

Daily Reflections

Thursday 1 January

Luke 2:16-21 • Mary, The Holy Mother of God (Solemnity)

The Advent and Christmastide seasons are rich and full with many important feast-days, including the feast of the first martyr St Stephen (26 December), the feast of the great Evangelist St John (27 December), the feast of the Holy Family (28 December) and the feast of St Thomas Becket (29 December). However, none of these wonderful celebrations compares with the feast-day we celebrate today as the Octave of Christmas ends: the great and holy solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God.

On this day we are reminded of the role that the Blessed Virgin played in the plan of our salvation. Christ's birth was made possible by Mary's fiat, her 'yes' to God's plan of salvation: 'let it be to me according to your word' (Luke 1:38). One of the earliest titles given by Christians to the Blessed Virgin was Theotokos, 'God-bearer': we celebrate her as the Mother of God because, in bearing Christ, she bore the fullness of the Godhead within her.

As we begin another year, we draw inspiration from the selfless love of the Theotokos, who never hesitated to do the will of God. And we trust in her prayers to God for us, that we might, as the years pass, become more like her. This is because God gave Mary to us as a model of discipleship and especially as a model of prayer. We are called to be like Mary in the way she treasured and pondered the great truths of our faith in her prayer – for where else can you treasure and ponder but in the inner sanctuary of quiet reflection and meditation?

For the events of our salvation unfolded before Mary's own eyes, and how she must have wondered that she was chosen to be an integral part of that plan! She must have wrestled, struggled, begged God for light and wisdom, interceded, not fully understood and thrown herself upon the mercy and providence of God. We must do the same because the truths of our faith are like an ocean, a deep unending mystery of God's revelation, which we are invited daily to plunge into and plumb their depths.

Lord God, heavenly Father, standing at the beginning of the New Year I commit myself to knowing the mystery of Christ. And just as Mary said 'yes' to your will, I too say 'yes' to your plan for my life, that I may give birth to Christ in the world.

Numbers 6:22-27 • Psalm 66(67):2-8

Galatians 4:4-7 • Luke 2:16-21

Friday 2 January

(Memorial) SS Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen • John 1:19-28

At the very heart of our faith, its pivot and fulcrum if you like, is the simple but profound truth that Jesus was God made man. Even though he was the Apostle of Love, John pulled no punches: for him those who accept this revelation, confess it with their lips and believe it in their hearts have received the light; those who reject it, scoff at it and pour scorn on it are antichrists (v. 22).

It was John who gave us the expression ‘the Word became flesh’ (John 1:14), a revelation which the Church has termed the ‘incarnation’. In order to accomplish our salvation, the Son of God assumed a human nature. The early believers were so wrapped up, absorbed even, in the beauty and glory of God made man that they composed a hymn or ode to the incarnation, which Paul quotes in Philippians: ‘Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross’ (2:5-8).

The wonderful thing about reading John’s words is that we are reading the testimony of an eyewitness – he saw, touched and heard the Lord. Scholars suggest that John may have lived well into his nineties and he clearly devoted himself to reflecting on the truth of God made man. And this is precisely what we too are called to do – reflect, pray, ponder, meditate and ask the Spirit to bring us into deeper and deeper understanding of this life-changing, divine mystery. This does require some effort, some application on our part; this does require a decision to spend time in prayer and be responsive to the working of the Spirit in our lives.

In order to live the incarnation we have to sing the incarnation. By that we mean that in our worship we have to focus on this wonderful revelation and glory in it because, when we do, we have no other option than to kneel before the Eternal Word made flesh.

Lord, I confess that Jesus of Nazareth is true God, true man, light from light, of one being with the Father, everlasting Word, fully human, fully divine, and I bow down in worship.

1 John 2:22-28 • Psalm 97(98):1-4

John 1:19-28

Saturday 3 January

John 1:29-34 • Holy Name of Jesus (Optional Memorial)

As many of you will know, through the seasons of Advent, Lent and Easter we publish Walk with Me, a journey of prayer. Devotional magazines don't usually invite controversy or provoke a flurry of letters from irate readers, but from time to time our publications have been known to rattle a few cages.

For example, some years ago the Lent edition of Walk with Me carried on its front page the image of a trussed-up lamb lying helplessly on an altar, ready for sacrificial slaughter. Now Walk with Me is purchased by many schools, both primary and secondary. Secondary schools don't seem to bat an eyelid at the sight of lambs ready for slaughter, but primary schools are a different kettle of fish, and we received a number of letters from primary school head teachers who were horrified by the image and protested strongly: How dare we publish such a brutal image of a poor defenceless animal on the front of a Catholic magazine? Did we not realize that children could be traumatized by such a hideous image?

We patiently gave our critics a hearing – after all we appreciate all feedback and are grateful when people make the effort to contact us. But then we explained that the image had been used to depict the Agnus Dei, the true Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Surprising as it seems, these recipients of Walk with Me had missed the symbolism and therefore misunderstand the image. For throughout the history of Israel lambs without blemish were slaughtered and offered as a sacrifice to God for sin, but in the fullness of time God sent his Only Son, the Lamb of God, truly innocent, without sin or blemish, to be the once and forever sacrifice for the sin of the whole world.

Jesus is the fulfilment of every sacrifice (Isa. 53:7; Jer. 11:19; Gen. 22:8). Jesus took upon himself the sin, evil and darkness of the human race – past, present and future. As terrible as his physical sufferings were, it was the torment of bearing sin that caused him the most agony. For this was the cup his Father wanted him to drink right down to the last dregs: only a perfect offering could bring reconciliation to the Father. This is a mystery of faith which only God's light can help us to penetrate.

Jesus, you are the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

1 John 2:29–3:6 • Psalm 97(98):1, 3-6

John 1:29-34

Sunday 4 January

(Solemnity) The Epiphany of the Lord • Matthew 2:1-12

Today we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany. The word ‘epiphany’ derives from the Greek and literally means ‘appearance’ or ‘revelation’. This feast celebrates, then, the revelation or appearance of Jesus to the Gentiles – for he was sent first to Israel but he is the Saviour of the whole world. The Magi represent the Gentiles (non Jews). The star represents the Light of Christ who has conquered sin and death. His light shines on every human being – Jew or Gentile. Today we celebrate the simple but profound truth that ‘The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined’ (Isa. 9:2).

From the very beginning God worked through his chosen people – Israel – but in these last times, the end days, he holds out salvation to every single human being. No one is excluded from the invitation to be a son or daughter of God through the cross and resurrection of Jesus. No one is beyond redemption; no one beyond salvation. Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus: not race, not colour, not sexual orientation, not gender, not wealth, not poverty, not religiosity, not worldliness. Today’s feast reveals the Father’s goodness, kindness and generosity towards all human beings.

The Magi teach us how to respond to this amazing goodness, kindness and generosity. From age to age God has gathered a people unto himself so that from the East to the West a perfect offering may be made to the glory of his name. God the Father seeks worshippers, and the Spirit is always at work in us to raise our hearts, minds and spirits to worship the Living God (see John 4:23). Jesus came as the Redeemer King, the Saviour, who reached down into the mire and dirt of our sin and darkness and raised us up with him. We were created to worship; we were born to adore God, to sing his praises and lift our voices in glory of our good Creator. The Magi reveal to us on this feast-day that we should bow down low in worship and adoration of our King.

On this day, Lord God, by a guiding star you revealed your only-begotten Son to all peoples of the world. Lead us from the faith by which we know you now to the vision of your glory, face to face. (Evening Prayer for the Solemnity of the Epiphany).

Isaiah 60:1-6 • Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-13

Ephesians 3:2-6 • Matthew 2:1-12

Monday 5 January

Matthew 4:12-17, 23-25 • Christmas Weekday

The legal philosopher John Sedon coined the memorable saying, ‘Ignorance of the law excuseth no man.’ The same could perhaps be said of the Scriptures, ‘Ignorance of the Scriptures excuseth no man.’

How strange that the scribes, Pharisees and teachers of the law – who boasted of their knowledge of Scripture – should be adamant that no prophet would ever come out of Galilee (see John 7:52). Surely they should have known that, as Matthew informs us in today’s Gospel, it was precisely Galilee which would be blessed with the great light of Christ – and Capernaum, where Jesus had now taken up residence, is in Galilee (v. 15).

Matthew sees in Jesus the fulfilment of the prophecy uttered by the prophet Isaiah (quoted in vv. 15-16). Imagine that 800 years before Christ, this son of Israel had pointed to the coming of Jesus as a great light shining on those who live in the shadow of death. Matthew links this Old Testament proclamation with the central message of Jesus’ teaching: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (v. 17). We can safely conclude, therefore, that there is a very close connection between God’s divine light and the gift of repentance.

We don’t tend to think of repentance as a gift, but rather the opposite – our hearts sink as we are reminded of our sin and guilt and we are filled with a sense of doom and gloom. Many people today would, in fact, opt to have the word ‘sin’ removed from the lexicon of faith if they could, protesting that it has too negative a connotation in people’s minds. They prefer to think in terms of falling short of the glory of God or falling short of the mark. This desire to be sensitive and responsive in our choice of language is laudable. However, there are some verities, some everlasting truths, which, try as we might to sweeten the message, we are unable to (see CCC 386). Sin and repentance are two such verities. Rather than change the terminology we should strive to have a deeper understanding of what we mean by the words. If we look at repentance, for example, it means turning away from sin and being given a second chance – an opportunity to begin afresh, to be healed, restored and forgiven. What greater gift could there be than that?

Lord, teach me to live the joy-filled life rooted in the call to repent and believe the gospel.

1 John 3:22–4:6 • Psalm 2:7-11

Matthew 4:12-17, 23-25

Tuesday 6 January

Christmas Weekday • Mark 6:34-44

Now steel yourselves: this reflection isn't going to be a comfortable ride. Here goes. Good luck! In today's Gospel, in the original Greek Mark used the word *splagchnizomai*, which is translated by our English word 'compassion'. It literally meant to be moved deep in one's bowels and, since in ancient Israel the bowels were thought to be the seat of love and pity, it came to mean to 'be moved with compassion'. We no longer understand the lower intestines in this way, but the important point is that Jesus felt profound, gut-wrenching compassion for the crowds of people who followed him 'because they were like sheep without a shepherd' (v. 34).

Since we warned you it wasn't going to be an easy ride, here is the challenge we want to put to you: do you ever or have you ever felt this kind of compassion for others? Do you ever feel literally sick to your stomach when you hear about what others are going through? 'Haven't we heard enough about internal organs now?', we hear you protest! For many of us, perhaps for most of us, the truth is that our sense of compassion does not reach very far beyond our immediate circle. Our human compassion is limited in scope. Only divine compassion is unlimited. Only divine compassion can see beyond the ordinary, mundane and superficial to recognize God's holy imprint on every human being, made, as we all are, in his image and likeness (Gen. 1:27).

So what did Jesus do when he felt this powerful sense of compassion for the crowds? Surprisingly, perhaps, he began to teach them. Mark does not tell us what he taught them on this occasion but perhaps it was related to the hunger and thirst we all experience, the hunger and thirst for God and meaning. He then began to meet their need by feeding them with real food and, in so doing, pointed to the Bread of Life, the everlasting food on which we too feed in the Eucharist.

Our hearts can bleed with compassion and pity for those who do not know Christ, for those who do not know the consolation of prayer, the joy of forgiveness and the peace of Christ.

Lord, give me a heart of compassion. Help me to sense your burning heart of love, mercy and compassion for your people, the lost and the found, and enable me to reach out as a brother/sister and a friend.

1 John 4:7-10 • Psalm 71(72):1-8

Mark 6:34-44

Wednesday 7 January

Mark 6:45-52 • Christmas Weekday

JR R Tolkien was a professor of English language; CS Lewis was a professor of English literature. Tolkien was a world expert on medieval language; Lewis was a world expert on genres of literature. Tolkien was a Catholic; Lewis was an atheist for the early part of his life. Lewis, a brilliant scholar, said that one of the reasons he was an unbeliever was because he could not believe in the virgin birth and a Messiah who could perform miracles and even walk on water – myths which he believed were rooted in pagan literature. However, one day he left Oxford on a bus not believing in God but returned believing in God. Following his conversion he said: ‘I believed for years that the Bible was a collection of myths and I believed that the Gospels especially were myth narratives. However, when I came to faith I saw that the genre was myth but the difference was this myth was true.’

Our faith teaches us that Jesus actually walked on water – it is not a literary device but an historical event! For surely if he could multiply loaves and fishes and feed five thousand people, then he could also walk on water (v. 49). Believing this to be true, we approach today’s reading with reverence and awe – marvelling at Jesus, the Son of God, who could suspend even the laws of nature, gravity itself, and walk on the waters of Galilee as if they were terra firma.

However, the question is how does this Scripture speak to us today, right now? How does it change our lives? The key is perhaps in the words ‘he spoke to them’ (v. 50 NIV). Jesus’ words are power and life. And the words he spoke to the terrified disciples two thousand years ago still speak to us all today, particularly if we are facing tumultuous waves of suffering, distress and challenge. Jesus always speaks these words to us: ‘Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid’ (v. 50 NIV). Revelation makes clear that Jesus is right there with us in our suffering, helping us when we stumble and fall, urging us to turn to the Spirit, praying for us and encouraging us.

Lord, today I cling to your words of comfort and consolation and make them my own: ‘Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.’

1 John 4:11-18 • Psalm 71(72):1-2, 10-13

Mark 6:45-52

Thursday 8 January

Christmas Weekday • Luke 4:14-22

Luke has captured a powerful and dramatic moment in Jesus' life. Close your eyes, be still and imagine the scene before us. Jesus worshipped alongside everyone else in the synagogue. On this occasion – just like one of our Mass readers – he was chosen to read the Scriptures out loud to the gathered congregation. He was handed a scroll – we don't know if the reading from the prophet Isaiah was prescribed for that day or if he chose it. It was customary to stand while reading Scripture in the synagogue. Like any gathering of human beings listening to a public reading, some would have listened attentively, others would have half-listened and a minority probably didn't listen at all because they were distracted and busy in their minds. Nothing new there then. It is likely that Jesus would have read the reading in Hebrew but someone would have paraphrased it into Aramaic.

The Hebrew Scriptures in Jesus' day were not numbered in the way we have them today, but we know he read from Isaiah 61:1-2 which alludes to the Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:8-55), when once every fifty years slaves were freed, debts were cancelled and ancestral property was returned to the original family who owned it. Isaiah was prophesying the liberation of Israel from the future Babylonian captivity, but Jesus saw in this sacred text a reference to a more profound liberation – from sin and death. This was a Messianic Scripture pointing to Israel's Liberator and Saviour.

So all was well: the reading had been read and the service was set to continue as it had done time and time again. Except this time, the reader, Jesus of Nazareth, did something remarkable and untold: he said the words, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' (v. 21). If your hair doesn't stand on end or a shiver run down your spine, then you probably haven't quite grasped their significance or you just need to work a little on your powers of imagination. Imagine that thousands of years of the history of God's Chosen People and the sacred words of the prophet Isaiah were fulfilled and completed in that single and sacred moment. Jesus is the fulfilment of the entire Hebrew Scriptures. The Law, the Prophets and the Psalms all pointed to him.

Lord, teach me to search the Scriptures so that I learn to see the Christ hidden in the Old Testament but fully and finally revealed in the New.

1 John 4:19–5:4 • Psalm 71(72):1-2, 14-17

Luke 4:14-22

Friday 9 January

Luke 5:12-16 • Christmas Weekday

In Jesus the miraculous overpowered and suspended the natural world, displaying the power and glory of God. In Jesus God's kingdom was unveiled, turning our world and what we know about our world upside down. Jesus' miracles were bold and outrageous; they were powerful manifestations of God's direct intervention in human affairs. Hansen's disease, as leprosy is known today, is treatable, but in an age without the blessing of modern medicine contracting it was tragic, resulting in banishment, ostracism and profound human suffering. This man needed a miracle – it was his only hope.

We don't tend to see miracles of this kind today. Of course, there are exceptions and indeed the process of canonization within our tradition requires the proving of two miracles attributable to the individual being proposed, one for beatification and one for canonization. So here's our question: why don't we see this kind of miracle today? We have the grace and power of God available to us in the sacrament of anointing and the sacrament of the Eucharist, the very source and summit of the Christian life. Since this is the case, why don't our parishes hold healing meetings after Mass, so that our communities might experience life-changing miracles like the one we read about in our Gospel today?

It is hard to know why we see so few miracles today but perhaps the answer can be found in verse 16: 'But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed' (NIV). We assume that Jesus' miracles were a given because he was God made man. But this verse suggests that, in order to nurture his relationship with the Father, he needed to spend time alone to pray and draw strength and nourishment from God.

Miracles are not a right and we cannot simply demand them – they are the mercy and kindness of God manifest in our world. In order for the miraculous power of God to be poured out upon us, perhaps we need to do as Jesus did and withdraw to lonely places to pray alone with the Father, to be fed and nourished by the One who is the source of every grace, every blessing, every healing and every miracle.

Lord, you are always willing to bind the wounds of our sin and heal us. Teach us to pray as Jesus prayed and to ask for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our age.

1 John 5:5-13 • Psalm 147:12-15, 19-20

Luke 5:12-16

Saturday 10 January

Christmas Weekday • John 3:22-30

We all have our favourite saints – we may as well admit it. There are certain saints that we love and admire more than all the others. However, it is unlikely that John the Baptist ranks very high among the favourite saints of any of us. He has a rather fierce and austere reputation, shall we say. There is a certain harshness to him which contrasts sharply with the warmth and humanity of many of the other saints and heroes of faith throughout history.

Nevertheless, Jesus described John the Baptist as the greatest man who ever lived (see Matt. 11:11). He was chosen to be the forerunner of the Lord, and so profound was his grasp of the gospel message that Luke records for us that he leapt for joy in his mother's womb (Luke 1:44). He is truly a magnificent saint, if a rather intimidating one.

But what made him tick? What was the key to his interior life? Perhaps it can be found in verse 30, where John the Evangelist records John the Baptist's words: 'He must become greater; I must become less' (NIV). If ever there was a countercultural teaching it is this one. The clarion call of human culture in every age but especially pronounced in our own celebrity-ridden one is 'I must increase – everyone else, including God, must decrease'. In stark contrast, humility was at the heart of John the Baptist's spiritual life.

We can tend to caricature humility and make it what it is not. The great English novelist Charles Dickens captures this perfectly in his character Uriah Heep, who begins every statement he makes with the words 'I am very 'umble, Sir' – as if in order to be humble all you need to do is say that you are and adopt a certain submissive demeanour. This is a million miles away from the gift and grace of humility. To be humble isn't to think of ourselves as inferior but as equal. To be humble isn't to despise ourselves, it is to want to serve others. To be humble isn't to have a negative self-image but to understand that we are created in the image of God and that we possess an inalienable dignity and destiny as a child of God on pilgrimage to our Father's house.

Lord, only you can make us truly humble. Help us to understand that we are the redeemed children of God called to serve others in love and humility.

1 John 5:14-21 • Psalm 149:1-6, 9

John 3:22-30

Sunday 11 January

Mark 1:7-11 • Baptism of the Lord (Feast of the Lord)(B)

Today, as the season of Christmastide draws to a close, we celebrate the revelation of Jesus as the beloved Son of the Father and as the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit. Since he hovered over the deep at the beginning of creation, the Spirit has been at work in our world and, in the fullness of time, he revealed to John the Baptist both the identity and the mission of Jesus. In this moment of revelation John was so utterly overwhelmed at finding himself in the presence of the one he had been sent to announce that he declared himself unworthy even to untie Jesus' sandals – a task which at that time was reserved for bond-servants, the lowest of the low in domestic servitude. John also proclaimed the need of every human being to be baptized when he declared: 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' (Matt. 3:14).

Against this backdrop God revealed himself as the Blessed Trinity, three Persons in One God. The voice from heaven confirmed the relationship between Jesus and the Father. Jesus is God's Only Son, the secret kept hidden, but fully and finally revealed in Jesus of Nazareth – God made man. Jesus reveals God in a unique way and is himself true God from true God, Light from Light, begotten and not made. This is the central teaching and revelation of our faith.

All three monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Islam and Christianity, believe in one God but only the Christian faith believes that God became man and that God is three Persons in One. We believe that God entered time and space; he entered human history. This is what makes the Christian faith unique – in fact, the notion or idea of God lowering himself in this way is anathema to the other two world faiths. The Catechism of the Catholic Church encapsulates this amazing truth in the following statement: 'For a Christian, believing in God cannot be separated from believing in the One he sent, his "beloved Son", in whom the Father is "well pleased"; God tells us to listen to him... We can believe in Jesus Christ because he is himself God, the Word made flesh: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he made him known"' (para. 151).

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

Isaiah 55:1-11 • Isaiah 12:2-6

1 John 5:1-9 • Mark 1:7-11

Monday 12 January

Mark 1:14-20

A signature theme of St Mark's Gospel is a certain kind of urgency. There is a sense of the need to act quickly – not in a panic or a rush but a calm, purposeful sense that we need to move on through the story because we are heading towards the most important event that has ever happened in the history of our world. In St Mark's Gospel there is a pace, a rhythm, which invites, nay demands, action, movement and decision. With phrases such as 'The time has come' (1:15 NIV) and 'immediately' (1:29), Mark invites us to enter into the adventure of a lifetime. He has an urgent message and he is an urgent messenger.

Mark is the first of the Evangelists to introduce us to the idea of the gospel being 'good news'. Jesus announces: 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news' (1:15 NIV). Does that resonate with you? Do you believe the gospel is 'good news'? The problem is that many of us have lost that sense of the gospel being good news and for that reason we are very reluctant evangelists. Even more worryingly, we are labouring under a serious misapprehension. Most of us think the gospel is primarily about good people striving to live good and righteous lives, caring for others and the environment, giving to those in need, etc. The thing is that this understanding isn't especially 'good news' because, believe it or not, lots of people who don't believe in God, man or the devil are already endeavouring to live in this way!

If that isn't the good news, what is? The good news is that God loves you and sent his Son to die for you, so that you can be set free from the mistakes you have made in the past. The good news is that God is with you and poured out his Spirit so that you can live and move and have your being sure in the knowledge of the love of God and the hope and promise of eternal life. The good news is that you can live each day from now on with him, and you can fulfil the plan and purpose he has for your life. This is an adventure worth staking your whole life on!

Lord, grant me a clarity about the gospel and a willingness to share and witness to my faith with joy, enthusiasm and love.

Hebrews 1:1-6 • Psalm 96(97):1-2, 6-9

Mark 1:14-20

Tuesday 13 January

Mark 1:21-28

Within the scope of six verses in this first chapter of his Gospel, Mark makes two statements about Jesus' authority: 'And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes' and 'And they were all amazed,...saying, "What is this? A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him"' (vv. 22, 27 emphasis added). Jesus' authority was clearly different from that his contemporaries were used to seeing being exercised around them, both in the secular and the religious sphere. Here was a man who spoke with an authority that rang true. This was amazing in itself, but even more amazing was the fact that when he used his authority to command an evil spirit to leave its human host, it obeyed him.

Unlike our own day when we struggle with the concept of demons and the demonic realm, in Jesus' day, evil spirits were considered, even by many Jewish teachers, to be numerous and powerful. This is borne out by the many occasions in the Gospels when Jesus conducted a deliverance ministry. His approach was very straightforward: when the demon-possessed man disrupted the meeting, Jesus simply ordered the demon to leave, and it left. The people in the synagogue had never seen anything like it.

Jesus, the Son of God, had all the authority in the world. God created all things through him and put all things under him, so even the demons were completely subject to him (see Col. 1:16). Yet Jesus did not use his authority the way we humans so often tend to use ours when given the opportunity. He used his authority to serve, not to be served. And that is how he wants us to use whatever authority we might have. Whether we have authority at home, at work, or somewhere else, he wants us to use it to help others, not to throw our weight around or make other people do what we want them to do. Later in Mark's Gospel, Jesus explained it to his disciples like this, 'whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all' (10:43-44).

Lord Jesus, please help me to take my example from you and be a servant to my fellow human beings. May I seek for no other reward than to please you, my Lord and Saviour.

Hebrews 2:5-12 • Psalm 8:2, 5-9

Mark 1:21-28

Wednesday 14 January

Mark 1:29-39

If St Mark's Gospel were to be compared to a British national newspaper it would be described as a red top, a tabloid – cheap and cheerful! This isn't meant to offend – a little-known fact about print journalism is that writing short, punchy and attention-grabbing copy is an art form and requires a lot of skill. In fact, whenever the TV programme University Challenge stages a competition between a team of journalists from the Tabloids and a team from the Broadsheets, the Tabloid journalists win, because they are razor sharp and on the ball. Strange but true. As the shortest of the Gospels Mark records almost what is called in the business NIBs (News in Brief).

Today's NIB is the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, who was suffering from a high fever that was clearly incapacitating her. Jesus 'took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her; and she served them' (v. 31). End of story. This incident is only found in St Mark's Gospel and is the only healing miracle involving a disciple's relative.

One of the striking things about this miracle is how mundane and ordinary it is. It shows us that God is interested in the mundane, the ordinary and the day-to-day, in short everything about our lives. Mark includes the interesting detail that when Jesus arrived at the home, they 'immediately' told him about the fact that someone in the house was sick (v. 30). The Lord wants us to be as quick and eager to tell him of those we care about who are laid low in any way.

One of the wonderful ways in which we and our loved ones can experience God's blessing and healing is through the sacramental blessings of the Church. The conveying of such blessing is not solely the preserve of clergy but is a grace available to all who are baptized. Married couples can pray with each other by laying on hands and asking for God's healing or blessing. Parents can bless their children with holy water, asking for God's strength and protection. We often don't feel comfortable doing this for only minor illnesses or the day-to-day challenges we face, but we should. God cares for us body, soul and spirit, and what parent does not care for every aspect of their children's lives?

Heavenly Father, give me the confidence to pray with others, asking for your healing mercy and love to be poured out.

Hebrews 2:14-18 • Psalm 104(105):1-9

Mark 1:29-39

Thursday 15 January

Mark 1:40-45

Tragically today leprosy remains one of the world's most stigmatized diseases. It seems inconceivable that people affected by what we now know to be a mildly infectious disease can be so marginalized by society, but leprosy sees entire families having their job, education and marriage prospects destroyed as a result of the stigma and misunderstandings surrounding the disease. The countries with the highest number of new diagnoses of leprosy are India, Brazil and Indonesia, followed by some of the African nations.

A myth still prevalent in the world today is that leprosy is a curse for something the sufferers have done wrong. This way of thinking has pervaded down through the centuries and is also applied to those suffering from other life-threatening conditions such as HIV/Aids. It locks into the mindset that God punishes sin by bringing down sickness and disease on his creatures. This is a myth and one we need to dispel! The best way to do so is by looking at the way Jesus treated and related to those suffering from socially exclusionary diseases such as leprosy. He reached out to them and healed them, and we are called to do the same.

From today's Gospel we learn that God wants to heal and restore. We know that Jesus was moved with pity and was full of compassion, and we too must have pity and extend compassion towards those who suffer and are marginalized. We can also rest confident in the knowledge that when people declare that this or that illness is a punishment from God, they are perpetrating an erroneous and dangerous fundamentalist way of thinking. It is not the disease or the person that God finds abhorrent, but rather this very attitude.

The truth is we are all suffering from the leprosy of sin and God's word to us is 'Be clean' through the gift of forgiveness and a lavish outpouring of his love and mercy. Faith humbles us all because we are all in the same boat: we are all beggars in need of God's mercy; we are all sinners in need of God's help and forgiveness.

Lord, we thank you that you have cleansed us from sin and restored to us the dignity of being your children. Holy Spirit, fill our hearts with joy in our salvation, so that we might in turn share that joy with others, especially those who have been rejected or ostracized by society.

Hebrews 3:7-14 • Psalm 94(95):6-11

Mark 1:40-45

Friday 16 January

Mark 2:1-12

‘My son, your sins are forgiven’ (v. 5). The paralytic and his friends knew that there was a power and authority about Jesus. They were so convinced that Jesus was offering something special that they were not going to let a crowd prevent them from coming to him. It was the true faith of these five men who had come to Jesus against all odds that enabled him to heal the paralytic.

The scribes, on the other hand, were among the crowd, watching suspiciously. They knew that sin exists, and that it is a serious matter – none can ‘forgive sins but God alone’ (v. 7) – and they did not believe that Jesus had the authority to forgive sin. When Jesus healed the paralytic they were confronted with the truth.

Jesus has the same message for each of us. Each day he wants us to know that our sins are forgiven. What is our response to this? Are we angry because we have not been healed physically, or feel our prayers for healing have not been answered? Do we feel that God is unaware of our suffering or that we are not important enough for him to listen to? Or do we see that the forgiveness of sins is more important than other physical ailments or discomforts?

On this topic the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: ‘Moved by so much suffering Christ not only allowed himself to be touched by the sick, but he makes their miseries his own: “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.” But he did not heal all the sick. His healings were signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God. They announced a more radical healing: the victory over sin and death through his Passover’ (para. 1505).

The miracle of today’s reading is that it reveals to us the power and authority of Jesus who both heals and forgives. Jesus is powerful in both word and deed – his power to forgive sins is confirmed by his healing of the paralytic.

Lord Jesus, help us to come to you in faith. May we know your loving power in our lives, to heal us and make us whole. May we know your forgiveness in our hearts.

Hebrews 4:1-5, 11 • Psalm 77(78):3-8

Mark 2:1-12

Saturday 17 January

Mark 2:13-17 • St Anthony, Abbot (Memorial)

As a tax collector working for the hated Romans, Levi was regarded as an outcast by his own people. Regular contact with Gentiles rendered him ritually unclean and unable to participate fully in the observance of Jewish law. Irrespective of his lifestyle, he would be bracketed along with people whose religious or moral backgrounds were suspect as ‘sinners’.

Tax collecting was a lucrative occupation – Levi’s prompt abandonment of his toll booth in response to Jesus’ call suggests that exclusion from his own religion and people was too painful a price to pay for his wealth. He knew his need for redemption and recognized its arrival in Jesus.

In calling Levi to follow him and later dining with him, Jesus was both enacting his preaching about repentance and the coming kingdom and demonstrating that he had come not for the righteous but for sinners. We do not like to talk about sin – we think it is unsophisticated. Our tendency is to see ourselves as fundamentally sound but with a number of faults for which, after the example of Adam and Eve, we make endless excuses (Gen. 3:11-13).

In our society we tend to avoid recognizing and confronting the sin in our lives. The ruthless pursuit of power is portrayed as healthy ambition, revenge-seeking masquerades as justice, and love has become a matter of self-gratifying sentiment rather than of giving and serving. ‘If it’s legal it’s OK!’ is frequently the only yardstick against which behaviour is measured.

Sometimes we are prepared to admit that we are sinners because we commit sins, but we are seldom ready to acknowledge that we commit sins because we are sinners – a condition so serious that Jesus died on the cross in order to preserve us from its consequences.

The Pharisees were indignant when Jesus dined with ‘sinners’ and thus betrayed their own lack of self-knowledge, a wilful blindness which, on that day at least, robbed them of the deliverance Jesus had come to bring them. Today we need to seek a true self-knowledge in our prayerful relationship with Jesus.

Holy Spirit, make me mindful today of my true condition. Deepen in me a spirit of humble repentance, that I may receive the forgiveness, cleansing and redemption offered by Jesus my Saviour.

Hebrews 4:12-16 • Psalm 18(19):8-10, 15

Mark 2:13-17

Sunday 18 January

(B) Second Sunday in Ordinary Time • John 1:35-42

John the Baptist's insight is prophetic and staggering. He identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God. The history of this title 'Lamb of God' sheds much light on Jesus' mission and ministry. The Jewish nation experienced deliverance from Egypt through the sacrifice of a lamb. The prescriptions for this sacrifice were specific. The lamb was to be 'without blemish, a male a year old' (Exod. 12:5). They were to eat it at night and daub the lintels of their doorways with its blood. The blood of the lamb protected them from the destructive power of the avenging angel.

The imagery of the sacrificial lamb became an important motif in the life of the people of Israel. We encounter this imagery in the ministry of the prophets. Jeremiah described himself as one like a lamb led to the slaughter (Jer. 11:19). Isaiah developed this idea further in his image of the Servant of the Lord: the Servant was also like a lamb led to the slaughter, silent and resigned in the face of death (Isa. 53:7).

These two prophets pointed to the humility and obedience so perfectly manifested in Jesus. He is the true paschal Lamb (John 1:29; 1 Pet. 1:19). He is the One who is pure, blameless and without stain of sin (John 8:46; 1 John 3:5; Heb. 9:14). In John's Gospel, the similarities between Jesus' death and the Passover lamb are striking. Jesus was crucified at the very hour when, according to the stipulations of the Torah, the lambs for the Passover sacrifice were killed in the temple. Like the sacrificial lamb none of Jesus' bones were broken (John 19:36; Exod. 12:46). The Old Testament shouts aloud the revelation of Christ.

Pope John Paul II expressed this prophetic momentum thus: 'what creation preserved as a seal etched in it by the creative hand of God and what the ancient prophets had announced as a promise is disclosed in the revelation of Christ' (Incarnationis mysterium 3). John the Baptist, the last of these ancient prophets, announced with vibrant confidence the promise unfolding in his presence. Jesus the Lamb would take away the sin of the world. Our redemption was sealed in the blood of the Lamb and through this blood we are liberated.

Lord Jesus, you are the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Help me to know the great love you have shown for me and to rejoice in the fruits of your sacrifice.

1 Samuel 3:3-10, 19 • Psalm 39(40):2, 4, 7-10

1 Corinthians 6:13-15, 17-20 • John 1:35-42

Monday 19 January

Mark 2:18-22

Fasting was a common practice in Israel. The disciples of the Baptist and the Pharisees shared a mutual interest – they were both practising self-denial. It was the custom of the Pharisees to fast twice a week (Luke 18:12) and their tendency to broadcast the fact. It is likely that the disciples of John, like their master, practised periods of fasting both as a sign of repentance and to hasten the coming of the Messiah. It is possible that they were grieving over the arrest of their master. It is clear that others knew they were fasting – in the same way that it was obvious that Jesus' disciples were not. Such a contrast caused comment. It attracted enquiry and questions – why did they not fast?

Jesus took the opportunity to teach more precisely about his person. Alluding to himself as the bridegroom, he made an appeal: how could his disciples (guests of the bridegroom) deny themselves when rejoicing, celebration and great joy were the order of the day? The time of the bridegroom was a season to be glad. A time would indeed come when the bridegroom was no more, and then a season of repentance and fasting would be more in order.

Jesus is now exalted and glorified in heaven and is worshipped and adored at the heavenly wedding banquet. The return of the bridegroom is the prayer of the Church and of each believer. When the bridegroom returns, human history will cease and mourning, death and sin will be vanquished by the victory of the cross. Then, at the wedding feast of the Lamb, those who have longed for his coming will know the eternal and lasting joy of the heavenly banquet. We can hope to experience a new desire and longing for the return of our heavenly king. It is the Spirit who refreshes and renews our thirst for the coming again of Jesus – our heavenly bridegroom.

Lord Jesus, by your cross and resurrection you won for us a new humanity. Help me to understand that the grace of repentance and fasting is both a gift and a choice. Pour out your Spirit that I may choose the path of self-denial and so know the joy of your cross and the freedom of repentance. Help me to drink deeply from the new wine of your salvation and be a witness of your love, compassion and mercy.

Hebrews 5:1-10 • Psalm 109(110):1-4

Mark 2:18-22

Tuesday 20 January

Mark 2:23-28

The Pharisees adhered to the letter and not the spirit of the law. Their zealous and rigid interpretation of the Torah predisposed them to judge the disciples harshly. It was not the picking of the corn that was the problem but their interpretation of this action. According to the Mishnah (Jewish traditions both oral and written), harvesting was not permissible on the Sabbath. The Pharisees saw the action of the disciples as an infringement of the law.

Jesus, familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures, drew their attention to the account of David and the high priest Ahimelech (1 Sam. 21:1-6). The consecrated bread or 'bread of the presence' was set out on display in the tabernacle as a symbol of thanks and praise to God for providing daily bread. According to the law (Lev. 24:9), it was permissible only for priests to eat this bread. Despite the law, Ahimelech allowed David and his companions, who were fleeing from King Saul, to eat it, once he had assured himself that they were ceremonially clean. Ahimelech had grasped the spirit of the law. Governed by the Spirit, he was able to respond to the needs of his brothers with kindness, love and compassion.

Jesus appealed to this example to illustrate that the value, dignity and worth of each human person transcends the dictates of the law. The Pharisees were blinded by zeal, and a slavish and mean interpretation of the law perversely violated the essence of the Sabbath as a time of rest, refreshment and recovery. God ordained one day in the week when work would cease, pressure abate and society recuperate. The teaching of Jesus is clear: the Sabbath was made for the human person and not vice versa.

The error of the Pharisees was that in their desire to please God they forgot God and focused their attention on appearing righteous. We need to guard against this sort of attitude.

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Lord of the Sabbath and the Lord of my life. Protect me from my own narrow and rigid interpretation of your law and the principles of your kingdom. Let all my judgements, opinions and views be tempered and refined by the breath of your Spirit. May I seek to be governed more by love than by duty, more by compassion than by law and more by the Spirit than by my own strength.

Hebrews 6:10-20 • Psalm 100(101):1-5, 9-10

Mark 2:23-28

Wednesday 21 January

Mark 3:1-6 • St Agnes (Memorial)

A dramatic and passionate confrontation takes place in the synagogue at Capernaum. The Pharisees, amazed by Jesus' teaching and actions, watch to see how he will react to a man with a withered hand. Jesus, knowing that they are trying to trap him, asks a question: 'Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?' (v. 4). The Pharisees maintain a petulant silence, and Jesus heals the man.

We can sense the passions running high in this encounter. Mark says that Jesus looked around in 'anger', and uses the Greek word *orge* which has a strong meaning – the same word is used elsewhere of the wrath of God against sin. In response the Pharisees, together with the Herodians – friends and supporters of Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee – first begin to plot to kill Jesus. The atmosphere must have crackled with tension.

Healing on the Sabbath was, in fact, permitted by the law if life was threatened. The man with the withered hand was not in danger of death, so Jesus' opponents could accuse him of breaking the law. And yet the law was given to help people to do God's will, so such a narrow use of it was against the law's original spirit. By Jesus' time the law was bound up with a multitude of traditions, which made it more prohibitive – those with a legalistic frame of mind, like the Pharisees, were quick to react to any breach.

Such a strict interpretation of the law meant Jesus' opponents missed a chance to do good. To miss an opportunity to do good is tantamount to doing evil, and so the Pharisees, in their desire to keep to their traditions, are led into sin – something that can all too easily happen when we stick to a legalistic interpretation of any law.

In healing the man, Jesus gave a sign of God's power. Healing is a sign of the kingdom of God, and should bring a reaction of joy, rather than the anger and threats of Jesus' opponents. There are many in need around us – in helping them we become signs of the presence of God's kingdom.

Lord Jesus, give me the vision and the courage always to seek to do your will. Grant me the strength never to turn away from any opportunity to do good. May I be a sign of your presence in the world.

Hebrews 7:1-3, 15-17 • Psalm 109(110):1-4

Mark 3:1-6

Thursday 22 January

Mark 3:7-12

Great crowds flocked to Jesus. From all over Palestine they came to hear him and to touch him. Why did so many rush to Jesus? His appearance obviously caused a stir, and the reports of his healing power spread quickly. So the crowds came both out of curiosity and to have their own needs met – they came to get something from him. But they did not recognize him for who he was – only the unclean spirits knew his true identity. At this point of apparent success and popularity, it is worth remembering that the crowds would turn against Jesus at the end.

Jesus rebuked the unclean spirits for publicly proclaiming him. He did not want to be revealed in this way, a way that ordinary people could not understand. At this stage they would not be able to comprehend what was meant by the title ‘Son of God’. Jesus wanted people to come to know him by remaining close to him, by sharing his life, hearing his teaching and experiencing his presence. Then they would know who he truly was.

It was the healings that drew the crowds above all. At a time when illness and disease were greatly feared, people were excited by the appearance of a healer. Jesus’ power to heal was a sign of the kingdom of God. When Jesus healed someone, that person was touched by God’s healing and transforming presence – the power of the kingdom of God broke into everyday life. The Catechism of the Catholic Church recognizes this: ‘Christ’s compassion toward the sick and his many healings of every kind of infirmity are a resplendent sign that “God has visited his people” and that the kingdom of God is close at hand’ (para. 1503).

Jesus came to heal the whole person, soul and body. In the sick he saw those who were most in need of his care and healing power, and also those most able to accept it. He called his disciples to have a special care for them. He calls us, too, to have a constant love and care for those who are sick, for all who are in need of God’s healing power. In our prayers and in our actions we can bring the kingdom of God close to them.

Lord, show your healing power to all who are sick. Enable me to be filled with love and compassion for them, and to do all I can to relieve their need.

Hebrews 7:25–8:6 • Psalm 39(40):7-10, 17

Mark 3:7-12

Friday 23 January

Mark 3:13-19

‘Simple, uncultured working men’ is how a casual observer might have described the first apostles. Few would have chosen them to convert the nations, subject as they were to human weakness and temptation. Like us they had to battle with petty jealousies, pride and ambition, and even in Jesus’ hour of need in Gethsemane they ran off in fear of their own lives. Yet, not many years after the Lord’s resurrection, these ordinary men had set the world on fire with their preaching of the Good News.

Jesus knew their frailties, but saw beyond the rough exteriors to hearts that truly wanted to serve God. He called these men to be with him. As they were in his company, Jesus was able to share with them his own divine life. Slowly, painfully, they recognized that he was indeed the Messiah. Ultimately they could say, with Thomas, ‘My Lord and my God!’ (John 20:28). After Pentecost, they were completely transformed by the Spirit and went out boldly to proclaim the name of Jesus.

The apostles are the foundation stones of the new Israel, the Church, and the people of God (Rev. 21:14). But we too have an apostolic vocation to serve Christ and to preach the gospel. Jesus is calling each of us. He empowers us as he did his apostles. He wants us to spend time with him, simply, from the heart, listening to his voice while we ponder the Scriptures. As we open our hearts to Jesus and give him time, he comes and changes us.

Often he leads us to start small, perhaps highlighting someone in our family or at work with whom he wants us to share his love. He may want us to take a more active role in parish life, such as joining a Bible study group, visiting the homeless or taking the Eucharist to the sick. What is important is that in faith we seek actively to respond to Jesus’ call to be an apostle to those around us.

Whatever our present situation, whatever sin is in our past, God has work for us to do. If we feel unclear about what God is asking us to do, the Holy Spirit will be our counsellor. He delights in revealing the Father’s will and gently prompts us to service.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill me with your love. Help me to know your will for me, and to follow it in faith.

Hebrews 8:6-13 • Psalm 84(85):8, 10-14

Mark 3:13-19

Saturday 24 January

(Memorial) St Francis de Sales • Mark 3:20-21

It would be easy to brush over today's short Gospel, but if we stop and reflect we can see that it challenges us in two ways. Firstly, we can ponder the life of Jesus and try to realize how he was misunderstood: even his own family 'went out to seize him, for people were saying, "He is beside himself"' (v. 21). Secondly, we can reflect on the personal cost of following Jesus.

Jesus was considered by some to be mad. He healed the sick, he forgave sinners, he associated with the outcasts, he often spent all night praying, he went without meals, he had no home of his own, he claimed God was his Father, he challenged the religious leaders of his day. He taught people to love their enemies and to do good to those who hurt them, and to seek greatness by being last and serving others. The Gospels reveal how Jesus had an effect on those he met, whether they marvelled at him, knelt before him, were puzzled by him or plotted to kill him.

As we seek to follow Jesus, and by his Holy Spirit grow more like him, then we too can expect to be laughed at or to meet opposition. This may already be our experience. Jesus calls us to take the lowest place – in contrast, the world encourages us to strive for success and praise. Jesus calls us to love and serve others even when this involves personal sacrifice – the world encourages us to seek comfort and indulge ourselves. In these and so many other ways Jesus' call to holiness and the qualities he seeks to form in us go against the world and expose us to ridicule. Mother Teresa wrote:

We are looked down on by some because of our lack of culture and education, our inefficiency in our work for lack of proper qualifications, or because of our awkwardness. Some do not understand our way of life or our charity to the poor and so they criticize us. Even so Christ was despised...so we are blessed again in sharing the same lot as Christ, though in a very small way.

'From the fear of being humiliated, deliver me, Jesus. From the fear of being criticized, deliver me, Jesus. From the fear of being passed over, deliver me, Jesus. O Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart like yours.' (Adapted from a prayer by Rafael)

Hebrews 9:2-3, 11-14 • Psalm 46(47):2-3, 6-9

Mark 3:20-21

Sunday 25 January

Mark 1:14-20 • Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

We all like to receive good news. It's said that good news doesn't sell newspapers, but there's no doubt that it lifts our spirits and gives us hope. You name it – any kind of good news is a tonic. The birth of a child, securing a new job, exam success, winning a competition, gaining a pay increase or a bonus: the list goes on and the enjoyment is wonderful. As St Basil once said, 'Truly unexpected news makes both ears tingle.'

The gospel, however, is a very special kind of good news. It doesn't just last for a day or a week and then fade into the background: it lasts for ever. If we haven't understood the gospel as good news we have seriously missed the point. The essence of the Good News is distilled in the words of Jesus: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel' (v. 15).

This verse unveils so much treasure about the gospel. For example, the Greek word used here for 'time' is *kairos*, which captures the idea of an anointed, special and unique opportunity (unlike the word *chronos*, which simply expresses time as a succession of moments). The Good News is that when time had reached its fullness God sent his Son. Time itself is now charged with the presence and mystery of God. God himself entered into human history, sanctifying time itself.

The Greek verb translated 'fulfilled' is *pleroo*, which means to fill up, indicating a fullness of being, completion and wholeness. God's plan of salvation finds its perfection and wholeness in the coming of Jesus. How are we to respond? By repenting and believing. The Greek word for 'repent' is *metanoeo*, which means to change one's mind: it implies turning away from sin wholeheartedly with a true change of heart towards God. Finally, the Greek word translated 'gospel' here is *euaggelion*, which means simply 'good news' – the good news is that in Jesus the kingdom of God is at hand, and that we can now be reconciled to God, restored to the fullness of the humanity for which we were created.

Lord Jesus, you are the Good News. You are inexpressible joy and fullness of life. Fill my heart with a living sense that the gospel is the best news I can hear, and grant me the grace to embrace it today.

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 • Psalm 24(25):4-9

1 Corinthians 7:29-31 • Mark 1:14-20

Monday 26 January

(Memorial) SS Timothy and Titus • Mark 3:22-30

Today we celebrate the memorial of St Timothy and St Titus who both accompanied Paul on his missionary journeys and had positions of authority and leadership in the new churches the apostle had established. To have been a companion of Paul must have been an exciting, challenging and daunting role for these men. What do we know of our intrepid pair?

Timothy was the son of a Jewish mother and Greek father (Acts 16:1-3). He was converted, together with his mother and grandmother, when Paul preached at Lystra on his first missionary journey. When Paul returned, two years later, he saw Timothy's desire to serve Jesus and invited him to join him on his mission. Titus, whom we encounter in Galatians (2:1-3), was a Greek who was part of an apostolic delegation from Antioch to Jerusalem (Acts 15). It is likely that Titus was with Paul on his second journey when Timothy joined them.

Timothy and Titus were Paul's constant companions, witnessing the dynamic birth and turbulent growth of the early churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth and Ephesus. From the letters Paul writes to them we can see that they grew into mature leaders of the Christian communities. To Titus, Paul entrusted the fledgling church in Crete and to Timothy, the difficult task of bringing into line those influenced by heretical teaching in Ephesus. Christian teaching on leadership is very important, and it is vital that those who serve God's people have the right character. We tend to think of bishops and priests as our leaders, and of course this is right and correct, but many are called to positions of leadership. Parents are Christian leaders and indeed are called to serve their families as Christ serves his Church. Teachers, public servants and those who serve in the parish are all called to be witnesses of Christian leadership. Paul outlines to Titus the qualities he is looking for in a leader – if we took his requirements seriously very few of us would want to be leaders. The reason the call is so demanding is because it is the call to live a life in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Lord God, teach me to be blameless, righteous, faithful, obedient, patient, gentle, self-disciplined, holy and to love the truth of the gospel. Teach me that through your Son Jesus Christ and by the power of your Holy Spirit, I can be the leader you want me to be.

Proper of Saints: 2 Tim 1:1-8 or Titus 1:1-5 • Ps 96(96):1-3, 7-8, 10

Proper of Season: Mark 3:22-30

Tuesday 27 January

Mark 3:31-35

Jesus is very clear that to do God's will is to belong to God's family. The practical and challenging question we face is: what is God's will for my life today? How am I to obey God's will? When we want something we can be very strong-willed. We can discover within a fierce determination to achieve our wants or desires. Often even the most mild-mannered and easy-going of people find themselves iron-willed and resolute on certain issues. If what we will is good, wholesome and even godly, this is a wonderful impulse. If what we will is bad, unwholesome and wrong, then this is a misguided impulse.

God has given the gift of free will. We have remarkable freedom in which we can exercise a choice to obey or disobey God. The very essence of Jesus' ministry was in carrying out and fulfilling the will of his Father. He sought to align his own will with God's and so lived a life of perfect, humble submission to his heavenly Father. To know God's will for our lives is to experience and know the freedom of being a child of God. Our knowledge and understanding of God's will is born within us through prayer in which we learn to listen and be docile and receptive to the prompting, guidance and movement of the Holy Spirit. We can have an instinctive fear or reticence in seeking out God's will for our lives – fearing perhaps that such insight will stifle or cramp our freedom. Nothing could be further from the truth, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church makes clear:

The grace of Christ is not in the slightest way a rival of our freedom when this freedom accords with the sense of the true and the good that God has put in the human heart. On the contrary, as Christian experience attests especially in prayer, the more docile we are to the promptings of grace, the more we grow in inner freedom and confidence during trials, such as those we face in the pressures and constraints of the outer world. By the workings of grace the Holy Spirit educates us in spiritual freedom in order to make us free collaborators in his work in the Church and in the world. (para. 1742)

Hebrews 10:1-10 • Psalm 39(40):2-11

Mark 3:31-35

Wednesday 28 January

Mark 4:1-20

Jesus told this parable to a large crowd, but explained it only to his disciples. He was particularly anxious that they should understand it, saying: 'Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?' (v. 13). Why was it so important?

This parable is essentially about how we respond to God in the light of our own daily experiences and the challenges that face us. It can be tempting to look at the explanation given by Jesus and think that each category describes a type of person. While that may be true, we can behave like any of the people described in the parable at different times, even during the same day. If we read Scripture in the morning and then immediately forget what we have read when we get to work, it is as if the word of God has fallen on stony ground. If in our prayer we receive a joyful insight into God's love for us, but then immediately get annoyed with someone on the phone, we are acting as if that insight has not taken root. If we find ourselves thinking about nothing else but the next shopping trip, we are in danger of letting worldly distractions choke the word.

But this parable is not intended to leave us helpless and hopeless, because Jesus points out the good soil that we can become if we 'hear the word and accept it and bear fruit' (v. 20). Then we shall grow fruitfully and joyfully in the way God wants us to. How can we do this?

We have everything we need to become good soil in the Holy Spirit. He will help us cultivate a deep inner knowledge of Jesus in prayer and the reading of the Word, and will give us the gifts of God that will enable us to develop and grow into the people he wants us to be. We only have to ask.

Father, we know that in many ways we act so that your seed cannot grow in us or bear fruit. Forgive us those times, Lord, and through the power of the Holy Spirit make us holy. Keep us faithful in prayer and the reading of your Word, and develop in us those gifts and virtues that will enable us to bear fruit for you.

Hebrews 10:11-18 • Psalm 109(110):1-4

Mark 4:1-20

Thursday 29 January

Mark 4:21-25

Jesus is the teacher par excellence. His insight, method and wisdom are sublime and perfect. CH Dodd, the New Testament scholar, marvelled at the teaching of Jesus:

The style is the man, they say. What, then, of the style of the teaching of Jesus as it has come down to us in the Gospels? A large proportion of it comes in the form of crisp utterances, pungent, often allusive, even cryptic, laden with irony and paradox. This whole body of sayings, handed down through different channels of tradition, has an unmistakable stamp. It is impossible to suppose that they are merely the product of skilful condensation by early Christian teachers. They have the ring of originality. They betray a mind whose processes were swift and direct, hitting the nail on the head without waste of words. (The Founder of Christianity)

In today's Gospel we encounter the force of this unique and beautiful mind. It is important that we savour, ponder and meditate upon the depth and breadth of Jesus' teaching. It is the Holy Spirit who creates within us a reverence and love for the words and teaching of Jesus. It is also the Holy Spirit who imparts wisdom, insight and clarity so we can understand his teaching. The challenge we face is: what does this mean to us today? How can we live out this teaching? What are its practical implications in our lives?

The notion that one would purchase a lamp and then immediately place it under a bed is ridiculous and amusing! We who have received so much grace and blessing should not be ashamed or embarrassed by our faith. A practical implication of this teaching is that we should not be ashamed of the gospel – it is the power of God. The beauty and glory of the gospel are to be proclaimed and made known. The large measure of grace we have received from God through baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist can be measured out through prayer, reading God's Word and acts of charity and mercy.

Heavenly Father, open my heart that I may understand more clearly, grasp more keenly and penetrate more deeply your teaching. In your love and mercy you lavish on me a generous measure of your grace. Grant me the humility and strength to treasure and protect your anointing received through baptism, that I may be a light to the world and a city on a hilltop.

Hebrews 10:19-25 • Psalm 23(24):1-6

Mark 4:21-25

Friday 30 January

Mark 4:26-34

The parables of Jesus are striking. They reflect a unique, highly imaginative and creative mind. His usual style was not to explain them in detail, but to leave his hearers to grapple with them. The temptation we face in hearing the parables is to assume that we know their meaning and have no further need to plumb their depths. The other snare to avoid is to imagine that we cannot possibly understand them. To avoid both these pitfalls we need to turn to the Holy Spirit for guidance and fresh insight. The joy of such discernment does not come with a mere cursory glance or superficial reading – we need to allow the words and their meaning to permeate our minds and hearts.

The parable of the growing seed appeals to the law of nature to show how growth has a momentum unperceived by the human eye. The farmer sows his seeds, confident and assured that they will germinate and produce a crop. In the same way the word that is sown in our hearts has an impetus and energy all of its own. It grows and matures all by itself – we don't know how or why – but the power of God's word matures, purifies and refines us in ways we are not aware of.

The grace of God cannot be perceived by the human eye. It has a mystery, a pace, a movement which, like the farmer, we need to respect. There are laws in the spiritual life as there are laws in nature. The laws of grace cannot be observed, dissected or perceived. Its gentle and masterful work is done in the unseen recesses of each human heart. Its healing and transforming power cuts away at the hard and unyielding parts of our nature – grace transforms, renews and builds on nature. As we are faithful to the disciplines of the spiritual life – daily prayer, reading God's Word, celebrating the Eucharist, resisting temptation and serving others in love and humility – unperceived by us a rich and abundant harvest will be revealed.

Holy Spirit, you are the Lord and the Giver of life. Your desire is that I grow in holiness and radiate in ever-increasing measure the beauty of Jesus. Grant me a renewed, keen and crisp grasp of the wisdom contained in the parables.

Hebrews 10:32-39 • Psalm 36(37):3-6, 23-24, 39-40

Mark 4:26-34

Saturday 31 January

Mark 4:35-41 • St John Bosco (Memorial)

Violent weather can be frightening. We glimpse the sheer power and force of nature. It demands respect and we fear its indiscriminate lash. Such weather often descends on the Sea of Galilee. Sudden turbulent squalls are common; they appear with no warning and can threaten to sink vessels with ease. A fertile imagination is not required to place ourselves in the disciples' shoes as they realized their plight. Jesus, apparently oblivious, dozed peacefully – on a cushion! Such a contrast is amusing. The imminent threat of loss of life, the pain of tragedy and the trauma of sudden death paralysed the disciples – we can easily imagine the kind of thoughts gripping their minds and hearts. We can understand why they woke Jesus to ask: 'Teacher, do you not care if we perish?' (v. 38). Their desperation gave rise to a profound question!

Jesus' reaction to their request is stunning and awe-inspiring. He rebuked the wind and calmed the sea. He then rebuked unbelief and calmed distraught minds. Sudden and violent squalls of anxiety, depression, and dark and negative thoughts can impinge on our lives. We can experience being swamped by so many issues, details and concerns. It can seem as if we too are going to drown!

All of us are prone to allowing destructive influences to capsize and undermine our faith. Like the disciples we can feel God is indifferent and does not care. In fact nothing could be further from the truth. This lie can be rebuked in the same way Jesus rebuked the wind and calmed the sea. God's care and love for us are unlimited. Our faith in God's love can remove the corrosive influence of fear, doubt and anxiety. The disciples asked: 'Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?' (v. 41). The light of faith moves us to recognize that Jesus is the Lord. He is the author of life and the key to human existence. He is always present whatever our predicament, and will calm our troubled mind, soothe our anxious hearts and guide us safely to his Father's house.

'Jesus Christ, the love that gives love, you are higher than the highest star; you are deeper than the deepest sea; you cherish us as your own family; you embrace us as your own spouse; you rule over us as your own subjects; you welcome us as your dearest friend. Let all the world worship you.' (Hildegard of Bingen)

Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19 • Luke 1:69-75

Mark 4:35-41