

Friday 1 January

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

It is fitting that on the first day of every year we celebrate the feast of Mary, Mother of God. In *Misericordiae vultus* Pope Francis says, ‘My thoughts now turn to the Mother of Mercy’ (para. 24), and, on this day, our thoughts also turn to Mary. We ask for her intercession and pray that she would watch over us, guide us and protect us.

Just as Abraham is our father in faith, Mary is our mother. At the foot of the cross Jesus gave Mary to the Church, to be her mother and to be our mother. She was the first disciple and above all she teaches us how to pray. Luke tells us that ‘Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart’ (v. 19 NIV). And so, in this extraordinary year of grace dedicated to discovering more of God’s mercy, we commit ourselves especially to learning the *Salve Regina*, if we do not already know it, and, if we do know it, to praying it more fervently and frequently.

When we pray the *Salve Regina*, Mary turns her merciful eyes towards us and makes us worthy to contemplate the face of Jesus, the face of mercy. The Holy Spirit leads us to make this prayer in such a way that we cherish every word and draw life from its proclamation. For Mary is indeed our gracious Advocate who looks on us and the world with eyes of mercy. Mary always leads us to her Son and always points us to the font of his mercy which we receive in lavish abundance in the gift of the Eucharist. Mary is not a mediator between us and God: rather she is our Friend, our Advocate, our Intercessor and our Mother. And so we say with heartfelt love and devotion in our hearts:

‘Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, our life, our sweetness and our hope. To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve. To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this vale of tears. Turn then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy towards us, and after this, our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus, O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary. Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God, that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.’

Numbers 6:22-27 • Psalm 66(67):2-3, 5, 6, 8

Galatians 4:4-7 • Luke 2:16-21

Saturday 2 January

(Memorial) SS Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen • 1 John 2:22-28

John is the Apostle of Love because his focus is always on the love the Father has lavished on us (1 John 3:1). Of course, it is impossible to distinguish between God's love and God's mercy. John testifies as one who has known the love of God in his own heart and rests, abides and remains in this love. Resting, abiding or remaining is a recurring theme in his letters: it is as if the apostle never tires of reminding and exhorting us to do just this – to abide in God's love.

But what is the secret of abiding in God's love and mercy? The idea of continually abiding in God's love can seem unrealistic and unworldly. After all we have jobs to do, families to care for, and our days are busy and demanding. How quickly we lose sight of God's presence and become easily distracted and consumed by the tyranny of the urgent and the constant demands. So what are we to do, what is the solution, because truly and surely how blessed our days would be if we abided in God's presence throughout the day!

John, thankfully, teaches us how. For him, the key to abiding is understanding our baptism, for in baptism we received God's anointing and this anointing lives in us: 'the anointing [baptism] which you received from him abides in you' (v. 27). Baptism immerses us into the very life of God. We are born again by the power of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and through the mystery of faith we become partakers in the divine nature. Baptism then, this wonderful anointing of God, brings about a deep change in us – in short, we become adopted children of the Father.

As children of God, we have the grace to live in his presence – we know we are welcome. And the more we experience God's love, the more we desire to rest, abide and remain in it. In this way God's presence becomes so real and so tangible that, like John, we have a living sense of it during our day. Living in God's presence is about living by faith, trusting in the truth that since the Spirit of God lives in us, we are temples of the Holy Spirit, heirs of eternal life.

Lord Jesus, may I by your grace live in the light of your presence during this day and lift up my heart in praise and thanksgiving for all your blessings.

1 John 2:22-28 • Psalm 97(98):1-4

John 1:19-28

Sunday 3 January

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

In *Misericordiae vultus* Pope Francis wrote, 'In this Jubilee Year, let us allow God to surprise us' (para. 25). Today, on the feast of the Epiphany, this is who we celebrate: the God of surprises. The Magi came in search of the God of surprises and followed the light of his star. We, like the Magi, are also following the star, the bright light of God's mercy, in this Holy Year of Mercy.

The motto for the Year of Mercy is: 'Be merciful as the Father is merciful' (Luke 6:36). To be merciful like the Father is to embrace a way of life and to learn to hear God's voice (Luke 6:27). It is by hearing God speak to us in silence and prayer that we learn to contemplate God's mercy and learn to show mercy almost as a way of life.

What does it mean to be merciful like the Father? It means being kind when tempted to be harsh, always seeing the good in others, and choosing to be forgiving instead of giving way to anger or resentment. We cannot do this in our own strength but need the grace of God and the blessing of the sacraments of the Church. Let us be led to the truth of God's mercy as the three kings were led by the star. Let us choose to follow as they chose.

Jesus came to reveal the Father to all men and women, Jew and Gentile alike. It is striking that in conversation with the woman at the well, Jesus told her that the Father actively seeks true worshippers who will worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:22). This is precisely what we witness in today's Gospel: the Magi were the perfect example of true worshippers, men of good will, open to the Holy Spirit and seeking to worship the Father in spirit and truth. They came from afar, from the East, and followed the star to Bethlehem. On seeing Jesus, 'they bowed down and worshipped him' (Matt. 2:11).

The Feast of the Epiphany reminds us of our call to be joyful evangelists, ambassadors of the Father's mercy who delight in the God of surprises.

Heavenly Father, today we are like the Magi: we too have seen the light of the gospel and have come to worship the King.

Isaiah 60:1-6 • Psalm 71(72):1-2, 7-8, 10-13
Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6 • Matthew 2:1-12

Monday 4 January

Christmas Weekday • 1 John 3:22-4:6

As human beings we have a tendency to overcomplicate and overthink things. Yet simplicity is a gift and trusting in God a grace. Today John teaches us a simple lesson which, if we take it to heart, could change our lives. We learn that we can strip faith down to two fundamentals: to belief in Jesus Christ and love of one another – it is no more complicated than that. Of course, another way of putting this is that the two greatest commandments are to love God (with all your soul and strength) and to love your neighbour as yourself. Nevertheless, like all simple truths there is a complexity and challenge underpinning them. How easy is it to believe in Jesus and love our neighbour? Paradoxically, it is both easy and difficult. Easy, because the Holy Spirit lives in us; difficult, because of our fallen nature.

Faith or belief is not something static or inert but rather living and dynamic. We often think it is self-evident that we believe in Jesus Christ and fail to nurture, cultivate and fan the flame of faith. We cannot say in our hearts and confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord without the indwelling of the Spirit. The truth is, if we are not deeply anchored in Jesus' Lordship we soon learn that we are slaves to other distractions: our schedule, our busyness, our money, our hobbies and so on. The flame of faith is warmed in our hearts through the grace and joy of repentance and conversion. When we pray, 'Lord, I do believe but strengthen and renew my faith every day', the Spirit quickly answers this prayer.

The love to which the New Testament calls us is agape love, requiring much more than sentiment. Agape love is rooted in the love of Christ. We love our neighbour when we seek to serve them in body, soul and spirit. To truly love our neighbour means that they encounter Christ in us, that they encounter one who is filled with the joy and clarity of the gospel because, as St Augustine said, 'He who does not give God gives too little.'

I proclaim with my lips and confess in my heart that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father. In this Holy Year of Mercy I commit myself to loving my neighbour as I love myself and sharing my faith with new joy and confidence.

1 John 3:22–4:6 • Psalm 2:7-8, 10-11

Matthew 4:12-17, 23-25

Tuesday 5 January

1 John 4:7-10 • Christmas Weekday

There is more than one type of love, as C S Lewis explained: ‘Charity means love. It is called Agape in the New Testament to distinguish it from Eros (sexual love), Storge (family affection) and Philia (friendship). So there are four kinds of love, all good in their proper place, but Agape is the best because it is the kind God has for us...’

Agape is the kind of love that John refers to in his letters. Let’s take a closer look at agape love.

And what better place to begin than John 3:16, probably one of the most well-known Scripture verses containing as it does the gospel in a nutshell: ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.’ John uses the Greek word *egapesen* which is the past tense of *agapao* and literally means ‘self-sacrificing love’. This kind of love is unique – it is, in fact, divine. To grasp it more firmly, think of the idea of loving someone not for what they can give you but for their own sake, and then imagine desiring only the very best for that person. And then take this thought even further by considering that, despite your love and affection not being reciprocated but actively rejected, you are prepared to suffer and endure in order to ensure their happiness and wellbeing.

Truth be told, most of us find this kind of love virtually impossible – and it is! But this is, of course, how God loves us, and the reason why agape love is so unique and special is because we are called to love as God loves. This quality of love is simply impossible without God’s grace – in fact, we could call it ‘grace love’ because it is only in the power of the Spirit that we receive the strength and grace to love as God loved. It is this quality of love, agape, that makes the world sit up and think. As Tertullian said: ‘What marks us in the eyes of our enemies is our loving kindness. “Only look,” they say, “look how they love one another.”’ This then is how we strive to love.

‘An instant of pure love is more precious to God and the soul and more profitable to the Church than all other good works together, though it may seem as if nothing were done.’ (St John of the Cross)

1 John 4:7-10 • Psalm 71(72):1-4, 7-8

Mark 6:34-44

Wednesday 6 January

Christmas Weekday • 1 John 4:11-18

John's understanding of God's love is rooted in the revelation of the extent to which God loves us: 'Beloved, if God so loved us...' (v. 11). Paul echoes this: 'But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us' (Rom. 5:8). Jesus came to make God's love visible.

Love is rather like faith, in that we have to question what good it is if we don't show it. In fact, faith and love are deeply entwined, as James explains: 'Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed", but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead' (2:15-16 NIV). So it is with love.

The problem is that we can find it hard enough to love our nearest and dearest in this way, let alone the stranger in our midst, the refugee, the migrant, the asylum seeker, the prisoner, the drug addict, those we despise, resent and feel hate towards. So here is the thing – and perhaps this is harder than we realize – to love as God has called us to love, we need kingdom logic. Kingdom logic says this: to love others, we need first to know God's love; to love others, we need to become aware of our own inability to do so, our bankruptcy if you like. Only then can we begin to put into practice the virtue of love, which is of course the greatest virtue of all. St John of the Cross said that in the evening of our lives we will all be judged by our love.

One practical way to grow in the love of God is to contemplate and meditate while gazing at a crucifix. This is because God's love was revealed most clearly in Jesus' passion and death. When we look upon the cross and pray simply, 'Lord Jesus, have mercy on me', the warm light of the grace of revelation floods our heart and soul and we find ourselves able to love as God loves us.

Lord, you love each one of us as if there were only one of us. By your grace may I learn to love my neighbour with the love of God poured out into my heart.

1 Jn 4:11-18 • Ps 71(72):1-2, 10-13 • Mk 6:45-52
(Solemnity of the Epiphany, see readings of 3 January)

Thursday 7 January

Luke 4:14-22 • Christmas Weekday

C S Lewis wrote: ‘A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg – or he would be the devil of hell. You must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us.’ This is the challenge we encounter in today’s Gospel reading when Jesus, after reading from the scroll, said: ‘Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’ (v. 21).

Truly, this was an amazing and incredible assertion for Jesus to make. It has to be true that there are only three conclusions to which we can come after hearing or reading these words: Jesus must either have been a lunatic with overblown delusions of grandeur or the ‘devil of hell’ or – perhaps most shocking of all – the fulfilment of holy Scripture, inspired by the Spirit to make that statement after reading Isaiah’s words on that Sabbath over two thousand years ago. Faith teaches us, by the gift of revelation, that Jesus of Nazareth is the fulfilment of Scripture.

St Jerome, that great Scripture scholar of old, said, ‘The Old Testament is pregnant with Christ.’ St Augustine said: ‘The New Testament was latent in the Old Testament but patent in the New.’ The Holy Spirit is the One who teaches us to approach the Scriptures with reverence and awe, and in that reverence and awe we receive a true understanding of who our Saviour is, causing us to ‘fall at his feet and call him Lord and God’. And in making that assertion our lives can never be the same again.

Lord, lead me on a journey into the deeper meaning of Scripture such that my heart will sing with joy and my spirit dance with the fullness of the Spirit as I see with ever-increasing clarity that Christ Jesus came to do your will and fulfil the Scriptures.

1 John 4:19–5:4 • Psalm 71(72):1-2, 14-15, 17

Luke 4:14-22

Friday 8 January

Christmas Weekday • 1 John 5:5-13

Most of us, truth be told, are so caught up in this world that we pay scant attention to the life to come. John, however, had a profound sense of the importance of the eternal in living the Christian life. He taught: 'I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know you have eternal life' (v. 13). Do you know that you have eternal life? Do you believe that you are going to heaven?

There is a mindset which rejects this idea, believing (falsely) that to say 'yes' means that we are being presumptuous or, worse, arrogant. This is nonsense and flies in the face of revelation and the teaching of Scripture. John is saying in a nutshell that if you believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, you can live in such a way that you have a sense or awareness that you have received the gift of eternal life. This is what we receive when we are baptized; it is a pure, unmerited and unconditional gift of God.

So, rooted and established in this knowledge, what do we do with it? How does it affect or impact our lives? John explains: it means that we don't approach God with timidity and in fear. No, the very opposite: we approach God with freedom and confidence. So great is our confidence, in fact, that we know that we can turn to God with anything that is on our hearts and be sure that he hears us. But don't believe this simply because we encourage it here – look at what John teaches. And as you read these words, know that the Church teaches us that every word of Scripture is the inspired Word of God. When we read the Scriptures it is not John or Peter or Paul or Matthew or Mark or Luke who is speaking to us: it is Almighty God himself. And the promise that God gives us is that 'if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him' (vv. 14-15).

Lord, I ask, according to your will, that I be filled with the joy of the gospel and the living hope of inheriting eternal life.

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

Luke 5:12-16

Saturday 9 January

1 John 5:14-21 • Christmas Weekday

John was steeped in the love and mercy of God. He didn't proclaim an idea, a theory or an ideology: he witnessed to a living relationship with God, whom he had seen with his own eyes, heard with his own ears and touched with his own hands in the person of Jesus Christ (see 1 John 1:1-2). We are invited to experience the same living relationship with God through Jesus Christ our Lord. St Augustine taught that 'God is closer to us than we are to ourselves'. God knows us better than we know ourselves, and in this extraordinary Year of Mercy we can grow in our understanding of what it means to be a Christian.

We learn something of this today as John's First Letter reaches its conclusion. For John, the closer we draw to Jesus and the better we get to know him, something extraordinary happens within us. By God's grace we begin to experience a drawing away from sin and a moving towards God. John puts it like this: 'We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin' (v. 18 NIV). Yet our hearts tell us that we do continue to sin and we often don't feel like 'overcomers' but more like those who have been overcome. Nevertheless, God holds out the hope to us that we can live by the Spirit and can overcome and conquer everything in our lives which prevents us from enjoying his life.

How do we live in such a way that the attraction of sin diminishes and we begin to long and thirst for holiness? The key is really in a desire created in us by the Spirit, compelling us to seek understanding from the Scriptures and revelation that when Christ died, we died with him. Since we died and rose with Christ, we can, with freedom and confidence, 'count [ourselves] dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 6:11). As new creations we can live joyful and victorious lives by the power of the Holy Spirit living within us; we no longer live but Christ lives in us. This does not mean that our personalities are overwhelmed, suppressed or oppressed but rather set free to bear witness as sons and daughters of God.

Lord, through your death and resurrection you have set us free. You are the Saviour of the world.

1 John 5:14-21 • Psalm 149:1-6, 9

John 3:22-30

Sunday 10 January

(Feast of the Lord) • Baptism of the Lord • Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

With the new year now well underway, today's feast-day brings to a fitting climax the seasons of Advent and Christmastide and draws our attention to the revelation of the Trinity which is at the very core of our Christian faith. This is the secret at the very heart of God's mystery, namely that God is Three Persons in One Godhead: the Father of Mercies, the Son who redeemed us and the Spirit who makes us holy. Jesus' mission was to reveal the mystery of the Blessed Trinity: God as Father, God as Son and God as Holy Spirit. Through baptism we are immersed into the mystery of the Blessed Trinity.

In this Year of Mercy we are invited to enter into the very depths of the unsearchable and unfathomable riches and treasure of God's life and mystery. As Christians, each one of us has received the call to evangelize and lead others into the mystery of the Trinity. Today, it is as if God is saying to us: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you' (Matt. 28:19-20).

Our life in the Spirit is simply a call to draw ever closer to each person of the Blessed Trinity. The Father is our trust, the Son our refuge and the Holy Spirit our protection. Our lives are to give glory and praise to the triune God. Did you know that the great explorer Christopher Columbus had a great and special devotion to the Blessed Trinity? He invoked the Trinity at the beginning of every voyage and everything he wrote began with: 'I come before you in the name of the most Holy Trinity.' On his third voyage in 1498 he vowed to consecrate to the Trinity the first land that he would discover and hence the island he reached first was called Trinidad. As we embark on our journey through this new year, we too invoke the Blessed Trinity and ask that the Father pour out his love, the Son his mercy, and the Spirit his grace and power upon us.

Lord, I renew the commitment of my own baptism, renouncing sin, promising to serve you faithfully in your holy Church and seeking to know you more and more.

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11 • Psalm 103(104):1-4, 24-30
Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7 • Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Monday 11 January

Mark 1:14-20

Today's reading is a kind of masterclass in the art of evangelization. Through an encounter with Christ, four fishermen – two sets of brothers, Andrew and Simon, James and John – left their nets and committed their lives to Christ. What can we glean from this striking and memorable example of the power of meeting Christ to transform lives?

The first principle that we glean is that the message of the gospel always accompanies a message of repentance. The call of repentance and conversion is at the very core, the very heart, of returning to God. This was the message that was presented to these four men, who would go on to be pillars of the Church – and, indeed, in Simon Peter's case, the first Pope. We know this because Jesus says: 'The time has come... The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!' (v. 15 NIV). The idea of repentance is often misunderstood and perceived rather negatively. We have lost a sense of sin and, as a result, have lost a sense of the need to repent. Repentance is crucial because it establishes our relationship with God – God is holy, we are sinners.

The problem with sin and repentance is that we (wrongly) think it's a rather depressing message. But the very opposite is true. To repent, confess, admit and lay before God our weakness, our darkness and the many ways we let God and other people down, is to face reality. Or, to put it another way, is to face the truth, and it is the truth which sets us free (John 8:32). The reason it liberates us is because in facing up to our fallen nature, we take responsibility for our words and deeds and throw ourselves on the mercy of God.

The gospel is for beggars; it is for those who know they are in the gutter looking up at the stars, but through the grace of humility, repentance and conversion are raised up to become sons and daughters of God. Rooted and established in the grace of repentance we are then equipped to be evangelists – and joyful ones at that!

Lord, you call us to be fishers of men and women although we are weighed down by the burden of sin and guilt. Teach me to be a witness of your grace and of the joy of heartfelt repentance, and in turn lead others to know deeply and personally your mercy and forgiveness.

1 Samuel 1:1-8 • Psalm 115(116):12-19

Mark 1:14-20

Tuesday 12 January

Mark 1:21-28

We are not told what Jesus taught about in the synagogue in Capernaum, but we are told that he taught with authority – with such authority, in fact, that the people were amazed. We should all be leaving Mass on a Sunday amazed by the preaching we hear, not solely because of the content but also because our bishop, priest or deacon speaks with life-changing authority and power! It is a mystery why more preachers don't have this gift.

Such preaching is certainly a gift. They say that St John Vianney was at first a poor preacher. He struggled academically and only managed by the skin of his teeth to pass the necessary examinations to enter seminary and prepare for the priesthood. As a parish priest, he was apparently so often overcome with nerves and apprehension that before preaching he would despair and he would often freeze and forget his words. To overcome this problem, he dedicated his week to committing his sermon to memory and he often rose in the early hours to practise it. Remarkably, however, over time he learnt to master the art of preaching and people would come from miles around to listen to the heartfelt and moving sermons of the Curé d'Ars, who became the patron saint of parish priests all over the world.

We must pray for our clergy that they too may preach with the authority of Christ. Sadly, many read their sermons and so, no matter how wonderful their words, they lack a certain authority. If only more would speak from the heart, the fruit of their own personal study of Church teaching and Scripture. For it is from this source, the wellspring of the Magisterium and the Scriptures, that the authority of the gospel is released. We see this in the ministry of Pope Francis who once threw down a prepared speech and said, 'This is boring, I will speak from my heart.'

The gospel message has the power to change lives. Thankfully, we do not need to leave preaching and teaching to the clergy: lay people are also called to proclaim the gospel. We do this best and most effectively by becoming familiar with the Scriptures and sharing them from our hearts – with the freedom, confidence and authority given by the Holy Spirit.

Lord, may my witness to the truth of the gospel be authentic and sincere, and carry the mark of authority and personal experience.

1 Samuel 1:9-20 • 1 Samuel 2:1, 4-8

Mark 1:21-28

Wednesday 13 January

Mark 1:29-39

How often do you get up early just to pray? Many arise early for work or to catch an early morning flight, but few to pray. Mark informs us that Jesus used to get up early, when it was still dark, and find a solitary place to pray. We can only conjecture what it was the Lord took to prayer but we can be sure that it was in these moments of deep communion with his Father that he drew strength and gained wisdom.

Perhaps in the prayer times to which Mark refers, the Lord heard the Father speak to him about why he had been sent. We can conjecture this because when the disciples went looking for him during one of these early morning prayer sessions, the Lord said to them: 'Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so I can preach there also. That is why I have come' (v. 38 NIV).

Prayer is really at the heart of our relationship with God. In prayer we receive from God the blessings and graces which give us the strength, courage, validation and affirmation we so desperately need. In prayer Jesus would have heard the Father speak to him and assure him of his love. The same is true for us: we too need to hear the Father's voice and be assured of his love. We too need to have an interior clarity about our vocation and calling, whatever that may be.

Prayer is best understood as nourishment for the soul. When we pray we feed our souls; when we don't pray we grow weak and weary. The analogy with food holds true, and although many find it hard to pray in the early hours of the morning, just as it is good to have breakfast, so too it is good to pray before the day gets underway.

'Father, keep us from vain strife of words.
Grant to us constant profession of the Truth!
Preserve us in a true and undefiled faith
so that we may hold fast to that which we professed when we were baptized
in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
that we may have thee for our Father,
that we may abide in thy Son
and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.
Through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.' (St Hilary of Poitiers)

1 Samuel 3:1-10, 19-20 • Psalm 39(40):2, 5, 7-10
Mark 1:29-39

Thursday 14 January

Mark 1:40-45

Many things are striking about the healing of the leper. For example, Jesus was ‘filled with compassion’ for him (NIV); Jesus touched him, despite the fact that, according to the Mosaic law, simply touching a leper caused defilement (see Lev. 13:45-46); Jesus’ words ‘be clean’ were enough to heal the man immediately. It was a stunning and truly incredible miracle, which revealed the amazing power of God at work in Jesus to transform lives.

Today, however, we are not going to focus on these amazing signs of God’s grace and power at work in our world, but rather on what the leper didn’t do. Remarkably and somewhat confusingly Jesus instructed the man to tell no one of his healing but rather to show himself to the priest and offer the sacrifices commanded by Moses for such a cleansing. It is striking that he did the exact opposite of what Jesus had asked. Like many scriptures this one is perplexing, and to understand it we need to look below the surface with the help of the Holy Spirit, who takes us by the hand and leads us on an adventure into the deeper meaning of the Scriptures.

Why did Jesus instruct the leper to keep quiet about the incredible healing he had received? Running through Mark’s Gospel is the motif of the Messianic Secret – the idea that Jesus’ true identity would be revealed at the proper time. For while many Jews believed Jesus to be the promised Messiah, they understood the Messiah to be a conquering king, releasing them from oppression and their chains of slavery under the occupying Roman army. The notion that the Messiah would undergo an ignominious death on a cross was unthinkable and actually repellent (cf. Isa. 53, the Suffering Servant).

In short, Jesus wanted the leper to keep a secret and obey his Lord. We are also called to obey God, but often it is this obedience which can be most difficult and challenging. We can be like the leper, overly eager and keen to rely on our own thinking and less inclined to be still and hear the Lord’s voice. The Lord’s voice guides us to think the way God thinks, act the way God acts and move the way God moves.

Lord, guide me with your wisdom and the grace of the Spirit. Teach me to rely less on my own thinking and more on the light and guidance of your holy Word.

1 Samuel 4:1-11 • Psalm 43(44):10-11, 14-15, 24-25

Mark 1:40-45

Friday 15 January

Mark 2:1-12

The religious authorities of Jesus' day were not bad men; for the most part they were good men doing their best to live out their faith. Nevertheless, Jesus put their noses out of joint by his healing, his teaching and his presence among them. They had contempt for him and they resisted him, but one thing, and one thing alone, tipped them over the edge and made them contemplate murdering him – and that was blasphemy.

We don't often appreciate this but to the Jewish leaders of his day Jesus was a blasphemer the like of which they had never come across before. He was for them the supreme blasphemer because he claimed to be able to forgive sin and no one can forgive sin except God. Indeed, in Jewish theology even the Messiah couldn't forgive sin. The sin of blasphemy not only involved reviling the name of God (Lev. 24:10-16) but also included any affront to his majesty and authority. The penalty for blasphemy was death by stoning (Lev. 24:16). Ultimately this was the reason why the Jewish authorities urged the Romans to crucify Jesus because he claimed to be God able to forgive sins and insisted he was the King.

As these teachers of the law watched Jesus' interaction with the paralyzed man, in their hearts they were silently accusing him of blasphemy. Able to discern what they were thinking Jesus posed the question: 'Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Rise, take up your pallet and walk"?' (v. 9).

While these religious leaders would never have admitted it, of course the forgiveness of sins is the greatest miracle of all because the healing it brings holds true for this world and the next. God's mercy and forgiveness poured out upon us is the miracle of all miracles, and in touching this mystery of God's love we receive grace and power to be witnesses of God's love and mercy. So glorious and wonderful is the forgiveness of sins that we received in the grace of baptism that the Catechism of the Catholic Church says: 'there remained in us [after baptism] absolutely nothing left to efface, neither original sin nor offences committed by our own will' (para. 978).

Lord, even if I should sin until the last moment of my life, the grace of your forgiveness is always available to me. I bow down on my knees and worship you in praise and adoration.

1 Samuel 8:4-7, 10-22 • Psalm 88(89):16-19

Mark 2:1-12

Saturday 16 January

Mark 2:13-17

The calling of St Matthew (today's Gospel reading) holds a very special place in the heart of Pope Francis. In 1953, on the feast of St Matthew, the young Jorge Bergoglio, while at confession, experienced in a unique and special way the love and presence of God in his life. This encounter transformed his life and at that moment he knew God was calling him, as Jesus had called Matthew, to follow him.

Pope Francis chose as his episcopal and papal motto the Latin words *miserando atque eligendo*, which means 'having mercy and choosing'. These very words are found in a homily by the church historian and Scripture scholar St Bede on the calling of St Matthew, in which he wrote: 'Jesus therefore sees the tax collector, and since he sees by having mercy and by choosing, he says to him, "Follow me."'

Many years later Pope Francis said of the moment of grace he experienced: 'In that confession, something very rare happened to me. I don't know what it was, but it changed my life. I would say that I was caught with my guard down...It was a surprise, the astonishment of an encounter. I realized that God was waiting for me. From that moment, for me God has been the one who precedes you...We want to meet him but he meets us first.' He went on: 'I believe in my history – which was pierced by God's look of love, on September 21, the feast of Saint Matthew – he came to meet me and invited me to follow him' (quoted from an interview with Sergio Rubin).

Interestingly when he visited Rome before he became Pope, Cardinal Bergoglio used to visit the church of St Louis of France in which hangs the famous painting by Caravaggio entitled 'The Calling of St Matthew'. Matthew and Pope Francis both encountered in Jesus of Nazareth the merciful face of the Father. This is the very essence of the Christian life: to devote our lives to contemplating the rich and tender mercy of God revealed in the face of Christ. It is this gaze of mercy which changes lives, transforms the world, makes everything new, convinces us of God's love and reveals the depth, length, width and height of God's mercy, forgiveness and compassion.

Have mercy upon me, O Lord, according to your unfailing love and abounding compassion and forgiveness. O Lord, have mercy on me a sinner.

1 Samuel 9:1-4, 17-19; 10:1 • Psalm 20(21):2-7

Mark 2:13-17

Sunday 17 January

John 2:1-11 • Second Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

Today we are introduced to what Scripture scholars and theologians refer to as John's sign theology. 'What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory' (v. 11 NIV). John's approach is to look above and beyond the meaning of Jesus' miracles to see their deeper meaning – to use them as a way to give us a deeper understanding of the mystery of Christ. The question John's sign theology always invites us to ask is: 'What does this sign mean?'

One immediate question this story answers is whether or not alcohol is a good thing. By changing six jars of water – each of which scholars tell us would hold 15 to 20 gallons – into the finest of wines, Jesus confirmed the goodness of wine. Like many good things in creation, it is not wine that is evil but the abuse of it.

But the sign of the changing of water into wine also helps to understand more about Jesus' role and purpose in coming to earth. Within Jewish theology and spirituality an abundance of wine was a prophetic image pointing to the dawning of the messianic age, for example: 'on each vine there shall be a thousand branches, and each branch will carry a thousand clusters and each cluster produce a thousand grapes, and each grape produce a cor [about 120 gallons] of wine...because these are they who have come to the consummation of time' (2 Bar. 29; see also Isa. 25:6; Amos 9:13-14).

By changing water into huge quantities of wine, Jesus was hinting that the messianic age had now arrived. It was the responsibility of the bridegroom to provide wine in abundance at a wedding feast, and so, by remedying the lack of wine at the wedding in Cana, Jesus pointed to his identity as the divine Bridegroom and Messiah and to the New Covenant he was going to accomplish by his life and death. With this 'new wine', a new era had begun – an era in which Jesus himself is the Bridegroom (John 3:29). In this Year of Mercy, we drink the wine of the New Covenant and are filled with the joy and mercy of Christ.

Lord Jesus, may I drink deeply of the wine of the New Covenant, and may my heart sing a new and joyful song proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah who gives us the gift of eternal life.

Isaiah 62:1-5 • Psalm 95 (96):1-3, 7-10

1 Corinthians 12:4-11 • John 2:1-11

Monday 18 January

Mark 2:18-22

Perhaps John the Baptist's disciples were fasting because he was in prison or perhaps they had embraced fasting as a way of life. There is no doubt that John the Baptist lived ascetically and encouraged his disciples to do likewise. One danger, however, that all those who fast need to watch out for is that the practice can evoke a certain competitiveness. Of course, this attitude rather defeats the object of all religious fasting, which is to grow closer to God, not put oneself over and above others.

This is precisely what happened with the Pharisees, who approached Jesus rather indignantly, pointing out that the Baptist's disciples fasted and they themselves fasted, but they saw no evidence of his disciples fasting. Interestingly, the only fast that was required of the Jewish faithful was on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), although after the Babylonian exile four other fasts were introduced (see, e.g., Zech. 7:5). In Jesus' day the Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12) and were keen that everybody knew about it!

True fasting makes us focus less on what others are doing or not doing, and more on our dependence on God. Fasting is a sign of conversion and repentance, and truly a time has now come when Christians are called to fast as we await the return of the Bridegroom. Of course, since the resurrection of Jesus from the dead we can enjoy both a time of fasting and a time of plenty.

With the season of Lent just around the corner we are shortly to enter into a time of fasting. Fasting is less about an external act and more about our interior disposition and attitude of heart. Going without food or water for a period brings to the fore our dependence upon God. Fasting (which can be broader than simply fasting from food) is essentially humbling and it is the humble whom God raises up. In this Year of Mercy we can re-discover fasting as a grace of the Spirit enabling us to seek the merciful face of God. At our baptism the Spirit made us a new creation, and through prayer, fasting and almsgiving we renew and refresh the work of the Spirit in our lives.

Lord Jesus, pour out into my life the wine of the New Covenant so I may witness to the abundant fruit of the Spirit in love, joy, peace and patience.

1 Samuel 15:16-23 • Psalm 49(50):8-9, 16-17, 21, 23

Mark 2:18-22

Tuesday 19 January

Mark 2:23-28

Technically what Jesus' disciples were doing was strictly forbidden on the Sabbath (Exod. 34:21). But Jesus looked beyond the letter of the law to see the spirit behind it – something the religious leaders were not very good at doing. Jesus argued from Scripture, showing that even David eschewed the law because his men were hungry (1 Sam. 21:2-7). Jesus taught that the Sabbath was intended as a day of rest, refreshment and renewal – it wasn't made so we could impose rules and regulations on other people undermining their human dignity.

Jesus underlined and even stamped his own authority on the Sabbath by referring to himself as the Son of Man, a title from Daniel 7:13 referring to the future Redeemer of Israel. Jesus is the Redeemer and Saviour of not only Israel but the whole world, and not only he is the Lord of the Sabbath he is also the Lord of our lives. And not only is he the Lord of our lives he is also the Lord of all creation, by whom and for whom all things were created (Col. 1:16).

What is striking about Jesus' encounter with the indignant Pharisees is how their understanding of their faith made them harsh and unmerciful. They had embraced a legalism which spilled out in the way they treated others, binding people up rather than setting them free. How can we avoid the same temptation? By growing in our understanding of Jesus' lordship over our lives. He is the Servant King and the Son of Man who came to seek and save the lost and give his life as a ransom for many.

This Year of Mercy, which is now well underway, provides us all with an opportunity to enter into the mystery of God's mercy in sending his Son to die upon the cross. We avoid religious legalism by immersing ourselves in the glory and beauty of Jesus' cross. Because through the grace of revelation we understand that we are fallen and far from God but through the cross we are reconciled to him, and we celebrate the amazing truth that the Son of Man became a son of man, in order that the sons of men might be raised up to become sons and daughters of the living God.

Lord, I am a temple of the Holy Spirit and God's Spirit lives in me. Teach me to immerse myself in the glory and beauty of the cross.

1 Samuel 16:1-13 • Psalm 88(89):20-22, 27-28

Mark 2:23-28

Wednesday 20 January

Mark 3:1-6

Jesus rattled cages and got under people's skin – and none more so than the Pharisees, the religious elite of his day. The Pharisees despised and detested Jesus. Actually despised and detested isn't the half of it: they wanted him dead (v. 6). In a cold and calculated way they 'plotted' to murder him. The Pharisees, as a group, were literally Jesus' mortal enemies. This is perplexing at many levels: these men were devout Jews, good religious men who strove to follow the Torah. They were also, it has to be said, an elite, and those who belong to an elite or profession are threatened easily.

Jesus did not take their criticism and obtuse behaviour with a pinch of salt. He took them up on it and challenged their spite and malice. They definitely caused him untold suffering and distress because of their attitude towards him. It is a striking and sobering fact that while the tax collectors, prostitutes and those on the margins of society flocked to Jesus, the religious elite, the professional religious if you like, hounded Jesus all his days until his dying breath.

Jesus' life and mission was lived out in a historical context, but in the millennia between his time and ours human drives and motivations have not changed. The Holy Spirit gives us the wisdom to see ourselves in the Pharisees; he exposes the vein of spite and cruelty that flowed through their hearts, cracking the religious veneer that covered their lives. Jesus fulfilled the purpose of the Sabbath by doing good and healing a man with a shrivelled hand, then and there. It was an outstanding intervention of God in which the poor man's affliction was instantly and completely healed. Yet, rather than invoke praise and worship of God it resulted in men plotting murder and revenge. Staggering, isn't it? Frightening even!

However, when we look into our own hearts can we see something of the heart of the Pharisee? How do we react or respond when a new initiative begins in our parish or diocese? How do we respond or react to young people who are enthusiastic about their faith? How do we react or respond to change in our parish – an alteration in the time of Mass or a new parish priest coming in?

Father, drive from my heart all malice and spite, and teach me to live by the Spirit and to be open to the work of God in my midst.

1 Samuel 17:32-33, 37, 40-51 • Psalm 143(144):1-2, 9-10

Mark 3:1-6

Thursday 21 January

Mark 3:7-12 • St Agnes (Memorial)

The Year of Mercy is a wonderful opportunity to evangelize and witness to our faith. Evangelizing is one of those elements of Christian discipleship which we often pay lip-service to, but which we actually rarely do. We might draw attention to our charitable giving or our support of CAFOD or other worthy causes, and convince ourselves that this is evangelizing. Or we just might persuade ourselves that we are evangelizing by being decent, kind people. The trouble is that you can find many atheists, agnostics and people of good will who are often more concerned for humanitarian concerns than believers are and can, in fact, be much more decent, upright and generally nicer people!

Deep down, of course, although we might not admit this, the reason we don't evangelize is because we are scared to death of sharing what we believe because actually we aren't too sure ourselves. We can also succumb to thinking that the gospel message is just too hard for people to accept and believe, and so we don't seek to understand it for ourselves or seek to share it either.

Today's reading holds out a way forward to understanding what evangelization really is all about. Mark records that the people were drawn to Jesus from far and wide – in a nutshell, they flocked to him, they wanted to see him, hear him, touch him. You see, Jesus is Christianity. He is the One we are drawn to. To be an evangelist means that by our life, our witness, our words, yes, even our teaching, preaching and sharing, we bear witness to Jesus being the key, the answer, the solution and the reason for human existence. People flocked to Jesus then and flock to him now because in him they encounter God as merciful, kind, compassionate, understanding, patient and forgiving.

To be an evangelist is, then, to witness to the reality of Christ in our lives. In other words, if we believe in our hearts that Jesus is Lord, then we must hold out to others the healing message of the gospel. This is why evangelism isn't about telling people how worthy or noble we are but rather about witnessing clearly and confidently that we are all beggars in need of God's mercy and healing.

Lord Jesus, help me to win over others to the love of God by the grace of attraction which bears witness to your mercy, love and forgiveness.

1 Samuel 18:6-9; 19:1-7 • Psalm 55(56):2-3, 9-14

Mark 3:7-12

Friday 22 January

Mark 3:13-19

There is a distinction made between the calling of the disciples and the commissioning of the disciples insofar as Mark describes these as two separate incidents. The general call of the disciples occurs a little earlier in the Gospel, but today's reading recounts something more solemn: their commissioning. As though to emphasize this, Mark tells us that Jesus 'went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him' (v. 13 NIV).

Is there perhaps here an allusion to Moses being summoned up the mountain (Sinai) to receive the commandments of God which were to form the basis of the covenant between God and the people of Israel (the twelve tribes)? Already in his Gospel, Mark has established Jesus' ministry in the context of the covenant – this is part of the significance of Jesus' healing miracles taking place on the Sabbath and of his words that 'the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath' (2:28). The Sabbath was at the heart of the covenant with God. Jesus is establishing a new and everlasting covenant, and indeed a new people embodied in the twelve apostles.

This context throws light upon what follows. In commissioning the apostles, Jesus does not reiterate the ten commandments, but rather says that the apostles are appointed to 'be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons' (vv. 14-15 NIV). If we recall that the ten commandments may be thought of as three commandments concerning love of God and the remaining seven concerning love of neighbour, we can perhaps see that Jesus' commission also divides twofold: to be with him, on the one hand, and to preach and have authority to drive out demons on the other. Jesus is revealing both the deeper purpose of the original Decalogue – that Israel's role through their relationship with God was to bring salvation to the nations – and also the new mission that the apostles were to undertake. In this new mission, their relationship with Jesus was to be the decisive element. In fact, the apostles were to have a share in the very mission that Jesus himself came to accomplish – bringing salvation to all the nations and establishing a new covenant between God and humanity.

The decisive element for us too is 'to be with Jesus'. Let's unite ourselves to him each day, so that he also may work through us!

1 Samuel 24:3-23 • Psalm 56(57):2-4, 6, 11

Mark 3:13-19

Saturday 23 January

Mark 3:20-21

Today's reading presents us with only two stark verses. Because tomorrow is a Sunday and Monday is the feast of the Conversion of St Paul, we shall miss out on reading verses 22-30. It would be good to read the whole passage from verse 20 through to verse 30, not least because the verses stand together even though at first sight they seem quite separate. Let's consider what is happening in these verses.

Jesus is being challenged by two different groups of people. In the first place, it is Jesus' relatives. He has come back to his home town and is being mobbed by the crowd. His relatives, perhaps with good intentions, are determined to 'seize him' because they think, or rather the word is going round, that he is out of his mind! The other group are officials from Jerusalem, who have arrived to make a judgement about Jesus and his behaviour. They have little hesitation in concluding that Jesus is demon-possessed!

There are certain similarities between the thinking of these two groups. At the time, signs of mental imbalance were suspected as having a demonic source. The scribes from Jerusalem came right out with it – Beelzebul was a name for Satan! What is happening is that there is an unwillingness to accept Jesus for who he is or to acknowledge the true working of God. Jesus counters the charge that he is acting in the power of the Evil One by suggesting that it is absurd to think that Satan would be acting against himself. He goes on to give a solemn warning that there is a danger of blaspheming and of sinning against the Holy Spirit.

Does this mean that there is some particular sin which is unforgivable? This would seem rather arbitrary. No, the meaning here is that there is a very real danger that, by persisting in refusing to acknowledge the action of God – the action of the Holy Spirit in the person of Jesus – we might also be preventing the action of the Holy Spirit in our own lives. Because it is through the agency of the Holy Spirit that we acknowledge sin and also that we receive the mercy of God's forgiveness, we can erect an obstacle to experiencing these realities by refusing to acknowledge Jesus. The sin becomes unforgivable only because we refuse to be open to God's mercy as it is revealed in Jesus.

2 Samuel 1:1-4, 11-12, 17, 19, 23-27 • Psalm 79(80):2-7

Mark 3:20-21

Sunday 24 January

(C) Third Sunday in Ordinary Time • Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21

Although on Sundays we change from reading St Mark's Gospel to that of St Luke, there is an interesting link today with the theme of yesterday's reading. Luke makes it abundantly clear that Jesus is acting in the power of the Spirit! In fact, Luke's Gospel is sometimes described as the Gospel of the Spirit. At certain key moments in his life and ministry, Jesus is described as being 'filled with the Spirit'.

In the opening chapters of this Gospel, described as the Infancy Narratives, the Holy Spirit is very clearly active in Mary, Zechariah, Elizabeth, John the Baptist and Simeon. In each of these persons, it is the work of the Spirit to open their eyes and hearts in recognition of the true reality and nature of Jesus. Remarkably, John the Baptist acknowledged the presence of Jesus from within the womb of his mother, Elizabeth, who felt him leap for joy! At the time, Jesus himself was present in the womb of his mother. What an amazing meeting this was! On the face of it, two pregnant women greeted each other. But, in the hidden depths, John encountered the saving mystery of Jesus. This encounter was brought about by the working of the Holy Spirit.

The second half of today's reading is from the fourth chapter of Luke's Gospel and describes Jesus, in the synagogue, reading a passage from the prophet Isaiah. The passage begins: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...' It goes on to list the activities that the anointing of the Spirit empowers: preaching the good news to the poor, proclaiming liberty to captives and announcing the year of the Lord's favour. As the people await his commentary on the text, Jesus declares: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

Luke is beginning to introduce a major theme of his Gospel, namely, the hidden presence of Jesus in the Scriptures – the Old Testament. For now we see Jesus revealing this hidden presence in a text from the book of Isaiah. Significantly, at the end of the Gospel, on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24), Jesus reveals his presence in the whole of the Old Testament. Luke is telling us that the Old Testament itself is like Mary at the visitation bearing within her the living presence of Jesus. It is through the power of the same Spirit that the presence of Jesus in Scripture is recognized!

Nehemiah 8:2-6, 8-10 • Psalm 18(19):8-10, 15
1 Corinthians 12:12-30 • Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21

Monday 25 January

Mark 16:15-18 • Conversion of St Paul (Feast)

Once again the sequence of our readings is broken today because we are celebrating a great feast – the Conversion of St Paul. But once again, today's Gospel reading actually continues the theme that has been emerging over the last few days. We read, last Friday, Mark's account of Jesus' commissioning of the twelve apostles. In the Gospel today, we read of the Risen Jesus once again commissioning the apostles. In yesterday's reading from Luke, Jesus reads a text which reveals that the commission needs the work and power of the Holy Spirit – preaching the good news, bringing liberty to captives, etc. Clearly, in today's reading, Jesus is handing on to the apostles not only the task for which he himself was anointed but is also empowering them with the same Spirit. How could they perform all these works, or indeed baptize people in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, unless they themselves were also anointed by the Spirit?

It is interesting to reflect that, as far as we know from the New Testament, although Paul himself was baptized, as presumably was Ananias, nowhere do we read that the apostles were ever baptized! We do, of course, know that they received the anointing, the outpouring, of the Holy Spirit. It would appear also that they experienced this anointing of the Holy Spirit on more than one occasion – e.g. in John's Gospel Jesus breathed on the apostles and said: 'Receive the Holy Spirit'; in Acts 2 there is the account of Pentecost; and in Acts 4:31ff. Pentecost is repeated after the apostles meet with some opposition and persecution.

So why is this Gospel reading chosen for the feast of the Conversion of St Paul? Paul also received the same commission, but it was through the baptism which Ananias carried out for him that Paul was empowered by the same Holy Spirit. If we read Romans 6, it is clear that, for Paul, his baptism was of immense significance. 'Did you not know that when you were baptized you died with Christ...and were raised to life with Christ?' Paul's conversion is directly related to his baptism and the gift of the Spirit. The same is true for each one of us.

Let us call on the intercession of St Paul that we might be empowered to carry out our share in Christ's mission in the world.

Acts 22:3-16 or Acts 9:1-22 • Psalm 116(117):1-2

Mark 16:15-18

Tuesday 26 January

(Memorial) SS Timothy and Titus • Mark 3:31-35

We return today to the text of Mark's Gospel and pick up once more the scene where Jesus' relatives were looking to 'seize him'. After the incident with the Jerusalem scribes, the relatives now arrive, including his mother, and Jesus is informed. What is now surprising is that Jesus continues speaking to the crowd and asks rhetorically: 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' He answers his own question: 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.'

What might seem like a snub or a disregard of his mother and relatives is surely not to be understood in this way. Indeed, is not Jesus actually extolling what Mary's greatness was – that she totally accepted God's will in her life? In the first place, her faithful acquiescence to becoming the mother of Jesus was her way of doing the will of God. Perhaps now she was to learn another aspect of doing God's will. This was to understand and appreciate that her son was himself carrying out the will of God, even though there might have been certain fears about his actions. Mary had had to learn that lesson on a previous occasion when her young son was found in the temple. No doubt, as the hostility of the Jewish authorities hardened towards Jesus, she also had to relearn the message given to her by Simeon – that a sword would pierce her heart! As time went by, she came to see that her son was going to carry out to the end everything that the Father willed for him.

As we saw on Sunday, the Father's will and purpose for his Son lies hidden within the texts of the Old Testament. Along with Mary, and all of Jesus' disciples, we see the text of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We see in the text of the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22) a revelation of the Father's will for Jesus. In the handing over of Joseph by his brothers, in the raising of the bronze serpent in the wilderness by Moses, in the sacrifice of the lambs in the temple and so many more texts, we see that God's revelation has always and ultimately been about Jesus and his sacrificial death! The more we embrace the Father's revelation about his Son, the more intimately related to Jesus we become.

Proper of the Saints: 2 Tim 1:1-8 or Titus 1:1-5 • Ps 95(96):1-3, 7-8, 10

Proper of the Season: Mark 3:31-35

Wednesday 27 January

Mark 4:1-20

Mark's primary goal is to bring his readers/hearers into direct communion or encounter with the living Christ. Over the last few days we have seen how the Gospel writer tries to bring out this truth, including focusing on the sort of mindsets that might prevent us from experiencing this encounter. So much depends on faith and openness to the truth about Jesus – that he truly is the Son of God!

Today and for the next three days, we move into a section of the Gospel in which Jesus is teaching through parables. We are invited to pay attention not only to the power and authority of Jesus' words, but also to their content and to the way that his words can take root in our lives and transform us. The first parable recorded in the three Synoptic Gospels is the parable of the Sower. It is important because Jesus says of it: 'Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?' (v. 13). So the Sower parable is a sort of key to unlocking all of the parables (and all of the teaching?) of Jesus. Why is this? Because the parable shows something of the process by which the word of Jesus is received and bears fruit within the human heart and mind, and shows also the various obstacles that need to be overcome if the word is to be successful in transforming us.

Notice that the various kinds of soil in which the seed is sown manifest a progression. Each variety is more productive than the one before it – e.g. the rocky soil is more fruitful than the path. However, each soil has its particular problem which obstructs the full fruitfulness of the seed. As a result, we can see that the fruitful soil is soil that has overcome the problems and obstacles of the previous three soils.

Only in this parable does Jesus actually explain the meaning of the three soils and the nature of the problems needing to be overcome. The path: hardness of heart and the Evil One stealing the word away. The rocky soil: lack of water (the Spirit bringing the word to life), and ideas that undermine confidence in God's word. The thorny soil: the word is choked because of the prevailing views of society. If we hold the Lord's word firmly in our minds and resist each of these obstacles, it will bear fruit within us.

2 Samuel 7:4-17 • Psalm 88(89):4-5, 27-30

Mark 4:1-20

Thursday 28 January

(Memorial) St Thomas Aquinas • Mark 4:21-25

Jesus uses a different metaphor in the brief reading today. Rather than a sower sowing seed, the image is of a lamp bringing light into the darkness. In both cases, however, the images refer to Jesus himself. While the seed is his word, the lamp refers to his coming into our world to bring the light of truth – truth that will set the world free from the thrall of darkness and ignorance. The parable also touches on an issue that we have already seen in the parable of the Sower: the fact that the word is sown/proclaimed does not automatically guarantee that it will have an effect; the fact that the lamp has come into the world does not automatically mean that people will recognize the light and rejoice in it. The seed can remain unproductive, the light can remain hidden.

At one level, the hiddenness of the light is related to the apparent ordinariness of Jesus. He grew up within a family and for thirty years was simply the carpenter's son. There is a hiddenness also because people's minds were closed to the possibility that God's Son could come among us. And yet, the words and actions of Jesus created a dilemma. What were people to make of what they were hearing and seeing?

There is a whole other sense in which we can reflect on the hiddenness of Jesus. This relates to the reading last Sunday. The mystery of Jesus is also hidden within the words and events of the Old Testament Scriptures. All of the Gospel writers have their eye on the Old Testament as they recount the events of Jesus' life and ministry, and especially their account of his death and resurrection. The Church too has understood this and, as a result, we continue to listen to the Old Testament in the daily and Sunday liturgy.

Let us look at the Old Testament reading selected by the Church for today. The passage from 2 Samuel 7 relates King David's desire to build a temple in Jerusalem. God sent the prophet Nathan to David to tell him that, on the contrary, it would be God who would build a house for David and indeed establish a kingdom and dynasty that would last forever. With the coming of Jesus and his death and resurrection, this text is fulfilled, because the kingdom of the Son of David is now established forever. The light that was hidden is now revealed!

2 Samuel 7:18-19, 24-29 • Psalm 131(132):1-5, 11-14
Mark 4:21-25

Friday 29 January

Mark 4:26-34

Today's reading provides an example of the New Testament having an eye towards the Old Testament. When Jesus describes the kingdom of God as being like a mustard seed, which grows into the largest of shrubs, it is likely that he has in mind the image in the Old Testament of God's kingdom as a lofty tree, whose shade gives protection to a great many birds. The sheltering birds are themselves an image of both Israel and the Gentile nations, who in God's plan will ultimately have a share in his kingdom (see Ezek. 17:23; 31:6; Dan. 4:9-12). Once again, this Old Testament theme is brought to fulfilment with the coming of Jesus and the spread of the gospel message to all the nations. Once again, we realize that throughout the Old Testament the mystery of Jesus has lain hidden until his coming in the flesh.

With Jesus' coming, all that was hidden in the Scriptures is now brought to light. We begin to understand also that, from the very beginning, God always had in mind the sending of his Son into the world, and continually imprints the image of his Son into the very history of Israel – the events, the characters, the wisdom, the poetry, even the laws. All bear the hidden imprint and presence of God's Son. The more we apply ourselves to seek out the hidden presence of Jesus, by letting the New Testament send us back to the Old Testament, the more the Scriptures will yield up their riches.

In the light of this, perhaps we may be permitted to see in the opening verses of today's reading an implicit reference to the overall plan of God, who has first planted the seed of his Word in the soil of Israel. The seed, which is Jesus himself, has, as we have said, lain hidden in the history of Israel. As Israel's life and history progressed and her writings multiplied, the seed – the revelation of Jesus – has also grown with it, and indeed permeated the whole of the Old Testament. But it was only when Jesus came forth from the womb of Mary and, after his death on the cross, when he came forth from the tomb as the Risen Lord, only then could we look back to the Old Testament and recognize what was hidden there!

2 Samuel 11:1-10, 13-17 • Psalm 50(51):3-7, 10-11

Mark 4:26-34

Saturday 30 January

Mark 4:35-41

All that we have been seeing in the readings of this week concerning Jesus – the power and authority of his words and actions, and the centrality of Jesus in the great plan of God for the salvation of humanity – should serve to inspire in us an utter confidence in him, and should drive out all fear from our lives.

The account of the stilling of the storm by Jesus shows, however, that this is not always the case. In the face of the violence of the storm on the Lake of Galilee, the disciples of Jesus, some of whom were seasoned fishermen, gave way to fear. In their hearts there was an implied criticism of Jesus, who was asleep in the boat. To their minds, it was as if he did not care about the crisis they were facing. How many times does that same thought occur to us when we face trials, crises and the storms of personal troubles in our lives? How often do we feel that Jesus is asleep when we call out to him? The people of the Old Testament often complained to God in the same way especially at the time of the Exodus and the years of wandering in the wilderness (see, e.g., Exod. 14:10-11; Num. 14:3).

It is perhaps surprising to us that Jesus addresses the storm and rebukes it. Once again, the Old Testament enables us to understand. For the sea was frequently seen as a symbol of the demonic forces that raged against humanity seeking to separate human beings from their trust in God. Jesus simply commands the storm to be still in a similar way to how he commands evil spirits to be quiet and to let go of their hold over human beings. Immediately calm and stillness was restored.

But there was an important lesson for the disciples and for us. Jesus chided them for letting fear overcome them and displace their faith and confidence in him. The message is clear – Jesus has authority over all things and has come into this world to bring us into his kingdom. He has broken the power of the enemy who would work to bring fear into our lives and separate us from the love of God made visible in Christ. There is nothing that need separate us from the love of God, from the love of Jesus – even when it seems that he is asleep!

2 Samuel 12:1-7, 10-17 • Psalm 50(51):12-17

Mark 4:35-41

Sunday 31 January

Luke 4:21-30 • Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

Jesus is in his home town of Nazareth. He has already been visiting towns and synagogues in the Galilee area, so the word has gone out. His reputation goes before him. Last week we saw that Jesus went into the synagogue in Nazareth and read from the prophet Isaiah, and then announced that the text was being fulfilled even as the people listened. In other words, Jesus was firmly placing his own activity of preaching, healing and bringing deliverance within the context of the promises of the Old Testament. He was laying claim to being the fulfilment of the Scriptures. Indeed, he was revealing himself to be the very heart and centre of Scripture – the goal towards which the whole plan and purpose of God was moving. This was an enormous claim, and it is perhaps not entirely surprising that the people of Nazareth were unable to come to terms with it.

The evidence for the truth of what Jesus was claiming lay in the very actions he was performing. Unfortunately, the people of Nazareth made it difficult for Jesus to carry out his ministry – either preaching or healing. When Jesus quoted examples from the Old Testament where the people prevented God's action through their lack of faith, his countrymen were enraged and drove him out of the town – even attempting to bring him to a violent end. It almost seems like an anticipation, a rehearsal, of what is to happen later in Jerusalem. We might also remember the violent reaction in Jerusalem when news was brought to King Herod by the wise men of a star rising in Bethlehem.

It seems that whenever there is the suggestion that the promise of a Messiah is about to be fulfilled and become a concrete reality, there is an extreme and violent reaction. As long as the promise remains just a promise it is not really a challenge. When Jesus claims to fulfil the promise, then everyone's life is challenged. Do we accept Jesus as the Saviour, promised by God, or not? If we accept, we are required to reorientate our whole lives around a new centre. It calls us to become disciples and to place every aspect of our lives under his Lordship.

Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19 • Psalm 70(71):1-6, 15-17

1 Corinthians 12:31–13:13 • Luke 4:21-30