. It’s as though the person addressed is in a mood and is determined to resist and say no to everything. When children are acting in this way, parents feel exasperated. They realize that it’s not usually much to do with the choices that are on offer. Rather it is more to do with the child’s state of heart and mind. They have set themselves in a mode of non-cooperation. The trick usually is to distract the child and help them get free of the mindset. Moments later peace and joy reign again.

In today’s reading we can sense a bit of exasperation on Jesus’ part. Neither his message nor that of John the Baptist was really reaching the people. Jesus almost sighs: ‘This generation is like children...!’ And not for the first time. The use of the words ‘this generation’ in the Old Testament often contained the notion that the people were being moodily resistant and rebellious towards God. Classically, this was particularly true at the time of the Israelites’ escape from Egypt and their years in the wilderness. We might say that this condition is a picture or a metaphor of the condition of the whole human race – the result of the fall of humanity – of original sin.

In his letter announcing the Holy Year of Mercy, Pope Francis has an interesting interpretation of the action of the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. When the younger son returns home with his prepared speech, the father ‘distracts him’. He interrupts the speech, embraces him and showers his love upon him.

Does he do something similar with the elder son too? For certainly he is the moody one. The father shows him that his resistance is making him incapable of rejoicing, and that his judgement is too severe. Indeed, the elder son’s reaction is especially preventing him from recognizing the daily joy of living within the father’s house, the recipient of the father’s generosity and mercy. How sad to hear him describing his life as a slavery and complaining that the father never gave him anything – and how patently untrue.

God is like the parent with moody children – distracting them from their stubborn heart and embracing them with his divine mercy! Jesus himself is the living sign of the Father’s embrace.

Isaiah 48:17-19 • Psalm 1:1-6

Matthew 11:16-19

## **Saturday 12 December**

### **Matthew 17:10-13 • Advent Weekday**

As faithful Jews, the disciples would have been familiar with Malachi's prophecy which declared that the prophet Elijah would return before the coming of the Messiah: 'Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes' (Mal. 4:5). Nevertheless, not being great listeners, the disciples had not understood the Lord when he encouraged them to see in John the Baptist the promised Elijah. They were blinded by their own preconceptions and preconceived ideas that Elijah would be a mighty and powerful reformer destroying evil and ridding the world of all of God's enemies prior to the coming of the Messiah. They had decided already how God would act in their midst and hadn't factored in God's mysterious ways of working out his plan in human history. This expectation was a far cry from the nomadic ascetic languishing in one of Herod's dungeons. But God's ways are not our ways – his plan not our plan, his vision not our vision.

This was the same with the Lord, of course: the Jewish people rejected and still reject the notion of the Suffering Messiah. Then and now, the Jewish people live in expectation of a powerful and mighty Messiah who crushes enemies and establishes God's kingdom by force. The notion of a Servant King, born in a stable, dying on a cross, is both a scandal and an anathema. What revelation makes known is that Jesus came in poverty not power, humility not hubris, and to serve not to be served.

We can underestimate the grace of revelation at work in our lives which moves us to bow before the great and majestic truth that God became man – the shocking and scandalous mystery of faith that Jesus is the Messiah, God made man, true God, true man, begotten and not made, consubstantial with the Father. In fact and in truth, to see Jesus is to see the Father. We can receive a new and fresh insight into the mystery of the incarnation this Advent, but the Spirit also opens our hearts to recognize the signs of the times and how God is working among us today. There will be no new revelation – we live in hope only of the second coming – but God is always working in new and exciting ways among his people.

Lord, teach me to be open, attentive and sensitive to the work of the Spirit in my midst.

Ecclesiasticus 48:1-4, 9-11 • Psalm 79(80):2-3, 15-19

Matthew 17:10-13

## **Sunday 13 December**

### **Luke 3:10-18 • Third Sunday of Advent (C)**

Nowadays any mention of sin is frowned on since it is seen to represent an outdated, outmoded and old-fashioned approach to faith and the human condition. Those who hold this view, and those who do hold on to it tightly, insist we refer to sin by another name – failings perhaps or weaknesses or even foibles – as if a name changes everything. The problem with this attitude or approach is that it's illusory and disingenuous. Sin will always be sin, and we sin because we are sinners. The natural extension of losing our sense of sin is we lose our sense of the need for repentance.

Clergy are keen, and rightly so, to put the accent on the love and mercy of God. But that is rather like a surgeon not wanting to talk to a patient about their diagnosis. We have a remarkable tendency to avoid calling a spade 'a spade', or simply calling sin 'sin'. John the Baptist, happily for us, showed no such sensitivity: he preached a message of repentance. He urged everyone to turn back to the Lord and offered specific advice to specific groups of people: tax collectors were advised not to extort more than the stipulated sum; soldiers were advised to refrain from extortion and be content with their pay. How would this advice translate today? Bankers might be advised not to take such huge bonuses; lawyers and accountants not to charge exorbitant fees; the clergy to be more joyful, to be grateful for their calling and smile more!

The truth, though, is that we all need to repent. Advent is a penitential season – a time for us all to return to the Lord. The sacrament of reconciliation is also called the sacrament of mercy or the sacrament of forgiveness, because it is where we receive the embrace of God's love and mercy. We cannot know the love and mercy of God without knowing the bitter tears of repentance and the sweet tears of contrition. St Ephraem the Syrian said: 'Even though there is only one baptism for the whitening of stains, yet there are two eyes which, when filled with tears, provide a baptismal font for the limbs. For the Creator knew well beforehand that sins multiply in us at all times, and though there is only a single baptism, he fixed in the single body two fonts that give absolution.'

Lord, your mercy endures forever. Have mercy on me, a sinner.

Zephaniah 3:14-18 • Isaiah 12:2-6

Philippians 4:4-7 • Luke 3:10-18

**Monday 14 December**

**Matthew 21:23-27 • St John of the Cross (Memorial)**

A parish priest dressed in his clerical robes was walking down the high street of his town when he was approached by a road worker. The road worker wasn't religious and wasn't familiar with clerical titles. He said to the priest, 'Hello, mate. Do you know where the post office is?' The priest was indignant at being referred to as 'mate' and replied crossly, 'I am not your mate.' Taken aback, the poor road worker said, 'Sorry, mate. I wasn't sure how to address you – anyway do you know where the post office is?'

Why was the priest so offended and annoyed? What did his reaction, which certainly did not reflect the dignity of his office, reveal about the man he was? The answer lies perhaps around the issue of authority. It was as if the priest was saying to the hapless road worker, 'Who gave you permission to speak to me like this? Do you not understand the authority and power of my position?'

Thankfully, Pope Francis is an enemy of this kind of clericalism and has been outspoken about those who place great stock on their titles or positions in the Church. The truth is we easily feel threatened, and this is what happened to our irascible priest and indeed to the chief priests and elders of the people whom we encounter in today's Gospel. In a nutshell, they felt threatened by Jesus' authority.

Although the religious leaders were threatened by Jesus' authority, the people were not. Matthew, for example, informs us that the crowds recognized that he taught with authority and not like the teachers of the law (Matt. 7:29). Jesus himself would go on to say that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him (Matt. 28:18). In normal circumstances, only a man who was a certified megalomaniac would make such a statement, but Jesus wasn't a megalomaniac. He said it because it was true.

So back to our indignant priest: his authority was given to him by the Lord – the authority to forgive sins, to celebrate the sacraments, to minister in persona Christi in his parish. He did not receive authority to be a poor witness, or to be indignant with our poor road worker. With great authority comes great responsibility.

Lord, we pray for all those in positions of authority that they may serve you with humility.

Numbers 24:2-7, 15-17 • Psalm 24(25):4-9

Matthew 21:23-27

**Tuesday 15 December**

**Matthew 21:28-32 • Advent Weekday**

The question with which the parable of the Two Sons begins is a great question, isn't it? 'What do you think?' It's an invitation, person to person, revealing a genuine interest and concern for the view and opinion of the person addressed. Jesus asks this question of each one of us today.

The question probes the conundrum of which of the two sons did what his father wanted. The answer is obvious – it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out. In fact, the first son feigns an intention to do his father's will but manifestly does not carry it through. The other son struggles to do his father's bidding, but relents and does it. Quite what the father wanted is not made clear. The message, however, is clear.

The gospel message has always spoken to those on the margins of society because the gospel is first and foremost about God's grace. We are all sinners. We tend to think that the worst sinners are those who fall prey to sexual sins and addictions in their rich array, but this is simply not true. We can be equally addicted to pride, arrogance, conceit, gossip and greed. We have a hierarchy of sins but this flies in the face of revelation, which is that we are all in need of the mercy of God. We might think that some people are lost or beyond redemption but God never thinks like this. God is as close to the desperate drug addict or prostitute as he is to a self-righteous prig who thanks God that he or indeed she is not like others. God always looks at the heart.

God seeks those who are genuine and sincere in their sorrow for sin and their repentance. Obedience to God is always a matter of the heart. God understands every private struggle, every interior battle to do his will – he is close to the broken-hearted, the overwhelmed, those in despair and those caught in the darkness of sin. Pope Francis is spearheading and heralding a new expression of faith – a faith rooted and grounded in the mercy of God. God's grace is a free unmerited gift; we can't earn it or win it. We are simply recipients of God's lavish love and mercy.

Lord, to do your will is my delight; to obey you my greatest dignity. Pour out your Spirit in such a way that I may obey your will with a grateful heart.

Zephaniah 3:1-2, 9-13 • Psalm 33(34):2-3, 6-7, 16-19, 23

Matthew 21:28-32

**Wednesday 16 December**

**Luke 7:19-23 • Advent Weekday**

Shortly after Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta died it emerged that for many years she had suffered with a sense that God was remote and distant from her. She wrote:

‘Darkness is such that I really do not see – neither with my mind nor with my reason – the place of God in my soul is blank – There is no God in me – when the pain of longing is so great – I just long and long for God... The torture and pain I can’t explain.’ This experience of the dark night of the soul is not unusual in men and women of extraordinary holiness. It seems that even John the Baptist, whom Jesus declared to be an outstanding believer (Luke 7:28), underwent a similar experience as he languished in his prison cell.

John the Baptist’s question, ‘Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?’ (v. 20), reveals not doubt but faith. As Blessed Cardinal Henry Newman said, ‘Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt.’ Perhaps he struggled to reconcile ‘all these things’ (Luke 7:18) that Jesus was doing with his Jewish idea that the Messiah would come in great power, and with ‘his winnowing fork... in his hand,... he will clear his threshing floor,... burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire’ (Matt. 3:12 NIV).

What is interesting is Jesus’ response to John’s question: he does not rebuke or remonstrate with him, or appear shocked or upset with what appears to be his fragile faith. Instead his answer leads John to a new idea of the identity of the Messiah (see Isa. 29:18; 61:1). Jesus appears to be tempering John’s emphasis on God’s justice by putting the accent on God’s mercy.

We should not be afraid of doubt and we should not be afraid of asking questions. Faith and reason always work in symphony with each other. When we experience this kind of spiritual battle, we must do as St John of the Cross taught: ‘We must then dig deeply in Christ. He is like a rich mine with many pockets containing treasures: however deep we dig, we will never find the end of their limit. Indeed, in every pocket new seams of fresh riches are discovered on all sides.’

Lord Jesus, in moments of doubt let me not turn away from you but towards you, laying my questions and my doubts before you just as John the Baptist did.

Isaiah 45:6-8, 18, 21-25 • Psalm 84(85):9-14

Luke 7:19-23



**Thursday 17 December**

**Matthew 1:1-17 • Advent Weekday (O Sapientia)**

‘O Wisdom, you come forth from the mouth of the Most High. You fill the universe and hold all things together in a strong yet gentle manner. O come to teach us the way of truth.’

Have you ever been tempted to skip over Matthew’s genealogy? This is quite understandable – it isn’t an easy read and you have to stick with it. Like many things in life, no pain, no gain. It was common practice in the ancient world to begin a literary work with a genealogy as it reassured the reader as to its pedigree – in Matthew’s case, his Jewish credentials to his Jewish readers.

However, Matthew’s genealogy is different and rather unique – you see, it was worth sticking with it and discovering its hidden treasures. Many of his readers would have been shocked by the inclusion of two prostitutes, Tamar (who had disguised herself as a shrine prostitute to win justice from her father-in-law – see Gen. 38) and Rahab (who hid the men sent to spy out the Promised Land – see Josh. 2). And, to add insult to injury, Ruth was seen as an alien and Gentile. Even David, although one of Israel’s greatest kings, had committed adultery with Bathsheba and sent her husband to certain death (see 2 Sam. 11). So much for Jewish pedigree!

What point was Matthew trying to make by including these dubious individuals in his genealogy? He wanted to highlight the scandal of grace and the depth of God’s mercy in sending Jesus. Jesus came to immerse himself in our fallen and sinful humanity. The gospel is first and foremost a gospel of mercy and grace. Through baptism we become children of God firmly rooted in his family, as John affirms: ‘But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to Father, I give you praise and thanks that my name is engraved on the palm of your hand and that the number of hairs on my head is known to you. Teach me to root my life ever more deeply in the life of Christ.

Genesis 49:2, 8-10 • Psalm 71(72):1-4, 7-8, 17

Matthew 1:1-17

**Friday 18 December**

**Matthew 1:18-24 • Advent Weekday (O Adonai)**

‘O Adonai and leader of Israel, you appeared to Moses in a burning bush and you gave him the law on Sinai. O come and save us with your mighty power.’

Can you imagine what Joseph must have thought on discovering that Mary was pregnant? He knew he wasn't the child's father and might have concluded that the young woman to whom he was betrothed had been seduced or, worse, raped. As a devout observer of the Torah he could not take Mary home as his wife (Deut. 22:23-27) and so he decided to divorce her discreetly. Not wanting to subject her to a trial he did not pursue justice through the due process outlined in the Torah (Num. 5:11-31). In effect, he chose on his own initiative to divorce her without involving the religious authorities. He must have loved her dearly and wanted to save her any further distress and humiliation. However, Matthew records how God stepped into the situation and spoke to Joseph in a dream, telling him to go ahead and take her as his wife, ‘for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit’ (v. 20).

God's plan from the beginning was that a child would be born who would ‘save’ his people from their sins – in Hebrew the name ‘Jesus’ is derived from the word for ‘save’. Matthew sees in these events the fulfilment of Isaiah 7:14: ‘Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.’ Immanuel means ‘God with us’.

In Mary the Father found the perfect dwelling place for the Son and the Spirit. The two names ‘Jesus’ and ‘Immanuel’ contain the very essence of the Christian message: God became man and lived among us in order to save us from our sins. This is the message of Christmas. When we accept this message and believe in our hearts and confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord, we are saved. This is the joy of the gospel and truly the joy of Christmas: Immanuel, God with us.

‘O come, o come, Emmanuel  
And ransom captive Israel

That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.’

Jeremiah 23:5-8 • Psalm 71(72):1-2, 12-13, 18-19

Matthew 1:18-24

**Saturday 19 December**

**Luke 1:5-25 • Advent weekday (O Radix Jesse)**

‘O stock of Jesse, you stand as a signal for the nations; kings fall silent before you whom the peoples acclaim. O come to deliver us, and do not delay.’

Luke, who wrote his Gospel for Gentiles, begins with a scene from the heart of Judaism. Zechariah was descended from the priestly tribe of Abijah, and he and his wife Elizabeth were renowned for their devotion to the law of Moses. But, like Abraham and Sarah before them, they were barren and well on in years! They would have known the stigma and humiliation of having no children, and in their need and pain cried out to the Lord.

Zechariah was privileged to be chosen by lot, ‘according to the custom of the priesthood’, to burn incense in the temple. Suddenly, as he was fulfilling his duties, an angel appeared. Zechariah was gripped with fear. The angel immediately told him not to be afraid, he told him that his prayer for a child had been heard and that he should name the child John. The angel prophesied that the child would be raised as a Nazirite (see Num. 6:1-21), and that he would be compared to the prophet Elijah: his mission would be to prepare the way for the Lord (vv. 15-17). Understandably, Zechariah found the message hard to believe: ‘How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years’ (v. 18). Poor Zechariah received grace and judgement simultaneously! Gabriel pronounced that he would remain dumb until the birth of the child on account of his lack of belief (v. 20).

St Augustine, reflecting on the significant role John the Baptist was to play, wrote:

‘John, then, appears as the boundary between the two Testaments, the Old and the New. That he is a sort of boundary the Lord himself bears witness, when he speaks of the law and the prophets up until John the Baptist. Thus he represents times past and is the herald of the era to come. As a representative of the past, he is born of aged parents; as herald of the new era, he is declared to be a prophet while still in his mother’s womb at the arrival of the blessed Mary. In that womb he had already been designated a prophet, even before he was born; it was revealed that he was to be Christ’s precursor, before they ever saw one another. These are divine happenings...’

Judges 13:2-7, 24-25 • Psalm 70(71): 3-6, 16-17

Luke 1:5-25

## **Sunday 20 December**

### **Luke 1:39-45 • Fourth Sunday of Advent (C) (O Clavis David)**

‘O Rising Sun, you are the splendour of eternal light and the sun of justice. O come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.’

Elizabeth had eyes of faith, given her by the Holy Spirit. As soon as she heard her cousin Mary’s greeting, the Holy Spirit filled her and caused her child to leap with joy. The Spirit revealed to Elizabeth that Mary was greatly blessed among all women for she was to give birth to the Lord, promised long ago by the prophets (vv. 42-44). Elizabeth rejoiced at the coming of the Lord.

Micah had eyes of faith, given him by the Holy Spirit. He prophesied that out of the clan of Judah would arise a ruler for Israel yielding authority and majesty. He would feed his flock with the power of the Lord, protect it and establish peace (Mic. 5:1-4). From a distance Micah rejoiced at the coming of the Lord.

The writer to the Hebrews had eyes of faith, given him by the Holy Spirit. He recognized that the promised Lord came from the Father. He understood that Jesus, in obedience to his Father, had offered his body in sacrifice for our salvation and sanctification (Heb. 10:5-10). He rejoiced at the coming of the Lord.

As we await the coming of the Lord in a few days’ time, we do so with the eyes of faith, given us by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has worked in each of our lives, revealing who Jesus is and the true significance of his coming. We know that Jesus is God’s eternal Son and that he came to save us and make us holy. We know that with great power he protects us, feeds us and gives us peace and security. Therefore, like Elizabeth we greet him with joy. Like Micah we rejoice that he comes to bring us into his kingdom of peace and joy. Like the writer to the Hebrews we rejoice that Jesus by his incarnation and sacrificial death redeems us and makes us holy. What joy is ours! He is coming to us this Christmas! In these last few days of Advent take some time to delight and rejoice in the Lord.

Lord Jesus, I welcome your coming with all my heart. You alone are my joy and my salvation. Come, Lord Jesus, do not delay!

Micah 5:1-4 • Psalm 79(80):2-3, 15-19  
Hebrews 10:5-10 • Luke 1:39-45

**Monday 21 December**

**Luke 1:39-45 • Advent Weekday (O Oriens)**

‘O Rising Sun, you are the splendour of eternal light and the sun of justice. O come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.’

As the drama of Luke’s narrative develops, we begin to touch the dynamic and living faith of all those involved. Mary and Elizabeth meet in order to share their joy. Mary carries the Saviour and Elizabeth carries the messenger. John the Baptist, attentive and responsive even in the womb, hears Mary’s greeting and cannot contain his joy. St Ambrose observes:

‘Notice the choice of words and their precise meaning. Elizabeth was the first to hear the voice; but John was the first to experience grace. She heard according to the order of nature; he leaped because of the mystery. She recognized the arrival of Mary; he the arrival of the Lord... The women speak of grace; the babies make it effective from within to the advantage of their mothers who, by a double miracle, prophesy under the inspiration of their babies.

‘The infant leaped, the mother was filled with the Spirit. The mother was not filled before the son, but after the son was filled with the Holy Spirit, he filled his mother too. John leaped and the spirit of Mary rejoiced. As John leaped, Elizabeth is filled, but we know that Mary was not filled but her spirit rejoiced. For he who cannot be comprehended was working in his mother’s womb in ways beyond comprehension. Elizabeth was filled with the Spirit after she had conceived, and Mary before. “Blessed are you” she said, “who believed”.’

We too should pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The famous Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon often spoke of the need for each one of us to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit. On one occasion, a journalist became so irritated by this message that he asked, ‘Why, sir, do you speak so much about being filled with the Spirit?’ Spurgeon replied: ‘Because I leak!’ We can also be expectant and confident that the Holy Spirit wants to renew and refresh us each day. The joy Mary, Elizabeth and John experienced will be ours as we ponder, in these days before we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the love he showed in coming among us.

Lord Jesus, I too want to leap with joy and rejoice at the good news of your incarnation.

Song of Songs 2:8-14 or Zephaniah 3:14-18

Psalm 32(33):2-3, 11-12, 20-21 • Luke 1:39-45

**Tuesday 22 December**

**Luke 1:46-56 • Advent Weekday (O Rex Gentium)**

‘O King whom all the people desire, you are the cornerstone which makes all one. O come and save man whom you made from clay.’

The Magnificat is Mary’s prayer. Luke affords us a wonderful glimpse into the personality, indeed the very heart, of Mary – her lively awareness of God as both her Lord and Saviour; her humility and her own sense of poverty and nothingness; her bold awareness and proclamation of the wonderful things God had done for her; and her acceptance of her role in God’s plan of salvation. As we reflect and ponder on Mary’s qualities, we realize that God not only chose her to be the mother of his Son, but has also given her to us as our mother and a model of the Christian life.

Mary, as a daughter of Israel, had a keen sense of the importance of God’s people in his divine plan. The Magnificat is not Mary’s prayer alone but is also the prayer of Israel. We can discover the spirit of the Magnificat in numerous prayers in the Old Testament (e.g. 1 Sam. 2:1; Pss. 34:1-3; 98:1-3). Mary’s prayer reflects how the wisdom of the Old Testament finds its fullest and most perfect expression in the events and circumstances of the New.

God’s unfolding purposes had been gathering momentum since the beginning of time. God had intended from the dawn of time that the incarnation of his Son would bring healing and eternal life to the fallen and wounded human race. He chose Israel to be the privileged people among whom this momentous meeting between God and humankind would take place.

Israel was formed over many centuries. God and his people were bound by the ties of covenant love. Despite their sin and rebellion, Israel has remained God’s chosen, special and beloved people. In Mary God found a woman who was a living embodiment of all that Israel had aspired to be – humble, receptive and obedient to the Lord of heaven and earth. Mary fulfils perfectly Israel’s role as the place of welcome for the coming of God’s Son, and her prayer today expresses beautifully her sense of being right at the heart of God’s plan for her own life and his people.

Father God, may my soul magnify the Lord and my spirit rejoice in God my Saviour as I taste in ever-increasing measure the beauty of your presence.

1 Samuel 1:24-28 • 1 Samuel 2:1, 4-8

Luke 1:46-56

**Wednesday 23 December**

**Luke 1:57-66 • Advent Weekday (O Emmanuel)**

‘O Emmanuel, you are our King and Judge, the One whom the peoples await and their Saviour. O come and save us, Lord, our God.’

John the Baptist stands at the end of a long line of prophets who served the God of Israel. John’s birth represents the fulfilment of a promise. His ministry was foretold by his brother prophets centuries earlier (Mal. 3:1; 4:5; Isa. 40:3-5). The amazing events surrounding his birth made it clear that this was no ordinary child. Those present at his circumcision asked a good question, ‘What then will this child be?’ (v. 66). He was in fact to be the forerunner of the Lord, preparing the way by preaching his message of repentance.

John, now as then, has rather a fierce reputation. His dress (clothing made of camel’s hair and a leather belt) and diet (locusts and wild honey) combined with his message made him formidable, to say the least. Despite his sombre message, the people came to him in their hordes. People from the whole Judaeen countryside and the city of Jerusalem flocked to him, confessing, repenting and being baptized. His approach was firm but compassionate, conscious of the weaknesses and inclinations of the human heart (Luke 3:10-14). The message of the Baptist speaks to us today – if we would but let it.

We are less than comfortable with the idea of sin, repentance and confession. The truth is, and sometimes we don’t like the truth, that acknowledging our sin, taking responsibility for our own thoughts, words and actions, and admitting humbly that we have done wrong is the gateway to an inner freedom and liberation from sin, guilt and condemnation. It takes courage to take a long, hard look at ourselves, our drives, motivation and actions, but to face this is a first step on the way to forgiveness and wholeness. We have a wonderful opportunity to do so in the sacrament of reconciliation. It is a work of the Holy Spirit within us that leads us to the celebration of this sacrament. We can respond to his leading by coming to confession and rejoicing in the amazing gift of God’s forgiveness that is offered to us.

Lord, help me to discover the joy of repentance. Your grace alone can give the strength and courage I need to face my sin, acknowledge it and be free of it. Restore to me, through the grace of your sacrament, the joy of my salvation.

Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24 • Psalm 24(25):4-10, 14

Luke 1:57-66

**Thursday 24 December**

**Luke 1:67-79 • Advent Weekday**

Silence is golden – or so they say. Well, in the case of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, this certainly proved to be the case. Zechariah, like Mary, gave the Church one of the liturgy's most familiar canticles, the Benedictus (vv. 68-79; see also Mary's Magnificat, Luke 1:46-55). We could say that while Mary's canticle was born of faith, Zechariah's was born of doubt.

When informed that she would be the Mother of God, Mary believed (see Luke 1:38). Zechariah, on the other hand, was rather more sceptical. When he was told that his barren wife Elizabeth would conceive, he was less than enthusiastic, asking: 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years' (Luke 1:18 NIV). Unimpressed, the Archangel Gabriel responded: 'I have been sent to... tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time' (Luke 1:19-20 NIV).

Mary was born without stain of original sin; Zechariah was born into original sin and his faith, like that of us all, was refined in the furnace of testing and doubt. His canticle, the fruit of his silence, has spoken and will continue to speak to every generation of believers. Like the Magnificat, the Benedictus includes us: we are the recipients of the 'forgiveness of [our] sins because of the tender mercy of our God' (vv. 77-78 NIV).

Tonight, on this holy eve, when we await the coming of Jesus, we pray the Benedictus, asking that our faith, too, would be refined and tested and become stronger and deeper. Despite his human failing and weakness, God worked powerfully in Zechariah's life. If we seek the Lord in the quietness of prayer and reflection, the Spirit will bring forth in our hearts too a canticle of praise and adoration. Zechariah received a great blessing from the Lord – his son would be the forerunner of the Lord. Through baptism we have received the greatest blessing from the Lord – the grace to produce the fruits of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

'Truth is sprung from the earth – flesh born of Mary. And justice looked down from heaven, for we cannot receive anything, unless it is given to us from heaven. Unto us a child is born.' (St Augustine, adapted)

2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-12, 14, 16 • Psalm 88(89):2-5, 27, 29

Luke 1:67-79



**Friday 25 December**

**John 1:1-18 • The Nativity of the Lord (Solemnity)**

The Prologue from John's Gospel is read at every Christmas Day Mass. We are united as believers in the act of hearing from the written Word about God's Word, the Word made flesh who dwelt among us. We stand in awe before this fundamental revelation of Christian faith: God became man.

This is the miracle of Christian faith; it is the distinctive doctrine of our faith. But doctrine without the fire and life of the Holy Spirit remains cold and on ice. The breath of the Spirit warms our hearts, and by a grace of revelation we are excited, animated and filled with joy at the knowledge that God entered human history. We grasp something of the revelation that Jesus' divinity did not overwhelm his humanity, nor did his humanity undermine his divinity. What revelation allows us to touch in a real and raw and even visceral way is that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, 'begotten not made', and is of one substance with the Father (homoousios).

It is as if today grace takes us by the hand and leads us to bow down in worship before the Man-God wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. The great saints of the Church prayed constantly to enter into the mystery in which we rejoice today. Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman wrote that the Son of God 'had it in mind to come on earth among innocent creatures,...to fill them with...grace, to receive their worship, to enjoy their company, and to prepare them for heaven...'

God did not abandon us despite the Fall; he could not leave us in the clutches of evil and eternal darkness. We stand on the shoulders of the saints of the Church as we ponder that 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (v. 1). In the manger in Bethlehem, Jesus revealed himself in poverty and showed his love by embracing our humanity; he demonstrated by his actions that he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but made himself a servant, the Servant King.

'He once had meant to come on earth in heavenly glory, but we sinned: and then he could not safely visit us, except with shrouded radiance, and a besmirched majesty, for he was God. So he came himself in weakness, not in power.' (Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman)

Isaiah 52:7-10 • Psalm 97(98):1-6

Hebrews 1:1-6 • John 1:1-18

## **Saturday 26 December**

**Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-59 • St Stephen (Feast)**

So soon after celebrating a birth we rejoice in a death! In his life and his death St Stephen was a shining witness to the grace and power of God. He was full of the Holy Spirit and displayed many gifts of the Spirit – signs, wonders, wisdom, self-sacrifice and martyrdom. Appointed as a deacon, his first task was helping with the practical distribution of food to the widows among the Grecian Jews. His humble service of God's people was soon overshadowed by the wisdom and clarity he displayed in engaging with those from Cyrene and Alexandria who were whipping up dissension and accusing him of blasphemy.

One so full of the Holy Spirit in life was bound to imitate his Master in death. With the crowd incensed, the authorities compliant and the will to murder evident, Stephen was stoned to death. He offered up his spirit to his Lord and God. His vibrant and living faith made him contemptuous of death, and his love for God gave him a wisdom and courage none could resist.

Stephen is our brother in faith and his witness has much to teach us today. The very thought of suffering persecution or pain for the kingdom can fill us with fear and dread. It is hard to suffer and endure persecution – we don't like it, retreat from it and avoid it at all costs! This is understandable and very human. Not many of us, thank God, will have to suffer a literal martyrdom, but in the course of our day we are called to die to self, to be self-sacrificing and to lay down our lives for others. Our noble vocation is to pray for those who persecute us, to bless when we are cursed, and to reach out with love and forgiveness to all those who hate or oppose us. To live in this way can appear simply beyond us, but through and in the power of the Holy Spirit we can radiate the overwhelming power of love.

‘Christ made love the stairway that would enable all Christians to climb to heaven. Hold fast to it, therefore, in all sincerity, give one another practical proof of it, and by your progress in it, make your ascent together.’ (St Fulgentius of Ruspe)

Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-59 • Psalm 30(31):3-8, 16-17

Matthew 10:17-22

## **Sunday 27 December**

### **Luke 2:41-52 • Holy Family (C)**

Today we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family and reflect on the blessing of living in a family. We all begin our lives in the cradle of the family, within the close and loving embrace of those who know us and love us the most. And God decreed that within the divine plan the family would play a crucial role in Jesus' growth and development.

The synod on the family acknowledges that families today come in many shapes and forms. Divorce, separation and marriage breakdown are more commonplace than they were thirty years ago. Grandparents often play a key role in keeping the family together and they provide child support as both parents work. The times they definitely are a-changin'. No family is perfect – we all have our ups and our downs, we all have moments of joy and times of crisis. Living in close proximity with others calls for the grace of forgiveness and mercy, as well as service and sacrifice.

Today's Gospel provides a fascinating insight into the life of the Holy Family. A missing child in any age is a terrifying and awful experience for the parent. It is their worst nightmare, and it is hard, if not impossible, to avoid succumbing to thinking the worst. Bear in mind that Jesus had been missing for three days! Mary and Joseph must have been beside themselves with worry and anxiety. The Lord's response can seem harsh, 'Why were you searching for me?...Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?' (v. 49 NIV). Mary must have pondered this incident in her heart and shared it with the apostles, for how else could they have known about this remarkable event in the life of the Holy Family?

We can glean from this morsel of insight into Jesus' early years that there is no crisis, no tragedy, no situation with which the Holy Family cannot identify. We are never alone no matter what trial or suffering we face and, truth be told, many of life's dramas and challenges occur within the family home. In this Year of Mercy, we turn to the Holy Family, asking for the intercession of Mary, our Mother, Joseph, the image of the Father, and Jesus, the Son of God, God made man.

Holy Family, pray for me. Holy Family, pray for my family. Holy Family, bless all families with your peace, mercy and love.

1 Sam 1:20-28 or Ecc 3:2-6, 12-14 • Ps 83(84):2-6, 9-10 or  
Ps 127(128):1-5 • 1 Jn 3:1-2, 21-24 or Col 3:12-21 • Lk 2:41-52

**Monday 28 December**

**Matthew 2:13-18 • Holy Innocents (Feast)**

Today we remember the brutal murder of the innocent baby boys (under the age of two) in Bethlehem during King Herod's reign. Matthew drew upon the writings of the prophet Jeremiah to express the profound grief the parents of these innocent children must have experienced: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more' (Jer. 31:5 NIV). Truly the despair and mourning of a parent who has lost a child speaks to every human heart.

We remember these children today, but we also remember all children throughout history who have experienced violence, abuse and terrible suffering. We remember especially victims of child abuse and child neglect, knowing that their cry is heard by our heavenly Father. These are today's holy innocents, as are the children in the womb whose lives are terminated before they have even begun. We pray for women, too, who have had abortions and ask especially in this Year of Mercy for forgiveness and healing.

Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta demonstrated the practical mercy of the Church when she declared: 'We are fighting abortion by adoption. We have sent word to the clinics, to the hospitals, to the police stations. Please do not destroy the child. We will take the child.' It is said that human life is sacred from the cradle to the grave. But this is a mistaken view for human life is sacred from the moment of conception to the moment of death.

Every human person is created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26), and therefore every child possesses a special dignity and what is more they rely not only on their parents but on wider society. This is why the child abuse scandal in the Catholic Church has been such a painful episode, for if a child is not safe in church, where can they be safe? Thank God every diocese and parish now has safeguarding procedures in place, and we pray that this and a new vigilance from us all will serve to protect children. Perhaps no society or organization is judged more accurately than by their attitude to children: their safety, their protection, their right to grow up in an environment which upholds their dignity and ensures their growth and development.

Heavenly Father, protect our children. Lord Jesus, hold them in your embrace. Holy Spirit, lead them to a knowledge of the love of God.

1 John 1:5-2:2 • Psalm 123(124):2-8

Matthew 2:13-18

**Tuesday 29 December**

**Luke 2:22-35 • St Thomas Becket (Patron Saint of English Clergy)**

**(Feast in England)**

As good and faithful Jews Joseph and Mary brought their newborn son to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord in accordance with the teaching of the Torah. Their journey to Jerusalem would have involved obedience, dedication and sacrifice. Faith always invites us to die to self and live for God. Many years later Jesus would travel again to Jerusalem to dedicate himself to God by dying on the cross to reconcile us to God the Father.

As the Year of Mercy gets underway we are invited to make a pilgrimage to pass through the Holy Door of Mercy. The holy door may be in the cathedral, the mother church of the diocese, or a designated shrine, or some may venture to Rome itself and pass through the holy door at St Peter's or at the Archbasilica of St John Lateran. How fitting that in discussing mercy and passing through holy doors today we celebrate the feast-day of one of England's great saints and martyrs, St Thomas Becket, who died in Canterbury Cathedral at the hands of cruel assassins, his fate having been sealed when King Henry II it is said exclaimed, 'Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?' On this day in 1170, a death squad set out to oblige the king. As their blows rained down on the archbishop as he stood before the High Altar, he cried out, 'For the name of Jesus and the protection of the Church I am ready to embrace death.'

St Thomas Becket is the patron saint of the English clergy and on this his feast-day we pray for all clergy, but especially the English clergy. Today England is truly a secular country, and in many dioceses churches are closing and congregations are dwindling. Furthermore, the demographics reveal that the clergy are not getting any younger. Our priests often live on their own in large presbyteries and for many, despite the support of their parish communities, it can be a lonely and isolated life. This is why we must offer our clergy our friendship, our prayers and our support, for through their ministry we receive the grace of the sacraments and through the grace of their ordination they minister to us in persona Christi.

Lord, we pray for all our clergy that they may serve you with love, enthusiasm and joy. For the name of Jesus and the protection of the Church grant them the courage to lay down their lives for your flock.

In England only: Col 1:24-29 • Ps 22(23) • Lk 22:24-30 or Mt 10:28-33

Proper of Seasons: 1 Jn 2:3-11 • Ps95(96):1-6 • Lk 2:22-35

## **Wednesday 30 December**

### **1 John 2:12-17 • Christmas Weekday**

In his first letter John takes his readers back to the beginning of their faith, and reminds them of what they have always believed. His desire as a pastor is to build up the congregations from whom he is now absent. Motivated by his pastoral concern and deep love, he urges them to remain strong in faith and to resist false doctrines. He talks about the message that they have had ‘from the beginning’ (1 John 1:1; 2:7). His readers are to remember who they are and what they have been given.

John wants his people to remember that, as children of God, they are strong, they have God’s word abiding in them and they have overcome the evil one. But these are not simply abstract truths or assertions we might make in church. God is not alien and distant, but knowable – knowable to each one of us in our everyday lives. For John the Evangelist the truths of the gospel had the power to impact and change lives.

John wants his readers to experience fellowship with God – this is the daily privilege we are able to enjoy as believers. Jesus said, ‘I no longer call you servants... I have called you friends’ (John 15:15 NIV). But as in every friendship, this requires effort on our part. The following patterns of life or daily disciplines can help us grow in our friendship with God and nurture and cultivate the life of Christ in us.

- Spend at least ten minutes a day in personal prayer – praising and worshipping God and thanking him for the many blessings and graces in your life.
- Examine your conscience daily, repenting of all that prevents you from enjoying God’s life. Ask the Holy Spirit to change your heart and mind.
- Spend ten minutes or more each day reading the Scriptures and ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten your mind about what you are reading.
- Nourish your spiritual life by reading from the saints, the Church fathers, the teaching of the Popes and Vatican II, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church.
- Be prepared to step out of your comfort zone in love and service of others. Give generously of your time, prayer and resources – for God loves a cheerful giver.

Heavenly Father, thank you for every blessing of faith: the forgiveness of my sins, the knowledge of the Father, the grace to overcome sin, and for making me strong in your word and name.

1 John 2:12-17 • Psalm 95(96):7-10

Luke 2:36-40

**Thursday 31 December**

**1 John 2:18-21 • Christmas Weekday**

‘You have been anointed by the Holy One...’ (v. 20)

We have been anointed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and strengthened in the Spirit through the grace of confirmation. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to remind us of everything he said and guide us into all truth (John 16:13-14). The Holy Spirit is the One who enables us to know what it means to live a holy life and gives us the power and grace to live that holy life.

We can sometimes lose a real and living sense of being anointed with the Spirit of God. We can sometimes think that bishops, priests and religious are the ones who have received an anointing whereas lay people haven't. This way of thinking prevents us cultivating a living sense of God's Spirit not only hovering over our lives but also living in us. We are temples of the Holy Spirit and God's Spirit dwells in us.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives also means that we can discern the spirit of the antichrist at work to lead us astray from the truth of the gospel. The spirit of the antichrist is at work in our world – through philosophies, teachings or people who oppose Christ and his message. The Spirit makes us alert to the work of deception both in the world around us and also in our own lives.

We need the Holy Spirit more than ever because we are living in an increasingly secular and relativistic world in which God is being pushed to the margins, and what is true and false, light and dark, good and evil becomes clouded and confused. As 2015 draws to a close we look back on the year that has gone and forward to the year that is to come. Protected by the armour of Christ, armed with the sword of truth and confessing the blood, name and cross of Christ we face the future with hope but also with wisdom.

Lord Jesus, I recommit my life to you and thank you for pouring out your Holy Spirit upon me. Help me to hold fast to the truth and to grow in my understanding of your love, mercy and compassion. Show me any areas of my life in which I listen to the spirit of the antichrist so that I can repent and turn away from sin and darkness. In the name of Christ, Amen.

1 John 2:18-21 • Psalm 95(96):1-2, 11-13

John 1:1-18