



SHARING
the WORD in EUCHARISTIA

IN GRATEFUL COMMEMORATION OF
MY PRIESTLY GOLDEN JUBILEE

1972 - 14 DECEMBER - 2022

John Ha

FOREWORD



On behalf of the Archdiocese, I would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to the Lord for the gift of Archbishop Emeritus John Ha who has faithfully served the Church for 50 years since his priestly ordination on 14th December 1972.

As Catholics, the Holy Mass is central to our worship. During the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we gather around the Altar in what is known in the New Testament as “the Breaking of Bread.” In the early church of Acts 2:42 “the disciples devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the *breaking of bread* and the prayers.” It is at the main Altar in Church that bread is taken, blessed, broken and given as the Body of Christ to nourish us.

There is another equally important “Altar” that is used for the Word of God at Mass. This is called the Lectern or Ambo where the Liturgy of the Word takes place – First Reading, Responsorial Psalm, Second Reading, Alleluia, Gospel, followed by the HOMILY. During the HOMILY, the Word of God is “broken” by the celebrant to nourish us.

As we are staying in the same house, I know how much attention and time Archbishop John took to prepare his homilies. He would often have them ready, printed out and placed outside his room, ready to be picked up on the way to the Church. As he has taught me during my seminary days, I am certain that he would have considered the historical background, the context when the respective books of the Bible were written in order to convey God’s Word as intended by the sacred writers. What I have always appreciated in his homily is that it is always insightful and practical, so as to enable us to live out the Word of God in today’s daily life situations.

May this book of homilies, drawn from his years of ministering at the Altar of the Word and the Altar of the Eucharist bless the priests and lay faithful at Mass every Sunday.

Ad multos annos

† Simon Poh

Archbishop Simon Poh

ARCHDIOCESE OF KUCHING

OPENING WORDS

Preaching is an integral part of the priest's pastoral ministry. It is exercised on different platforms, from liturgical celebrations to faith formation. Its aim is to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, build up the audience's faith, and inspire them to live by it.

"Sharing God's Word In Eucharistia" is confined to preaching in the celebration of the Eucharist. It is done within the Liturgy of the Word which precedes the Liturgy of the Eucharist. A common term for it is "Homily". It seeks to break the Word of God proclaimed in the readings selected for the liturgical celebration. Generally, it consists in reflecting on the readings and drawing from them a relevant application to life, often termed as "word of life". Its hope is to contribute to a more meaningful celebration of the Eucharist and offer a word of life for daily living.

There are as many homilies as there are homilists. With online Masses in the two years of Covid 19, many homilies have been shared. We can say we have been "spoilt for choices". Feedback indicates a certain degree of "affiliations" has emerged, as followers have their favourite homilists and become their "fans". This is to be expected and rejoiced over because homilies shared have touched the hearts of their audiences in different ways. As God's ways are mysterious, so also is His Word, even if "broken" by human agents.

This fact itself bears testimony to the richness of the Scriptures as the living Word of God. Homilists vary in their approaches. Some draw on one verse or one idea from the reading(s) for the substance of their homilies. Some others prefer to highlight the main point of each reading and focus on their connection to offer a relevant message to the congregation. Yet others stick only to the Gospel and point out how it sheds light on a particular situation of the day. The list goes on. Whatever may be the approaches adopted, homilies have the same aim: to promote a meaningful celebration of the Eucharist and draw life from God's Word. The Lord is to be praised for His Word and for providing in abundance different "tastes" of His bread of life to suit the different spiritual "tastebuds" of His children.

As a general rule for my homilies, I do a brief analysis of significant expressions, verses, or concepts from the Gospel as well as at times from the first reading. From this analysis, I give a brief reflection on the readings. I hope this will help the audience/reader to draw inspiration for their life. My compilation into a book of my homilies over the three-year cycle of the Liturgy of the Word on Sundays and major feast days is in response to requests for them by some Catholics in the Archdiocese of Kuching. I am offering them as an expression of my heartfelt gratitude to God and to all the very supportive faithful of the Archdiocese of Kuching as well as elsewhere for my fifty years of pastoral ministry as a priest and fourteen years as Archbishop of Kuching.

"Gratitude" is thanksgiving. "Eucharist" comes from the Greek word *"eucharistia"*, which means thanksgiving. This explains the title I have selected for this compilation *"Sharing God's Word In Eucharistia"*: it conveys my modest effort to share the Word of God in the Eucharist and my sincere intention of offering my homilies to the faithful as well as friends and benefactors in gratitude to them for their unfailing support for me. I thought this would serve as a meaningful commemoration of my priestly golden jubilee and a personal way of thanking God for all His graces. I pray that different homilies of mine may have something to offer to different readers.

More importantly, I earnestly hope that taking up this “souvenir compilation” every Sunday and feast day will remind the user of me and urge him/her to pray for me. The economy of space dictates mere references to Scripture passages for the Liturgy of the Word without the full text. It is advisable to read these passages in the Sunday Missal or Lectionary before going through a particular homily.

A word about the book cover. It was designed by Felix Wee, an architect nephew of mine. The chalice and paten featured in the photo were designed by Fr. Peter Saveng Samipakdi, a priest of Chanthaburi Diocese, Thailand. He had them made in Thailand and presented them to me for my priestly ordination fifty years ago. To both Felix and Fr. Peter I say a big “THANK YOU”.

My heartfelt thanks to everyone for their invaluable support in multiple ways.

God bless one and all.



Yours gratefully,

John

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FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:37-44

Today's world is marked by a tremendous progress in science and technology which has improved health and life, brought about ease and speed of communication to the point of turning the world into a global village. With these factors, there should have been peace and harmony among all nations. Yet, there are still fights, conflicts and even wars at the domestic as well as international levels.

Reasons for divisions and conflicts in the world are numerous and interconnected. Among them is the apparently insatiable greed for power which is often tied to greed for wealth and leads to efforts to acquire as many of the world's resources as possible. As a result, inequality and injustice, breach of human rights and human dignity, and even crime against humanity rear their ugly heads. The undercurrent of such trends is selfishness and self-centredness. A deeper undercurrent is a lack of obedience to God's will or even a total disregard for God.

Today's first reading from Isaiah teaches that submission to the Lord's law is indispensable for peace in the world. It proclaims the great desire of nations to *"go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the Temple of the God of Jacob."* The mountain of the Lord is where His Temple is. It is His dwelling place. Going there is going into the Lord's presence. For what purpose? The nations say, *"that He may teach us His ways so that we may walk in His paths."*

Those willing to learn and walk in the way of the Lord are disposed to *"hammering their swords into ploughshare and their spears into sickles."* In other words, they are prepared to convert their weapons of war into instruments of development. As a result, *"nation will not lift sword against nation and there will be no more training for war."* That means, there will be peace. Peace is what the Lord wants for all peoples and nations on earth. The Lord has created all human beings in His own image and the world for them. This is the foundation of all human dignity and human rights to the world's resources.

Clearly then, the way to peace in our world today is to accept the Lord's supreme authority and will. It means all human beings on earth must respect this God-created human dignity and uphold these God-given human rights. This is the law of the Lord. To observe it is to walk in His way. In His teaching on the last

judgement, Jesus articulates the Lord's way in terms of doing good to the least of His brothers and sisters and He identifies Himself with them. Such good acts amount to respecting human dignity and upholding human rights.

In today's Gospel, Jesus warns His audience to *"stay awake"* and *"stand ready"* because He *"is coming at an hour they do not expect."* He gives an example from Noah's time how people were caught when the Lord came. They were not bothered about the Lord and were engaged in all sorts of sinful activities. When He sent a serious flood to punish them, they were caught unprepared and destroyed. Jesus also points out that some people of His time would face the same destruction in these terms: *"Of two men in the fields one is taken, one left; of two women at the millstone grinding, one is taken, one left."*

Jesus' warning holds true for us in today's world where there is so much of disregard for the Lord and His will. Indeed, today's situation is no different from Noah's time. Millions of people today are not bothered about God at all. They unscrupulously exploit and rob people for their own ends and purposes. Some even claim to act in the name of God and kill innocent people on grounds that their victims are blasphemous or embrace the wrong faith.

As we begin a new Church's Liturgical Year in this Season of Advent, we are reminded that Jesus will come at the end of time to judge the living and the dead. His criterion is His Father's will which is peace in the world through respect for human dignity and upholding of human rights. In our desire for world peace, we need to pray; but we are also called upon to do our part, which means we must genuinely respect the dignity and rights of every person who comes our way.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-9; Matthew 3:1-12

Our world today faces global warming due to climate change which has come about because of human negligence. Unless effectively stopped, this climate change will threaten the lives of the next generation of humankind and may perhaps result in human extinction.

This is an issue that touches on the environment which has to do with creation – the creation that came from God and entrusted to us humankind to look after. Indeed, in the beginning all creation, as the first chapter of Genesis tells us, was good. The relationship or interrelationship between all created beings, living and non-living was good. Human beings enjoyed and maintained harmony with every other created being and, of course, a good relationship with the Creator God Himself.

But in the course of time, human beings disobeyed God and sinned. This soured up their good relationship with God and with other creatures as well. In His love and mercy, God did not leave fallen humankind in their sin. He decided to send a Messiah to restore their broken relationship with God and all creation.

This Messiah, as announced in today's first reading, was to "*spring from the stock of Jesse*", that is, from the line of King David. The restoration of the broken relationship with creation is articulated in terms of a little boy leading wild and domestic animals in harmonious coexistence and friendship as well as "*playing over the cobra's hole and putting his hand into the viper's lair.*"

The restoration of such harmonious interrelationship in creation is possible because the Messiah "*shall stand as a signal to the peoples*" as He "*fills the world with the knowledge of the Lord.*" In other words, He shall make all nations understand once again the original will of God the Creator for the entire universe. Jesus is the Messiah. John the Baptist was His forerunner.

John announced His coming thus: "*The one who follows me is more powerful than I am... He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*"

The Messiah would give believers His Holy Spirit to fill them with the knowledge of the Lord and thus an understanding of His will. With that knowledge and understanding, they would "*repent*", that is, turn away from sin and accept the Lord's will. In this way, they would enter "*the kingdom of God.*"

The Messiah's baptism with fire signals His judgement at the end of time. John the Baptist elaborated on it in metaphorical terms: *"He will gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff He will burn in a fire that will never go out."* The wheat refers to those who repent, that is, those who turn away from their sin and accept God's will; the chaff refers to those who are not bothered at all.

Submission to God's will is indispensable for harmonious relationship with creation or the environment. This thought flows from last Sunday's Liturgy of the Word. Its first reading, from the same prophet Isaiah as today's first reading, announced peace in the world in terms of weapons of war being converted into instruments of development. Such peace means harmonious living together of all peoples. It would be possible only when nations were prepared to *"go up to the mountain of the Lord to learn His law and walk in His paths."*

Indeed, knowledge and acceptance of the Lord's will are prerequisites for peace among all humankind as well as for harmony with the entire creation. In our world so deeply marked by conflicts and damages to the environment, we run the great risk of self-destruction. The call to repent, that is, to turn away from conflicts and selfish exploitation of the environment is urgent and must be seriously responded to by all. We cannot expect any one, any leader, any nation to respond to the call unless we ourselves do so. Our personal responses can make a difference and influence others also to repent and accept God's will for peace among all humankind and a healthy environment conducive to life in planet earth.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 35:1-6,10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Doubts about faith are common experiences, because faith deals with a realm outside the visible and tangible world. We need not have faith to accept that what we see, feel and touch are real. But the reality beyond our senses requires faith to accept. This includes God and His saving presence among us.

Even John the Baptist, as today's Gospel narrates, reached a point where he was not sure whether Jesus was the Christ – the Messiah to come. So, from his prison cell, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus for confirmation: *"Are you the one who is to come?"* Yet, John had been preparing the hearts of people for the coming of the Messiah.

Jesus gave an answer in terms of what John's disciples had heard and seen: *"the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised to life."* These were signs prophets of the Old Testament associated with the Messiah. Today's first reading from Isaiah is a classic example of this. To these signs, Jesus added an important fact: *"the Good News is proclaimed to the poor."* Jesus had been working these signs. He proclaimed, *"Happy is the man who does not lose faith in Me."*

John was a great prophet, in fact *"much more than a prophet."* He was the forerunner of Christ to prepare the hearts of people for His coming. He should therefore have no doubt that He was truly the Messiah: *"the one who was to come."*

Despite his greatness, insofar as he was Christ's precursor, John belonged to an age preceding Him. This age could not outdo Christ's age, the age of the kingdom of God. Thus, *"the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he (= John) is."* In this declaration of His, coupled with the earlier one of blessedness of faith, Christ underscored His messiahship in terms of the kingdom of God. He was indeed the promised Messiah; His works of healing were signs of it.

Jesus the Messiah came more than two thousand years ago. Though He had physically left the world at His resurrection and ascension, He continues to remain in the world and be with His disciples as well as all humankind. Matthew's Gospel records His promise: *"I will be with you till the end of time"*

(28:20). He continues to be the Immanuel – God-with-us. Jesus is now present with us through His Holy Spirit whom He sent from His Father’s right hand.

For sure, we do not see the Holy Spirit. But He gives signs of His presence with us, among us and within us. There are many signs – from our birth to the present day. The common ones include the love and care of our parents, the faith they passed on to us, the education they made sure we received, the teachers we had in school, the friends we have, the success we scored, and now (for some) the spouses and children we have and the intimate love we experience from them.

Everyone has experiences that point to Christ’s presence, love and care. Without faith, such experiences remain at the human level and will not lead to the Immanuel. With faith, even the smallest experience becomes a miracle – a clear sign of God’s presence in the person’s life.

Indeed, for one who does not believe, the biggest miracle will not be sign enough of God’s presence and saving love; but for one who has faith, even the smallest experience is enough to point to it.

The Holy Spirit is with us to lead us to and sustain us in faith. We need to open our hearts to His guidance so that we will experience the Lord’s presence, love and care for us in all the daily experiences of our lives. True joy comes our way when we are able to see God present with us, among us and within us, to show His love and take care of us in all circumstances of our lives. In fact, joy is the best indicator as to whether or not we are able to see signs of God’s presence in our lives.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 7:10-14; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

Sometimes the unwillingness to change a calculated decision or fear of having to do so is an obstacle to seeking and following God's will. Today's liturgy of the word presents a case in point and also a case in which a desire to be faithful to God's will yields a change of decision.

The first case involved King Ahaz of the southern kingdom of Judah. Faced with the prospect of a war from a joint attempt by two kings to depose him, Ahaz felt inclined to seek help from the most powerful kingdom of the day: Assyria. Paradoxically, the Assyrian king sought to invade foreign nations to expand his kingdom. To strengthen their defence against this invasion, the Syrian king, Rezin, and the king of the northern kingdom of Israel, Remaliah, decided to form a coalition. They approached King Ahaz to join them. But he refused. They therefore planned to depose King Ahaz and replace him with the son of a certain Tabeel, very likely a "yes" man to them.

Adamant with his refusal, King Ahaz prepared for war against the coalition forces. One radical decision he made was to seek the help of the king of Assyria. That decision would undoubtedly facilitate Assyria's invasion campaign. It was in these circumstances that God sent the prophet Isaiah to Ahaz to tell him not to proceed with his decision. Isaiah assured Ahaz that the coalition plan to depose him would not happen for God would be there to make sure that he would continue to be king of Judah, as much as Rezin would remain king of Syria and Remaliah king of Israel.

To back up his assurance, Isaiah offered Ahaz the opportunity to request any sign *"from the depths of Sheol or from the heights above."* Realising that the sign would require him to abandon his decision, Ahaz rejected the offer. He would count on a visible protector in the Assyrian king rather than the invisible God. He gave a very beautiful reason for his rejection: *"I will not put the Lord to the test."*

In response, through Isaiah, the Lord gave Ahaz a sign: the Immanuel, a child who would signal the presence of God with His people. God's was a protective presence. Trust and confidence in Him were called for to experience it in a real way. Ahaz would have to manifest this trust and confidence by abandoning his decision.

The Gospel story presents the fulfilment of the sign announced by Isaiah. Jesus Christ is the Immanuel, *"God with us."* The fulfilment was possible because Joseph was faithful to God's will. Having come to know of his betrothed Mary's pregnancy without himself being involved, he *"decided to divorce her informally."* But an angel of the Lord came to him with God's instruction to *"take Mary home as his wife."* He dropped his decision and obeyed God. He became the foster father of Jesus, the Immanuel, and played a role in God's marvellous plan of salvation for the world.

God's plan is beyond doubt infinitely better than any one's. But there are some difficulties with it. Two of these are: we do not see God and our own decisions are calculated on factors, seen or foreseen. The common tendency is to stick to our personal decisions. In so doing we are likely to miss out on an experience of God's power, providence and protection. That was true of King Ahaz, while Joseph was overwhelmed with the wonder of God's plan and gift of the Immanuel.

A simple example from life may help to appreciate more concretely the value of God's plan and will for us. A sinful addiction may pose a great obstacle to receiving the sacrament of reconciliation (confession). The addict shuns the sacrament because he/she fears the prospect of being challenged to drop that habit unwillingly. Yet, dropping it in conversion will spiral him/her into a whole experience of God's liberating grace and therefore of a wondrous freedom in which he/she is able to live his/her life freely and meaningfully.

God's plan is indeed liberating and brings us joy and self-fulfilment. It would be foolish to reject it in favour of our own plans.

CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS

Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

“Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you: He is Christ the Lord.”

An angel of the Lord made this announcement to shepherds who were watching their flocks in the open fields in the darkness of the night. The angel qualified this announcement as *“news of great joy”*.

To us this news of great joy is tied to the birth of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Yes, there is a sense of joy that Christmas brings to us. But perhaps the depth of our joy cannot compare with that of the shepherds when they heard the good news of the Lord’s birth from the angel. To feel their joy, we need to understand their situation. And what was their situation? It was one of oppression and marginalisation.

The world at that time was the Roman Empire. The Emperor Caesar Augustus portrayed himself as the saviour of the world who promoted and maintained peace among his subjects. His system of governance was through local governors and of course through his powerful army. In this way, he secured obedience of his subjects and peace throughout his empire. The census he decreed also served as a way of enhancing his control. Dictatorial control created fear among the subjects. Of course, there would be peace in the sense of absence of trouble, but in reality, the peace was rooted in fear and was therefore a false peace.

Under Caesar’s system of governance, to fan fear in his subjects, many were oppressed and marginalised – like the shepherds in tonight’s Gospel. These shepherds were engaged to look after the sheep of rich masters. They had to work long hours, by day and by night, in the heat and in the cold, in open fields. They had no place in society except for the work that they were enslaved to do. No one paid attention to them. They were truly people living in darkness as they saw no light of how they could get out of their hard and unjust treatment by their masters.

One night, however, as they were watching their flock, all of a sudden, an angel of the Lord brought them the good news that a Saviour had been born to them in the town of David. Now there was hope for them. In their darkness, light had come. Isaiah’s prophecy in the first reading came to be fulfilled: *“The people that*

walked in darkness has seen a great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow, a light has shone."

There would now be a future of these shepherds who had been living in a land of deep shadow. They could entertain the hope of a better life ahead. This indeed filled them with great joy. Again, they experienced what Isaiah had proclaimed: *"You (Lord) have made their gladness greater, and You have made their joy increase. They rejoice in Your presence."* That joy was enhanced by the wonderful sight of the heavenly host praising and singing the glory of God and announcing peace among men.

What kind of Saviour was born to them? One who identified with the shepherds by being born in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes. Unlike Caesar, He came not to oppress but to be in solidarity with them and indeed with all humankind; not to marginalise anyone but to live with everyone, especially the marginalised. He came to share the life of those living in harsh conditions. In this way, to use the words of Isaiah in the first reading, He bore *"the yoke that was weighing on Him, the bar across His shoulders, the rod of His oppressor"*. But He also *"broke these as on the day of Midian"*, thus setting the oppressed free.

Indeed, He did not look down on the marginalised and the oppressed, but respected and accepted them as men who enjoyed God's favour. He brought peace not by creating fear but by promoting justice and integrity, that is, by promoting mutual respect and acceptance.

Indeed, the true Lord and Saviour of the world was not Caesar Augustus but Jesus Christ. He was born to bring true and lasting peace to the world. True and lasting peace was fostered not through fear, but through respect, justice and integrity. This ultimately means genuine acceptance of every human person on earth.

We all want true and lasting peace. Tonight, let us decide to do our part to promote it. Let us also pray that in our country and throughout the world, peace will be promoted not by control of power and sowing seeds of fear, but by mutual respect and acceptance of one another as human persons created in God's image. Promoting peace in this way is giving glory to God and bringing true joy to all citizens.

CHRISTMAS DAY MASS

Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-6; John 1:1-18

Christmas is a global feast celebrated even by many non-Christians and commercialised by the business world. It means different things to different people. But one sentiment stands out in common: joy. Whilst for the non-Christians and business circles, that joy consists of merriment, for us Christians it is the profound happiness rooted in the experience of God's profound love for us.

God's profound love for us is manifested in a most incredible way through a great paradox. The first reading announces it to the people of God thus: *"Your God is King! ... He returns to Zion."* He manifests His almighty power as He *"bares His holy arm in the sight of all the nations"*. The all-powerful God comes to bring *"salvation to all the ends of the earth."* The paradox here is that God the King reaches out to all humankind with His power though they have rejected Him, in order to bring them back into His embrace. What great love that is!

The Old Testament prophets constantly announced this move of love made by God and His invitation to His people to return to Him. But there came a time when God sent His own Son *"to speak to us"*, as the second reading from the Letter to the Hebrew proclaims. The Son of God *"is the radiant light of God's glory and the perfect copy of His nature, sustaining the universe by His powerful command."* He wields the infinite power of God His Father. He is God, one with His Father.

The Gospel proclaims the divinity of the Son of God: *"In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God."* The Word of God is the Son of God, as the end of the Gospel identifies. He played a unique role in the creation of the world. It was *"through Him that all things came to be."* He came into the world darkened by sin as its light to save it. This point affirmed by the Gospel today is also affirmed by the second reading today. But the Gospel goes further to declare the great mystery of the Son of God *"being made flesh and living among us."*

The affirmation carries an unbelievable paradox: the all powerful and all holy God took on "flesh", the sinful and limited condition of fallen humankind, without the sin. That was because He wanted to *"live among us"*, sinful humankind, to be the Immanuel, God-with-us. In this way, He could relate with

us in a way possible for us and show His love in a way we can experience it so that we can respond to Him and share in His life. In this experience of ours, we can *“see His glory, the glory that is His as the only Son of the Father.”*

Sharing in the life of the Son of God means sharing in the life of God the Father. Clearly, this means becoming children of God the Father. The Gospel today affirms this in no uncertain terms: *“But to all who did accept Him”* and *“to all who believe in His name”* *“He gave power to become children of God.”* What incredible grace this is: the sinless Son of God became Man so that sinful human beings could become children of God. All this is possible because for God nothing is impossible; He is all powerful. In His infinite love for all of us, He exercised His almighty power not just to bring us back to Himself but also to share His life with us and make us His children.

This is the joy that we experience at Christmas – the joy that is rooted in the reality that Jesus Christ the Son of God became Man to bring the life of His Father to us and make us His children. Christmas is surely the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ the Son of God made Man. It is also the celebration of our birthday as children of God the Father.

It is in this joy and meaning of Christmas that I wish all of you A BLESSED CHRISTMAS and HAPPY BIRTHDAY INTO THE FAMILY OF GOD. May the love of God be truly experienced as we celebrate this great mystery of the birth of God made Man and our birth as children of God. May we share this love with one another, so that there will be true peace and joy in our hearts and in our communities, in our country and in our world.

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY

Ecclesiasticus 3:2-6,12-14; Colossians 3:12-21; Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

Today we celebrate the Feast of this Holy Family. With Jesus at the heart of the Holy Family, they came under threat from King Herod. Charged with fear and jealousy that the baby Jesus was the infant King of the Jews, Herod was all out to kill Him.

In the face of Herod's murderous intent, Joseph was surely under great pressure and sought a way of escape. As Joseph was contemplating his options, an angel of the Lord came to him in a dream and instructed him to take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt. Later on, after Herod's death, the angel told Joseph, again in a dream, to return to the land of Israel. And learning that Archelaus had succeeded his father Herod, Joseph decided to take the family to Nazareth.

From today's Gospel story we see God's hand at work in human history as well as in the decision Joseph took for the family. The bottom line was God's fulfillment of His promise of salvation for the whole of humankind. To this end, God turned Herod's jealous and cruel infanticide into a fulfillment of His word in the Scriptures: *"I called my son out of Egypt"* and *"He will be called a Nazarene."* God's fidelity to His promise was the deciding factor in the whole course of event.

The story of the Holy Family offers us a lot of lessons. But let us just single out one of them for our consideration. This has to do with pressures families have to face – pressures that come from outside and beyond their control. A few examples serve our point here: rising costs of living, social demands that weigh heavily on the finances of the family, pressure from stiff competition and work demands, government policies which sometimes border on unfairness or even injustice, earnest desire to give the best to children, and racial and religious discrimination. The list goes on.

Parents facing such pressures beyond their control are often anxious, worried and perhaps even lost. For sure, many do turn to God for help and strength. Some, however, may even ask God very honestly: "Where are you God? Why am I not experiencing your presence, much less your help and strength?" If Joseph did ask the same question, he received no clear answer. For, God did not take away Herod's jealousy and stop his cruel and bloody course of action. God only sent an angel to direct Joseph to escape into Egypt – a very difficult and harsh journey indeed. But God was with Joseph and his young and fragile family in this journey. God turned the story of Herod's jealousy and cruelty into a

fulfillment of His plan of salvation – beyond Joseph’s personal and family horizons to benefit the whole world.

God often seems to be absent when we face pressures and problems, because these remain. God does not take them away. But He is with us in order to accompany us as we endure them and guide us as we work our way out of them. The fact that Jesus, the Son of God made man, was born in a manger and wrapped in swaddling cloths is a clear indication that God is present among us to suffer with us. Faith in this presence of His gives us both the confidence and strength to move on in life even though we still face the same pressures and problems.

Our faith is that God will work out His plan of salvation for us personally and for our family through what we go through. He will interact with us as we make decisions in life, to guide us on and to strengthen us to live under those pressures and problems of life. We need to place our total faith and trust in Him.

On this feast of the Holy Family, we take the family of Nazareth as our assurance of the Immanuel, that is, that God is always with us through thick and thin. Indeed, the Holy Family was constituted for this very purpose – for the Son of God to take on human flesh and become one of us to dwell in our midst and bring us eternal life.

Today should therefore be a day of joy for all of us. Assured of God’s presence with us in our families, let us make a fervent decision to count on Him. His presence among us is one that suffers with us and helps us suffer the pressures of life. More importantly, God’s presence is to share His life with us. In this way, we are made holy and given a share in His eternal life. If God sent His only Son into our world, it was precisely to bring us eternal life. That is how important eternal life is to us and our families.

FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY

Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:2-3,5-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Science deals with concrete physical realities of nature, their interrelationship and consequences of their interaction. Faith delves into the spiritual world and the invisible realm of the divine. Are these two fields of human experience mutually exclusive or contradictory? Or are they compatible or even interrelated?

The Gospel for today's feast, the Feast of the Epiphany, provides an indication for an answer. Its story is about some Magi from the East making their way to do homage to the "infant king of the Jews". Magi were a priestly caste from Persia dedicated to the interpretation of dreams especially with regard to the births or deaths of great figures.

The birth in our Gospel was that of the "infant king of the Jews". The Magi who undertook the search for this infant king followed a star. This piece of information likely indicates their engagement in a study of the movement of stars to corroborate or clarify details about the events interpreted in their dreams. That astral study was a field of science in its own right. But it did not rule out the role of faith. For the Magi, in fact, it did exert an impact on their faith and became a vehicle for them to seek divine revelation. In the Gospel story, the mystery their astral science pointed to concerned the king of the Jews.

When these Magi arrived in Jerusalem, they had to stop as their star had disappeared. They were therefore obliged to seek further information regarding the "infant king of the Jews". To this end they approached King Herod. It must be noted that Herod was the King of the Jews. Fearing the rise of a potential rival, the king took the matter very seriously. He consulted the chief priests and the scribes "about where the Christ was to be born." These were scripture scholars, that is, experts in the study of the word of God.

The two titles, "king of the Jews" and "Christ", referred to the same person. The first one was used by the Gentiles represented by the Magi; the Jews used the second one and so Herod used it when addressing the chief priests and scribes. The answer Herod received was cited as "from the prophet", meaning from the scriptures, that is, from the word of God revealed through His prophets. "Bethlehem, in the land of Judah" was the place of Christ's birth. The word of God prophesied that the Christ would be "a leader who would shepherd His people."

With that revelation, the Magi proceeded on their journey, naturally intending to head for Bethlehem. At this stage, the star reappeared to guide them and “halted over the place where the child was.” The Gospel states: “The sight of the star filled them with delight”, for they felt reaffirmed in their search of the child.

Seeing the child and His mother Mary, they “fell on their knees, did Him homage and offered Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.” This gesture and these gifts of theirs expressed their acknowledgement of the full identity of “the infant king of the Jews”. For sure, they acknowledged that He was God. That was why they fell on their knees to worship Him. When they met Herod in Jerusalem, they told him that they had come to do homage to the infant king of the Jews. Doing homage with bowing prostration conveyed profound respect for a person of authority who, in the Gospel, was the king of the Jews. But in today’s Gospel, it involved falling on the knees. It amounted to worship and thus acknowledgement of Jesus as God.

Through their astral study and the knowledge received from inspired Scriptures, the Magi came to find and acknowledge the infant Jesus as the king of the Jews and God. Their gifts expressed their faith. Frankincense conveyed their faith in the divinity of the child. Gold reiterated their acknowledgement of Him as king which they had come to know through their science of stars and following the one that guided them. Myrrh, associated with burial, indicated their acknowledgement of the child as a true human person.

From the story in today’s Gospel, it seems clear that science and revelation in the scriptures worked hand-in-hand to lead the Magi to a knowledge of the infant king of the Jews and further discovery of the place of His birth as well as His full identity. The Magi’s experience reflects that of many a believing scientist. Their scientific knowledge leads them to acknowledge God’s existence and work in creation. Their faith complements their scientific discovery and brings them to a deeper knowledge of God. The complementarity between science and faith is rooted in the fact that God is the Creator, the source of the entire universe, and He is also the source of all revelation in the scriptures. He reveals Himself through both science and faith.

Epiphany celebrates the almighty, infinite and invisible God revealing Himself in the powerless, finite and visible baby Jesus. Indeed, the divine Godhead beyond our grasp becomes a human person in Jesus Whom we can see, touch and relate with. The historical Jesus Whom science has verified has led us to the Jesus of faith. Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Immanuel, God-with-us.

ASH WEDNESDAY

Joel 2:12-18; 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2; Matthew 6:1-6,16-18

Ash Wednesday begins the annual season of Lent. Lent is a period of forty days to prepare for the commemoration of the central mystery of salvation history: the death and resurrection of the Lord. Lent ends as the commemoration begins on Holy Thursday and runs through Easter Sunday.

The Lord Jesus came into our world to save us from sin and death. At His crucifixion, He took our place to pay the death penalty due to our sin. By His death on the cross, He won for us forgiveness of sins. But His death led to His resurrection to life. By His resurrection, He secured eternal life for all of us. That is the central mystery of our salvation.

In today's second reading, St. Paul articulates this central mystery of our salvation in these words: *"For our sake God made the sinless one into sin, so that in Him we might become the goodness of God... Well, now is the favourable time; this is the day of salvation."* The meaning of this statement is clear. Jesus Christ is *"the sinless one"*. He is *"made into sin"*; this does not in any way mean that He is made to sin. Rather, it means He took all our sins upon Himself in order to destroy them. He did it by taking our place to pay the death penalty for our sins.

By taking away and destroying our sins, Jesus made it possible for us to *"become the goodness of God"*; in other words, we can now share in God's goodness. "Goodness" here translates the Greek word *dikaiosune* which means "righteousness". It conveys God's attribute of always being and doing right. This attribute gives rise to His mercy towards all sinful humankind whose fate is death. In the light of this, *"becoming the goodness of God"* means enjoying the fruit of God's righteousness and benefitting from His mercy. If sin leads to death, God's righteousness leads to life.

Jesus' death and resurrection fulfilled this righteousness of God and efficaciously applied it to sinful humankind. That brought them salvation. They did not deserve it. But in His mercy, God sent Jesus to bring it about. This was God's favour towards all humankind. On these grounds, St. Paul in the second reading calls the time of salvation *"the favourable time"*. The Greek word thus translated is *kairos* which means "a time of grace". The salvation God sent Jesus *"the sinless one"* to bring to all humankind entrenched in sin is surely His grace.

As a commemoration of the central mystery of salvation, Easter Triduum (from Holy Thursday to Easter Sunday) is *“the favourable time”*, the time of “grace”. It is natural therefore that Lent, the forty days to prepare for it, is marked by penitence or penance as a sign of repentance. Penance flows from a heart that seeks personal appropriation of God’s grace of salvation through Jesus Christ. That heart seeks a change, a conversion. That change involves a turning away from sin in order to follow Jesus Christ faithfully. The ultimate purpose is to receive the life that Jesus won for all through His resurrection.

In the light of the central mystery of salvation and the significance of Lent as a preparation for its commemoration, the reception of ashes on Ash Wednesday to begin the penitential season serves to remind us that life on earth will end in physical death but transit to eternal life. The transition to eternal life is assured only through faithful following of Christ. Thus, in the imposition of ashes, the liturgy uses two formulae as alternatives to express this faith of the Church.

One formula conveys the reality of physical death: *“Remember man that you are dust and unto dust you shall return.”* The formula is taken from Gen. 3:19 which carries God’s word to the man for his disobedience to Him. But even in the story of the fall of the man and his wife, God made a promise of salvation to be brought by the *“offspring”* of a woman (Gen. 3:15). By virtue of this promise, the first formula used in the imposition of ashes carries with it the idea of life after death, the life brought by Jesus Christ.

The second formula is borrowed from Mk. 1:15: *“Repent, and believe the Gospel.”* It is Jesus’ call at the start of His public ministry. It is noteworthy that He precedes this call with this proclamation: *“The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand.”* The *“time”* of the *“kingdom”* is *kairos*. The kingdom of God is where followers of Jesus *“the sinless one”* *“become the goodness of God”*. It is essentially sharing in God’s own life. Jesus has come to inaugurate the kingdom and made it possible for His followers to experience God’s life on earth. But it is after death that that life is bestowed and enjoyed definitively, provided the disciples *“believe the Gospel”*, that is, follow Jesus Christ faithfully. The second formula expresses faith in the eternal life in the kingdom and carries the call to turn away from sin and follow Jesus faithfully.

Receiving of ashes on Ash Wednesday expresses one’s faith in and desire for life in God’s kingdom. It also conveys one’s resolve to do all one can in the season of Lent to live one’s life to this end. May this resolve be faithfully carried out.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

Temptations are rampant. They spare no one. This is because Satan and his forces spare no efforts to draw people away from God and destroy them. To do this, they exploit human desires.

Satan was at work right at the beginning of creation. Symbolised by the serpent in the Garden of Eden, he succeeded in getting the first man and his wife (traditionally named Adam and Eve) to go against God. He got them to eat the forbidden fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. This knowledge amounted to total knowledge. It belonged to God and God alone. Striving to achieve it indicated an attempt to rival with God.

Adam and Eve saw that the fruit *“was good to eat and pleasing to the eye, and it was desirable for the knowledge that it could give.”* They had a strong desire to be gods unto themselves. Satan exploited this desire of theirs. His strategy was cunning. He first tried to sow a doubt in the minds of the human couple by asking a question: *“Did God really say you were not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?”* Their minds then were still clear when they specified the *“tree in the middle of the garden”* which bore the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. They also repeated the reason God gave for the ban: they would die if they ate the fruit.

In his response, Satan covered a lie with a half-truth. The lie was: *“No! You will not die!”* The half-truth was: *“God knows in fact that on the day you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil.”* Satan distorted God’s good intention. God meant to protect Adam and Eve from self-destruction by striving to be gods. But Satan crossed his point that God feared rivalry from them.

Satan’s strategy worked. But his lie was exposed. After eating the fruit, Adam and Eve had *“their eyes opened; but they realised that they were naked.”* They therefore became ashamed and tried to cover their nakedness. This meant that they realised that they were mere creatures and could never ever be equal to their Creator. Moreover, God shared His own life with them in Paradise by offering them all that there was in it. This was God’s love and generosity towards them. But they were not satisfied; they wanted more.

In the Gospel, we see Satan employing the same strategy when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness. In the first two temptations, he challenged Jesus to prove that He was the Son of God: *“If you are the Son of God.”* As Son of God Jesus had power to change stones into bread to satisfy His hunger. He also could jump down from the parapet of the Temple without being hurt; this would gain Him fame. The challenge could also be Satan’s cunning way of sowing seeds of doubt in Jesus’ mind regarding His status. The final temptation was for Jesus to acquire power over all the kingdoms of the world, on condition that He would worship Satan. That was his ultimate goal.

It must be noted that satisfaction and pleasures of the flesh, fame, power and glory are all human desires. Satan exploited them to bring about the downfall of Adam and Eve. He tried to do the same to Jesus. But Jesus was very focused. He drew His response to each of the three temptations from the Scriptures. In that way, Jesus defeated Satan and kept faithful to the mission from His Father.

If Satan even went after Jesus, we could be sure he is all out to get each one of us. The story of the fall of Adam and Eve is the story of everyone of us. Every day, Satan seeks to exploit our desires and weaknesses to lead us to our fall. He presents truths but only to cover their lies. God has given us abundant blessings out of sheer love for us. But Satan tries to distort this. He tells us God wants to make us obligated to Him so that He can dominate us.

Like Jesus, we must be well focused. Let us be absolutely certain that God truly loves us as He shares His life with us. Let us be contented with His blessings and not strive to be His equal.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Genesis 12:1-4; 2 Tim. 1:8-10; 17:1-9

Life on earth is a journey. Whereto? Christians receive the answer from the Scriptures. Today's Liturgy of the Word articulates it.

The second reading explains it in terms of God's "*own purpose*" to "*proclaim life and immortality through the Good News.*" Life and immortality mean eternal life in God's kingdom. We have access to it through the salvation brought us by Christ Jesus.

God's purpose was already there "*from the beginning of time.*" It started working out in history in Abraham's journey. God asked Abraham to "*leave his country, family and father's house for a land He would show him.*" The journey was actually in sync with Abraham's nomadic life. Every day he was moving from place to place in search of food for his family and his cattle. Such a nomadic journey was fraught with difficulties, dangers and catastrophes, for example, harsh weather conditions, wild animals, robbers and enemies.

Abraham undertook the journey not just because of need but also with faith and trust in God. The land God would show him was Canaan. Upon arrival there, God promised to give it to him and his descendants. There, as God promised, Abraham would become "*a great nation*" – meaning his descendants would make a great nation. This was God's blessing on the patriarch, so much so that "*all the tribes of the earth would bless themselves by him.*" Canaan was by divine purpose the goal of Abraham's perilous nomadic journey. He undertook it with this faith and experienced God's guidance, protection and providence.

The Gospel reading narrates the great event of Christ's transfiguration up on "*a high mountain*". It comes immediately after Jesus had predicted His passion and violent death in the hands of the Jewish religious authorities to be followed by His resurrection. He took three of His disciples – Peter, James and John – up that mountain. In biblical tradition, the mountain top is God's special dwelling place.

There He received His Father's reaffirmation that He was His beloved Son: *"This is my Son, the Beloved; He enjoys my favour. Listen to Him."*

Jesus' transfiguration was a glorious experience. Peter was for remaining on the mountain to continue in that experience. To this end, he proposed to build three tents: one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah, the two prophets who figured in the transfiguration. But Jesus took them down the mountain to continue His journey to the cross. With that experience of glory, He saw the reality of His resurrection to follow His violent death. This undergirded His instruction to the three disciples: *"Tell no one about the vision until the Son of Man has risen from the dead."*

Jesus' journey to Jerusalem was His way to the cross. But more importantly, it was His way to His resurrection. His resurrection was His return to His Father who had sent Him into the world to bring life to all fallen humankind. This was the Father's purpose for Jesus' journey on earth – His life, public ministry and mission.

From Abraham to Jesus, God's purpose determined *"before the beginning of time"* was carried out till its total achievement. By His cross and resurrection, Christ has made life in the kingdom accessible to us. He now calls each one of us to *"leave our country, our family and our father's house"* to the kingdom. In effect, it is a call to live our lives with the kingdom as our goal. As the true God and Saviour, He will accompany us on this journey of ours. Like Abraham, each one of us needs to respond. When the day comes, the land of Canaan will be the kingdom of God where we will enjoy eternal life in God's presence. There we will fully experience God as our Father and we as His children.

THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Exodus 17:3-7; Romans 5:1-2,5-8; John 4:5-42

Sometimes we might have fallen into very deep pits in life and felt absolutely helpless and perhaps even hopeless. We might have then asked: Does God not bother? Is there no hope of salvation?

The story of the Samaritan woman in the Gospel is a good case in point. She went to the well of Jacob to draw water. She needed the water for a drink, for washing and for cooking. Jesus too had come to the well. He too had come to quench His thirst as He was tired by the journey and it was the sixth hour of the day, that is, midday. But having no bucket to draw water from the deep well, He sat by it, presumably waiting for some one to come who might be able to help.

Yes, the Samaritan woman came along. Jesus asked her, *"Give me a drink."* That was a bold move on two counts. Jesus was a man and a Jew. The new arrival was a woman and a Samaritan. They were not allowed to associate with each other for Jews and Samaritans were enemies.

Now Jesus' thirst was no longer for physical water but for the salvation of the woman. He sought to change her thirst from physical water to *"living water, welling up to eternal life."* Jesus offered her that water. She asked for it: *"Sir, give me some of that water."* The story started with Jesus asking her for a drink and now reaches a point where it was the woman asking Him for living water. There was an openness in her.

For sure living water had to do with life. Jesus confronted the woman on her life, her married life, which was in a mess. She had fallen into a deep pit; she had hit rock bottom. Jesus told her, *"Go and call your husband, and come back here."* She answered, *"I have no husband."* Jesus knew her story: she had had five husbands and so the current one was legally not her husband. That was where she had landed herself: married five times over but having no proper married life and indeed having no purpose in life.

Jesus commended her truthfulness: *"You spoke the truth there."* In her truthfulness, the woman said to Jesus, *"I see you are a prophet."* Her truthfulness, that is, her honest acknowledgement of her own situation, was necessary for the living water. However, she felt embarrassed and uneasy; so, she tried to draw the conversation to a point about places of worship: *"this*

mountain” for her forefathers and *“Jerusalem”* for the Jews. Jesus pointed out that places of worship were not important; of vital importance was *“worship of God the Father in spirit and in truth.”*

In her given situation, *“worship in spirit and in truth”* for the woman would be to turn away from her messy life and live a righteous one, that is, in fidelity to God’s will. Such worship leads to eternal life, the life Jesus was sent into our world to offer. This life was the *“living water”* Jesus offered the Samaritan woman. In offering eternal life Jesus fulfilled His role as the Messiah, that is, the Saviour.

The Samaritan woman’s desire for the living water from Jesus led her at first to wonder if Jesus was the Messiah. She shared her experience with her townsfolk, many of whom after seeing Jesus came to believe that *“He really is the Saviour of the world.”* In her encounter with Jesus, she was brought to a clear self-knowledge: her current situation and messy life. She moved step by step in her knowledge of Jesus: from *“Sir”* (an ordinary but respectable gentleman) to *“prophet”* and ultimately to *“the Christ”*. From one who was confronted by Jesus on her own messy life, she changed and became an evangelist of Jesus the Messiah to her townsfolk. Indeed, she and townsfolk had received the living water offered by Jesus. This living water was eternal life.

There is no rock bottom from which God cannot and will not lift those who have hit it. All that is needed is a truthful acknowledgement of one’s situation and a sincere desire for God’s help as well as conversion of heart. In faithful response, one is bound to experience God’s salvation and know that Jesus is truly the Saviour of the world.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

1 Samuel 16:1,6-7,10-13; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

Sight is possible only with healthy eyes and sufficient light. Sight is necessary for safety.

The Gospel today narrates the story of Jesus giving sight to a blind man. Clearly, the blind man could not see because of defective eyes. He had to beg simply because he could not seek employment. He was thus deprived of a decent human life and that damaged his human dignity. A tendency of the day attributed his condition to his own sins or the sins of his parents.

Jesus' disciples sought His stand on this prevalent thinking. He corrected it: neither the man nor his parents sinned to bring blindness to him. In a sense, the wrong mentality signalled blindness, blindness to physical conditions caused by genetic factors. But because sin was brought in, the blindness had also to do with spiritual ignorance.

Jesus cured the blind man. For sure, He intended to give physical sight to the man and lift him up from his degrading and humiliating life condition. But He had an added reason: to cure the spiritual blindness of those who were judging the blind man or his parents by attributing his condition to his own sins or their sins. Indeed, this spiritual blindness was much more serious than the physical blindness of the man.

As the story unfolds, the spiritual blindness is seen to affect different classes of people. The blind man's neighbours and those who had earlier seen him begging were not sure if he was actually the same person as the one who could see. They brought the man to the Pharisees. This ruling class found fault with Jesus for curing the man on a sabbath day: *"This man cannot be from God; He does not keep the sabbath."* They were blind to God's work behind Jesus' cure of the blind man.

In the midst of all this, a contrary view was expressed: *"How could a sinner produce signs like this?"* In the wake of this, the blind man was asked and he replied, *"He is a prophet."* Now the Jews, the popular class, took the matter up with the man's parents. Afraid of being expelled from the synagogue, they advised the Jews to ask the man himself for *"he is old enough."* Fear led to this non-committal stance of the parents.

The core of the matter was the identity of *“Jesus as the Christ”*. When the Jews questioned the blind man, they used grounds of *“giving glory to God”* to get him to speak the truth. Here, they betrayed their spiritual blindness regarding Jesus the Messiah. They expressly affirmed: *“We know that his man is a sinner.”* That was their spiritual blindness. The blind man was not just cured of his physical blindness, but was given spiritual sight as well: *“Ever since the world began it is unheard of for anyone to open the eyes of a man who was born blind; if this man were not from God, He couldn’t do a thing.”*

The man cured of his physical blindness had his spiritual sight affirmed when later Jesus met him again and asked him: *“Do you believe in the Son of Man?”* His final reply was: *“Lord, I believe”*, and worshipped Him. He knew Jesus’ full identity as the Messiah and Son of God.

Jesus is the light of the world. He came into the world to enable everybody to see spiritually. But in order to see, we need good spiritual eyes, that is, faith. Jesus seeks to heal us of our spiritual blindness – the obstacles that block our vision of God. While not the cause of physical blindness and physical defects, our sins block our spiritual sight even in the presence of Jesus the light of the world, just as physical blindness prevents sight even in daylight. We need Jesus to remove all that clouds our spiritual vision. Let us not be like the blind man’s parents, neighbours, onlookers, Pharisees and the Jews raising doubts about Jesus or even denying Him. Let us rather be like the blind man standing by his faith in Jesus: *“Lord, I believe”* and worshipping Him. Jesus is indeed the Son of God made man to be the light of the world. With this spiritual sight, we walk in safety in the light of Jesus. This is salvation.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Ezekiel 37:12-14; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45

Covid19, first breaking out in China about four months ago, has become a serious pandemic. World statistics to date* records 613,828 confirmed cases of infection and a death toll of 28,229. Statistics keeps showing a rapid rise of cases. Apart from health, the virus has adversely affected human life in many areas: for example, social and community life, economy and work.

The religious sphere is not spared. For sure, positively countless believers of all faiths have been brought to their knees, pleading with God for intervention. But as the virus continues to spread, questions have been raised, like: Where is God in all this? Why does He not rid the world of the lethal virus? Does He not care at all? Many answers have been attempted by some religious leaders, theologians and believers at large.

In the face of the pandemic and a multitude of attempts to make sense of it, today's Gospel offers a ray of hope. It narrates the story of Jesus raising Lazarus to life. The story is long and rich with lessons for the reader. A lesson of immediate relevance to the questions raised by believers comes from Jesus' response when He received the message Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, sent Him: *"Lord, the man you love is ill."* The illness must have been critical enough for them to send that message. Their expectation was surely that Jesus would immediately make His way not just to see Lazarus but heal him. After all, He had healed countless people of different diseases in His ministry. But instead, Jesus *"stayed where He was for two more days"*. He gave His reason for this decision of His: *"This sickness will end not in death but in God's glory, and through it the Son of God will be glorified."*

Jesus tied Lazarus' illness and eventual death to God's glory. As it manifested the divine glory, it would also draw those witnessing it to faith. This is clearly the focus of the Gospel story. For, later when Jesus made His way and arrived at Bethany, the hometown of Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha, Lazarus had been dead four days already. Meeting Jesus, Martha said, *"If you have been here, my brother would not have died; but I know that, even now whatever you ask of God, He will grant you."* Mary repeated her sister's remark to Jesus. Jesus' love for Lazarus made Him sad and weep. Seeing this, some of those visiting the two sisters wondered why He had not in the first place prevented Lazarus' death as He had the power to.

Though He loved Lazarus, Jesus let him die. For the manifestation of God's glory would be greater in His raising of Lazarus to life than curing him of his critical illness. In working this miracle, He Himself would be glorified. This was what He told His disciples when informed of Lazarus' illness.

Jesus had power to raise Lazarus to life because, as He told Martha, *"I am the resurrection and the life."* His claim was not empty, for on the third day of His violent death on the cross, He rose from the dead. Resurrection and life are inseparably connected. For resurrection is to life. Jesus is, as Martha confessed, *"the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into this world"* to offer life, eternal life. He opened the door to this life through His death and resurrection. The raising of Lazarus became a sign of Jesus' own resurrection by virtue of which all of God's children would also rise to life. That indeed was God's glory as well as the glory of Jesus as the Son of God.

To enjoy the resurrection to eternal life, faith in Jesus is required. He made this very clear to Martha: *"Whoever lives and believes in Me will never die."* He then said to Mary, *"If you believe you will see the glory of God."* His raising of Lazarus to life was intended not just to give glory to God but also to elicit faith in His disciples. He asserted this to His disciples when He decided to go to Lazarus: *"Lazarus is dead and for your sake I am glad I was not there because now you will believe. Let us go to him."* He also asserted it in His prayer to His Father: *"I speak for the sake of all those who stand round Me, so that they may believe it was You who sent Me."* The story closes with a record that those *"who had seen what He did believed in Him."* The double purpose of the miracle was achieved: glory to God and faith of those who witnessed it.

The Gospel story assures us that the pandemic, though not His doing, will end in God's glory. For the moment, He seems to be passive or delaying His intervention. But He is there, always concerned. He weeps for us as Jesus wept for Lazarus. He calls for our faith and trust in Him. When and how God will manifest His glory through the pandemic we do not know. But we are sure it will happen. There will be a resurrection to life.

**This homily was written on 28th March 2020.*

PASSION SUNDAY

Matthew 21:1-11

Isaiah 50:4-7; Philippians 2:6-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66

Palm Sunday is also known as Passion Sunday for it begins Holy Week, the week Christians not only solemnly recall the passion and death of the Lord but also spiritually enter into an encounter with the Lord in these paschal mysteries of His. The Liturgy begins with the blessing of palms and the proclamation of the Gospel episode that narrates the Lord's entry into Jerusalem. (The Gospel is from Matthew for Year A, Mark for Year B and Luke for Year C).

The Lord's so-called "triumphant entry" into Jerusalem was marked by the following of "*great crowds*". They honoured Him by "*spreading their cloaks on the road*" and "*cutting branches from the trees and spreading them in His path.*" He Himself rode on the backs of "*the donkey and the colt.*" Such honour was what the people could accord Him. But it stood in stark contrast with the triumphant entry of a king into Jerusalem.

Why the difference? Simply because the Lord, as acclaimed, was the "*Son of David coming in the name of the Lord.*" He was not the political "*King of the Jews*", but the suffering Messiah of the Lord prophesied by Isaiah in the first reading. His entry into Jerusalem was for Him to be tried, condemned and crucified. Only after Jesus had "*yielded up His spirit*" was His identity as the "*Son of God*" recognised and publicly acknowledged by a Roman centurion who would have participated in His crucifixion.

Indeed, Jesus was the Son of God made man born as "*Son of David*" to be the suffering Messiah God promised through the prophets. He "*emptied Himself of His divinity*", as the second reading from Paul's Letter to the Philippians affirms, "*to become as men are... even to accepting death, death on a cross.*" That was the humility of Jesus. All this was because of His unconditional love for all fallen humanity. In that love, He went to the extent of humbly accepting humiliation in His death on the cross. In this way, He took our place to suffer the death penalty due to our sin. In this way, He took away all our sins and opened the doors of the heavenly Jerusalem to all of us. In the heavenly Jerusalem, eternal life awaits every faithful and converted disciple of the Lord Jesus. Entry into the heavenly city takes place at our death – at our departure from this world.

We bring home the palms we have blessed and received today not for any power they are often superstitiously believed to possess. No; they are meant to remind us of Jesus' humble entry into Jerusalem to accept in our place the death penalty due to our sin. They must then also sustain our hope that one day we will enter the heavenly Jerusalem where we will possess eternal life and share in the eternal glory of God.

Keeping the palms at home has no meaning if it does not give us this reminder and sustain our hope. As we are reminded of the goal of our earthly lives, it is important that we live them in accordance with God's will. Love is what God wants us to have: love of God and love of neighbour. This is because God sent His Son to save us out of love.

In these times of Covid19, our love for neighbour is very uniquely and indeed paradoxically expressed by social distancing, by avoiding one another's company. This is to contain the spread of the virus. But it also calls on us to ensure that all have enough food and their daily needs met. One response to this call is not to overstock our provisions and deprive some of their needs. Another response is to find a way of providing essential supplies to those who cannot afford them.

Because of the havoc Covid19 has caused and the lives it has claimed, there may be a great temptation to despair, to lose hope because of loss of faith and trust in God, or to think that God does not care at all, or to doubt if He has any power over the virus. The passion and death Jesus suffered in love for all of us should lead us to believe that He is now there suffering with all humanity as we face Covid19. His resurrection should assure us that the virus will be totally contained and there will be new life – new life even in this world of ours in the sense of greater solidarity among all peoples and deeper concern for one another. Beyond our lives on earth, this new life is eternal life in the heavenly Jerusalem.

Indeed, the celebration of Passion Sunday and the palms we keep should remind us of the Lord's unconditional love for us. Our experience of His love should lead us to respond to it with love. In this response of ours, our hope of entry into the heavenly Jerusalem deepens. Our courage to continue living increases.

HOLY THURSDAY

Exodus 12:1-8,11-14; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-15

Today's liturgical celebration is traditionally called "*Cena Domini*", that is, "*The Lord's Supper*". It took place within the context of the Jewish Passover meal, although the Gospel reading sets it a day earlier.

What does the Jewish Passover celebrate? The liberation of the Israelites, their ancestors, from slavery in Egypt. For more than four hundred years, the Israelites laboured as slaves for the Egyptian Pharaoh and his people. These harsh masters of theirs lived in scandalous opulence while their slaves were kept in inhumane conditions. The Israelites' desperate cry to God was heard and heeded. He intervened through Moses who called down plague after plague to break Pharaoh's obstinate heart.

All plagues had failed until the last, the tenth one. That plague claimed the lives of the firstborn of every Egyptian family and cattle. It succeeded in securing the liberation of the Israelites who then left Egypt for the land God had promised to give them. There, they would become a free nation.

The outbreak of the tenth plague was the context of the Passover meal narrated in today's first reading. The meal consisted in the eating of a roasted male lamb a year old. The lamb's blood was smeared on the lintels of the houses of the Israelites to identify them, so that the "angel of death" would "pass over" them to spare their firstborn from death. That was how the meal came to be called the "Passover meal". The people of Israel were instructed to eat it every year to remember this event of their liberation from slavery on their way to be God's chosen people in His covenant with them: "*I will be your God and you will be My people.*" God's choice of them was intended as "*light of the nations.*" God also wanted to make the entire humankind His own people and be their God.

To this end, God sent His Son Jesus into our world. Today's Gospel narrates the story of Jesus' last supper with His disciples. It took place "*before the festival of the Passover*" and on the eve of His crucifixion. This timing would allow Jesus to be crucified on the day when Passover lambs were slaughtered. By virtue of this, Jesus would become the new Passover Lamb to replace the Passover lamb of the OT. His blood would be poured out for the forgiveness of sins and bring about the total liberation of sinful humankind from Satan's bondage. For sure, this spiritual liberation was much deeper and more important than the Israelites'

liberation from Egyptian slavery. Sinful humankind, set free from Satan's bondage, would become not just the people of God but the family of God. Theirs would be a sharing in God's life, much like children sharing in the life of their parents.

Sharing in God's life means loving Him and loving all His children. For God is love. Jesus' gesture of washing the feet of His disciples at the end of the Last Supper underscored love. It was a symbolic action crystallising His unconditional love for all humankind. *"He loved them to the end"* – to the point of His death on the cross. His crucifixion was the full and clearest expression of His love: *"Greater love than this no man has, that he lays down his life for his friends."*

In bringing them to share in God's own life, Jesus wanted His disciples to love as He did. He had instructed them, *"Love one another as I have loved you."* His revolutionary gesture of washing His disciples' feet was intended to corroborate His teaching. In His days, and even today, no master would wash his disciples' feet. That gesture belonged to servants and slaves. But Jesus did it. Peter resented it.

In His response to Peter, Jesus categorically said, *"If I do not wash you, you can have nothing in common with Me."* Rejecting Jesus' gesture, Peter would have absolutely no share in Jesus' life, and therefore in His Father's life as well. Accepting it was a prerequisite for reception of the life Jesus was to bring about through His pouring out of His blood. Nobody was excluded from this life; not even Judas. For Jesus also washed his feet even though *"the devil had already put it into his mind to betray Him."* If only Judas had realised the significance of Jesus' gesture and repented! The opportunity was nonetheless offered.

A personal decision was called for from those the opportunity was offered. The decision is an act of the will that must translate into concrete actions that flow from the heart. That again was categorically articulated in Jesus' command: *"If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you."* His was an example of concrete love, love in action, assuming His whole life of love and prefiguring His "love to the end" shown on the cross. His love was not exclusive; on the cross He loved all to the end and intended to save all.

Jesus' command of love marks the discipleship He calls for. *"By this all men are to know you for My disciples, the love you have for each other."* By our mutual love, we identify ourselves as Christians and thus proclaim Christ to the world.

GOOD FRIDAY

Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42

The love of God for us is overwhelming. We feel it very strongly today as we commemorate His Son Jesus arrested, tried, condemned to death and crucified. The holy Son of the Blessed One accepted that fate we imposed on Him for no other reason than love: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life”* (Jn. 3:16). His death on the cross was His unmistakable expression of the depth of His love: *“Greater love than this no one has, that he should lay down his life for his friends”* (Jn. 15:13). Indeed, the crucified Christ is the clearest revelation of God loving all of us to the end.

It was out of the same love that Jesus on the cross gave His mother Mary and His beloved disciple to each other as mother and son through His words to them: *“Woman, this is your son. This is your mother.”* Jesus did this not out of expediency: entrusting His mother to the loving care of His beloved disciple. Rather, He pronounced the fruit of His death on the cross to be followed of course by His resurrection. The eternal life He had been sent to bring to the world was God’s own life. All who believe in Him share in God’s own life.

Sharing in God’s own life means becoming His children, just as children share in the life of their earthly parents. Becoming God’s children means belonging to God’s family as children belong to the family of their parents. Jesus’ saving mission on earth reached its climax at His death on the cross. With that mission completed, God’s family was instituted. In giving His mother and beloved disciple to each other as mother and son, Jesus actually proclaimed that the new family of God had come into being.

The family of God is founded not on blood but on faith and fidelity to God’s will. Jesus had affirmed it when told his mother and family members were looking for Him: *“Anyone who hears the word of God and does it is my mother, my brother and my sister”* (Mk. 3:35). Jesus clearly spelt out God’s will in terms of love: *“Love one another as I have loved you”* (Jn. 15:12). Mary was always faithful to God’s will and thus a woman of love. The wedding feast at Cana (Jn. 2:1-11) was a clear illustration of her dispositions. Though she and Jesus were guests of the feast, her love was at play. She noticed the shortage of wine. In love for her host, she approached Jesus her Son and was confident He would act to save the situation. Her confidence was manifested in her instruction to the servants: *“Do*

whatever He tells you.” That was an instruction to obey and came from an obedient heart, a heart of total fidelity. For sure, Mary was always faithful to God’s will. She was unfailingly obedient.

The beloved disciple of Jesus was so because of his fidelity to God’s will too and therefore a disciple of love. His fidelity to Jesus undergirded his painful and risky following of Jesus to the foot of His cross. God’s will, as Jesus articulated it, is: *“Love one another as I have loved you.”* Love willed by God would be the hallmark of His new family the crucified Jesus instituted by His death and resurrection.

The new family of God is open to all to join. Fidelity to God’s will is the only requirement. Since God’s will is that we love one another, anyone who loves is automatically a member of God’s family; he/she becomes a child of God, regardless of his/her religious affiliation. The famous theologian of the 20th century, Karl Rahner SJ, coined a term to describe non-Christians whose lives reflect Christian love: *“anonymous Christians”*. They are disciples of Christ and thus members of God’s family instituted by Christ on the cross.

Love is called for in our current crisis brought on us by Covid19. Love has indeed motivated many to reach out to those in need at personal risks. Though appearing to the contrary, social distancing is also an act of love, for it serves to “break the circuit” of the spread of the virus. Refraining from overstocking is to ensure provisions are available to others. Sharing of needs with the have-nots is taking care of others. All these acts of love involve sacrifices. A sacrifice is a dying to self and thus a participation in Christ’s laying down His life on the cross in love for all of us. It will lead to a resurrection, as Christ’s death led to His resurrection. All this by the power of God!

EASTER VIGIL

***Genesis 1:1-2:2; 22:1-18; Exodus 14:15-15:1;
Romans 6:3-11; Matthew 28:1-10***

God created human beings male and female to be one flesh and to multiply by conceiving and bearing children. With children, the family is formed. Thus, marriage and the family constitute the call from God to the man and the woman.

God also created human beings in His own image and likeness. His intention was to enable them to share in His life and faculties and relate with Him in an interpersonal way as children to their Father. So, at the bottom of it all, God created the man and the woman to form a family and be a part of His own family.

Sin caused a radical breach of God's intention. Although the fundamental call to marriage and family life was still possible, sin had seriously marred it. Fidelity to this call has become a huge struggle. More seriously, sin caused the loss of God's image in His human creatures. As a result, they were turned away from God and broke their interpersonal relationship with Him. They stayed out of God's family.

But God's love for His human creatures was too great to allow them to perish in their sin. He promised them salvation as He cursed the tempter. He sent Jesus into the world to fulfil this promise. By His death on the cross followed by His resurrection, Jesus restored the lost image of God to the fallen man and woman. The pronouncement He made on the cross for His mother and His beloved disciple to be mother and son was His restoration of the family of God.

All this restoration of the divine family relationship became a reality at Jesus' death and resurrection. But the reality has to be appropriated – that is, individually accepted and owned by every person. This takes place at baptism in which the believer participates in the death of the Lord through the immersion into the baptismal waters and in His resurrection through the act of coming out of the waters. The baptismal act its effects from the power of the Holy Spirit. Renewal of the baptismal vows tonight should be a renewed acceptance of God's grace.

Having appropriated this salvation brought about by Christ, the baptised are called to cling to Him and be faithful to Him. This means they ought to live their lives as faithful disciples, with the divine sonship in mind and eternal life as goal.

The disciples must have the right sense to choose eternal life even at the expense of earthly life: *“to lose one’s life in order to find it”*.

In realistic terms, even when everything in earthly life fails and death occurs, disciples are to cling to their Christian faith and be filled with the hope of rising to life at the end of time. Only with this faith and hope will they find true meaning and purpose in life. For it is in order to bring eternal life to us that Jesus Christ came into our world, became a human person, died and rose from the dead.

Jesus’ resurrection to life was as real as His death on the cross. The Gospel narrates, *“Mary of Magdala and the other Mary went to visit the tomb.”* *“The angel of the Lord”* who had *“descended from heaven”* *“rolled away the stone and sat on it”*. He did all that to show the two women that the tomb was empty. He then explained to them that the tomb was empty because Jesus had risen from the dead.

The women found the angel’s explanation verified when the risen Jesus went to meet them. Indeed, it was true that Jesus had risen. This truth was also affirmed by a lie that the chief priests concocted to explain the empty tomb. Tonight’s Gospel does not narrate it; but it is found immediately after the episode we have just heard. When the guards stationed to watch over the tomb reported to them what had happened, the chief priests paid them to propagate the lie that Jesus’ disciples had stolen His body. In trying to cover or distort the truth, the lie in fact affirmed it even more!

Jesus’ resurrection to life was a humanly impossible reality. It happened by the power of God. God exercised His power out of sheer love for fallen humankind. In this way He made it possible for sinners to return to Him and have their broken filial relationship with Him restored. He also made it possible for broken families to be patched up through reconciliation, so that they could become once again cells of His family.

Above all, as we continue to battle with Covid19, His power is there to assure us that if we count on Him in our struggle, we will be victorious and rise from the effects of the terrible virus. In this resurrection, we ought to live in fidelity to His will as our Father in heaven and in solidarity with one another as His children. Genuine love, care and concern must be the hallmark of our risen life.

EASTER SUNDAY

Acts 10:34,37-43; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-9

Among the messages sent around in the wake of Covid19 was this one: “Churches are empty. Christ’s tomb was empty too.” Emptiness is the common factor, but the reasons for the emptiness are very different. Christ’s tomb was empty because He had risen from the dead to life. Churches are empty because of the necessary measure to impose social distancing to control the deadly Covid19. Churches are empty apparently because of fear of death from the virus.

Death brings life to an end. Jesus Christ’s human life came to an end at His crucifixion. Throughout His life on earth He exercised a ministry of love. Love was the reason for His incarnation, for becoming Man. He loved all to the end as He laid down His life for all humankind facing death through the deadly virus of sin. Unlike Covid19 which infected only some, though many, people and caused the death of a good number of them, sin infected and brought death to all humankind; no one was spared except Jesus’ Mother. This death was not physical, but spiritual; it was death to eternal life and thus more serious than physical death.

On the cross, Christ took the place of all fallen humankind to pay the death penalty due to sin. In this way, He brought forgiveness of sin to all. By His resurrection to life, He brought life also to all humankind forgiven of sin. That is the salvation that God the Father out of love sent Him into the world to bring about as Jn 3:16 affirms: *“For God so loved the world that He sent His only Son into the world, so that those who believe in Him might not perish, but have eternal life.”*

The Gospel points out two attitudes towards the empty tomb. On seeing it, Mary of Magdala was convinced that some people had taken away the Lord’s body. The disciple Jesus loved saw the tomb empty and believed. What did he believe? The Lord had risen from the dead, as the scripture had foretold. The tomb was empty because it was meant for the dead and Jesus had risen to life. We celebrate Easter because we have taken on the attitude of the beloved disciple: we believe that the Lord has risen from the dead.

Churches are empty. The situation has been forced by Covid19 which has claimed millions of lives. The emptiness of the Churches has seen a surge of live streaming of the Triduum services throughout the world. Sharings over social media by countless Christians on their experiences in “participating” in these

services seem to be marked by a strange appreciation for a unique liturgical celebration. The “participation” has been in many cases creatively embellished, like for example, members of a family washing each other’s feet on Holy Thursday and leaving a lit candle outside the house. There has been an acknowledgement of a spiritual enrichment. Such media sharings have brought encouragement to the faithful isolated from congregations by the current virus and leaving Churches empty.

Faith is kept alive in a unique way by the risen Christ as the deadly virus has forced abandonment of the traditional community’s celebration of the paschal mysteries. The live streaming of services is meant to enable the faithful to “participate” in them. As one homily pointed out, it is now the domestic Church celebrating the liturgy. How true this is! The domestic Church is not an empty theological term. It is real and the local Church as well as the universal Church cannot do without the domestic Church. The domestic Church is the fabric of the local and universal Church, as much as the family is the fabric of society.

In the light of all that has been going on in the universal, the local and domestic Church, the empty Churches forced by Covid19 have shown that the Christian faith is very much alive. It is kept alive by the Lord whose empty tomb signals that He has risen from the dead. The risen Lord is in our midst, encouraging us to live fully by loving and sustaining our hope of eternal life. Our faith and our hope motivate us to face Covid19 with courage and live fully.

Happily, today our churches are filling up, although there may still be some who are staying away out of either cautiousness or convenience of online Masses at home. In a sense, this is a resurrection that participates in Christ’s resurrection to life. It is Easter for us.

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

“Seeing is believing.” We often hear this saying especially with regard to something incredible or thought impossible. Jesus’ resurrection is one event that falls into this category.

The risen Lord Jesus met His disciples’ need to see in order to believe. Today’s Gospel narrates the Lord entering the room where His disciples had locked themselves up “*for fear of the Jews*”. He had a triple intention: to offer them His peace, show them His wounded body to make them believe, and send them out on mission. This homily chooses to focus on the second intention.

Indeed, seeing His wounds the disciples came to believe that Jesus who had been crucified had risen from the dead. Naturally, they “*were filled with joy*”, the joy that their Lord and Master had risen to life. In their joy they shared their vision with Thomas: “*We have seen the Lord.*” For he was not with them when Jesus appeared to them. This one brief sharing was actually a confession of faith anchored on the *kerygma*: Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead. He therefore is indeed Lord. The *kerygma*, the core Gospel, proclaimed by the disciples of Jesus, aimed to elicit this faith.

Thomas’ response to the disciples’ sharing categorically articulated the human need to see in order to believe. He declared in no uncertain terms, “*Unless I see the holes that the nails made in His hands and can put my finger into the holes they made, and unless I can put my hand into His side, I refuse to believe.*” To meet Thomas’ expectation, the risen Jesus appeared to His disciples again and personally invited Thomas to feel His wounds. Indeed, He was the Jesus who was nailed to the cross. He had now risen.

Seeing is believing. Like his fellow disciples, Thomas had now seen. The risen Lord told him in no uncertain terms: “*Doubt no longer but believe.*” That was a call to faith to which Thomas responded, “*My Lord and my God.*” That response was a profession of faith elicited by the *kerygma* not proclaimed but experienced. The risen Lord was God. He came as Man to be crucified. Here, He took the place of all sinful humankind to pay the death penalty for sin. With the “price” paid, He brought life to all fallen humankind.

Remarking on Thomas’ confession, Christ said: “*You believe because you can see me. Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe.*” By these words, Christ

extolled the faith of future disciples of His. They would not have the privilege of seeing Him concretely in His wounded body. None the less, they would believe in Him crucified and risen, their Lord and God, through the *kerygma* proclaimed by Jesus' immediate disciples. Today's Gospel takes up this assurance of Christ and sets out to record Jesus' works to draw its readers to "*believe that Jesus in the Christ, the Son of God.*" The *kerygma* has power to elicit faith. In that faith believers see in every experience of their signs of the risen Lord.

In the second reading taken from his first letter, Peter acknowledges the truth of the declaration made by the risen Lord. Peter tells his addressees, "*You did not see Him (= Jesus Christ), yet you love him; and still without seeing Him, you are already filled with a joy so glorious that it cannot be described, because you believe.*" Indeed, as the risen Lord declared, these addressees did not see Him, but they came to believe Him: that He was crucified and had risen; that He is Lord and God. For that faith of theirs, they would have "*salvation of their souls*". This salvation is their "*new birth as children of God.*"

We live more than two thousand years after Christ. None of us has ever seen Him physically in His risen body. But we have received the *kerygma* and its embellishments into four Gospels. We have been led to faith in the risen Jesus as Lord and God. Our faith in Him opens our hearts to receive the salvation He came into our world to bring about. It is imperative that we cling to this faith of ours because it is anchored on historical fact in accordance with God's plan and because it "*gives us life through His name*". This life is our new birth as children of God and assures us that we will rise to it one day.

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 2:14,22-33; 1 Peter 1:17-21; Luke 24:13-35

In life we often face problems and difficulties. Sometimes they make us frustrated. Perhaps at times we even feel like giving up altogether. To make matters worse, in faith we turn to Jesus Christ for help, but He does not seem to be there for us. We wait for Him in hope, but end up in vain.

The two disciples going to the village of Emmaus went through the same experience of frustration and ended up losing hope altogether. They had been following Jesus for quite some time. They were entertaining the hope, as they put it, *“that He would be the one to set Israel free”*. Free from what? Free from the hands of the Romans. Once set free, Israel would gain her independence; Jesus would be their King; and His disciples would likely be given ministerial posts. Jesus’ great teachings and mighty works in the sight of God and the whole people had intensified their hope.

But unfortunately, all this hope had been shattered with the death of Jesus. The *“chief priests and leaders of the Jewish people had Jesus crucified.”* *“Two whole days had gone by since His death.”* There were astounding reports from women who had found His tomb empty and been told by angels that He was alive. Some disciples also found the tomb empty but had seen nothing of Him. Such reports had raised false hopes that yielded nothing.

Quite understandably, in their loss of hope altogether, the two disciples decided to leave Jerusalem to go to Emmaus obviously to start a new life. It was on their journey to the village that the risen Jesus broke into their company. But they did not recognize Him. Why? Because their minds had already been made up. He had been crucified and buried; despite the reports from the women, they had seen nothing of Jesus. The two disciples had indeed given up on Jesus.

So Jesus came and journeyed with them as a stranger. He listened to their conversation. It was about Him. He entered into a dialogue with them as if He knew nothing of what had happened: *“What matters are you discussing as you walk along?”* Their answer betrayed their surprise: *“You must be the only person staying in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have been happening there these last days.”* These things were headline news. Everyone was expected to have heard them. They then shared with Jesus not just what had taken place but also how they themselves had been badly affected by it. They were frustrated.

After listening to them, Jesus did two things. Firstly, He explained to them how the Scriptures had *“ordained that the Christ should suffer and enter into His glory.”* The Scriptures contained the word of God. Thus, God Himself had determined the death and resurrection of the Christ – the one anointed to bring salvation to the world.

The second thing Jesus did was to celebrate the Eucharist with the two disciples. Upon their arrival at Emmaus, they invited Him to stay with them since it was nearly evening. They hosted a meal for Him and at that meal, *“He took the bread and said the blessing; then He broke it and handed it to them.”* These were the four gestures that Jesus carried out at the Last Supper when He instituted the Eucharist.

It was at this point that they recognized Jesus. This was because Jesus had explained to them from the Scriptures the meaning of His own death and resurrection. The four signature gestures at the meal indicated to them that the “stranger” was Jesus. The moment the two disciples recognized Him, the risen Lord disappeared from their sight. They did not need His visible and physical presence to believe that He had risen from the dead.

From their state of hopelessness, the two disciples sprang into joy and went immediately back to Jerusalem to share the good news with the other disciples. They were eager to share their experience of Jesus on their journey to Emmaus and at the breaking of bread. But the other disciples were equally excited to break the same news that Jesus had risen. Excitement prevailed. *“Yes, it is true. The Lord has risen.”*

With their experience of the risen Lord, the disciples had their own resurrection. They rose from their frustration and sense of hopelessness. They rose to new life rooted in a new understanding of the liberation their Lord and Master had come to bring to them. The liberation consisted in forgiveness of sins and eternal life. It was far deeper and far more important than the liberation they expected.

The risen Lord is truly in our midst to offer us eternal life. To appreciate this, we need to read and pray the Scriptures. To experience His presence, we need to celebrate the Eucharist. Both the word of God in the Scriptures and the Eucharist will open our eyes to see Him journeying with us through the ups and downs of life. His answers to our prayers are directed to the all-important eternal life He won for us by His death and resurrection. They go beyond our expectation.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 2:14,36-41; 1 Peter 2:20-25; John 10:1-10

“No Admission for Unauthorised Persons”, “Trespasses will be prosecuted”, “Beware of Dogs” are some of the notices often posted at gates or entrances to properties, buildings, offices and houses. Security guards and control counters are also a common sight. Gated apartments are becoming a more regular preference among house buyers. Many install CCTVs or security alarms.

What do all these signages indicate? Essentially, a desire for protection and security. With armed robberies and instances of rape, child abduction, kidnapping, and revenge becoming increasingly common, such protection is felt to be an almost absolute necessity. Everyone wants security to live and work with peace of mind and heart. Gates and doors with security features offer some level of security – at least psychologically.

In today’s Gospel Jesus identifies Himself as *“the gate of the sheepfold”*. He is the point of entry into the sheepfold – that is, the “home” where the sheep can rest in peace and security. He also wards off *“thieves and brigands who come in to steal and kill and destroy.”* These refer to evil forces mustered by Satan in different and often subtle forms, like lust, domestic violence, bribery and corruption, exploitation and human trafficking.

Jesus’ self-identification as the gate is surprising especially after His parable of the shepherd and his sheep. Our normal expectation is for Him to identify Himself with the shepherd – a concept we are so used to. In today’s Gospel, He focuses on His role as the gate of the sheepfold to highlight the protection and security He accords to the sheep within the sheepfold. He then refers to the shepherd entering the sheepfold through the gate, allowed by the gatekeeper, very likely a reference to His Father.

In this way, Jesus makes room for shepherds other than Himself. These are leaders called by God to look after His flock. Every one of these shepherds calls the sheep one by one and goes ahead of them. They follow him because they know his voice. He commands an intimate relationship with every sheep in the fold entrusted to his care. He protects them as they pasture. When he leads them back to the sheepfold, he does so through Christ the gate, allowed by His Father the gatekeeper. In the sheepfold, the sheep are protected and are safe.

The gated sheepfold is the Church. The shepherds have a very broad application. We commonly think of them as the Pope, bishops and priests, especially in the context of Vocation Sunday which we mark today. We may also allow shepherds to include lay leaders of the Church – and these cover the whole spectrum of the Church’s ministry.

But there is an important category of shepherds who exercise a vital responsibility over smaller flocks within the sheepfold. These are parents. They are shepherds of their children. Parenthood is as much and important a vocation as the priesthood, church leadership or consecrated life. We must not forget that every Christian family is a domestic church; it is the fabric of the local and universal Church. Parents play a most important role to ensure the fabric is solid.

In today’s Gospel, the role of parents as shepherds is to be tied to the role of Jesus the gate of the sheepfold. This link has an important bearing on the responsibility of parents to bring up their children in faith and in relationship with Jesus. When children have Jesus as their gate, they have no fear of thieves and brigands – the agents of the evil one who are out to destroy their faith. They will always enjoy a sense of security and go on with their lives with peace of mind and heart, whether at home or outside. For, they will enter and exit through Jesus the gate – with Jesus always in their consciousness.

Indeed, Jesus as the gate is there to supplement and support the role of parents as shepherds of their children. Working with Jesus, parents will lead their children to the right spiritual pasture and feed them with the right values – in addition to providing them their material needs. In this way, children will grow up in faith – in the consciousness that Jesus is always there to protect them and give them safety. Entering and exiting through Jesus they will find true freedom and pasture as Jesus assures: *“Anyone who enters through me will be safe: he will go freely in and out and be sure of finding pasture.”* That pasture is the life which Jesus has *“come to offer to the full.”*

Parents play an indispensable role in the faith building of their children. Entering the sheepfold through Jesus the gate, allowed by the Father, they are in good relationship with Him. Leading their children through Jesus the gate, they impart to them a sense of security in Jesus and motivate them to stick to Him faithfully. In sound relationship with Jesus, children will find life to the full.

Parents are indeed shepherds appointed by God the Father to look after the fabric of the sheepfold – the family – and strengthen the Church.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 6:1-7; 1 Peter 2:4-9; John 14:1-12

From a stone rejected to the keystone; from an individual to a community; from earth to heaven – that is the mysterious plan of God. God’s power unfolds this mysterious plan of God. God’s power is life and with life there is growth. The growth reaches beyond earth to heaven.

The stone rejected was Jesus Christ. He was rejected by men, but chosen by God. He was an individual, but brought forth a community, because He was a living stone. The community is a spiritual house made up of living stones. In this metaphorical description, the second reading from 1 Peter depicts the powerful unfolding of God’s mysterious plan. The plan was ultimately to save all fallen humankind from death and bring them to life. Indeed, Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, was the key player.

Those who accepted the salvation Jesus brought to the world became living stones making God’s spiritual house. They formed a community which God transformed into His own family. We call this family the Church. Jesus Christ is the keystone of this house, the foundation of the family of God, the Church. As a living body, the Church grew.

As the Church grew, its needs increased. The community of Christians had to find ways to meet these needs. Today’s first reading records how the early Church addressed one significant need: taking care of widows. The widows among the Greek Christians were overlooked. Since the apostles could not and must not neglect prayer and the service of the word of God, they called a full meeting of the community and asked them to appoint seven deacons to address the new need. They laid hands on these deacons, a liturgical act of empowering them with the Holy Spirit to carry out their ministry.

The Christian community is God’s family on earth. It has its counterpart in heaven. Today’s Gospel presents Jesus’ affirmation of it. Jesus calls it “*My Father’s house*”. Elaborating on this house, Jesus assures all His disciples that there are “*many rooms*” there, meaning every disciple has a room reserved for them. He takes the trouble of “*preparing*” a room for each of them. In His Father’s house, all disciples will be with Jesus for ever. There, every disciple clearly belongs to the family of God and takes their proper place.

The heavenly counterpart of God's family on earth is in fact the latter's goal or the destination. It means, the Church or the community of Christ's disciples on earth are journeying towards heaven to be with Jesus for ever. In the Father's house in heaven, the Church as God's family will find its total fulfilment.

The question that arises is: how to get there? How will the individual members of God's family on earth get to the Father's house in heaven? That was the question Thomas asked Jesus: *"Lord, we do not know where you are going; so how can we know the way?"* In a sense, it was also reflected in Philip's request: *"Lord, let us see the Father and we shall be satisfied."*

Jesus' response was very clear and focused: *"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life... To have seen Me is to have seen the Father."* Jesus is the Way to the Father because He is the Truth about the Father. He is one with the Father and His entire person reveals His Father totally. Anyone wishing to enter the Father's house and be with Him needs to be with Jesus and follow Him. Once with the Father in Jesus, the disciple has life because Jesus is the Life.

One who follows Jesus to the Father enters the Father's house to enjoy a share in His life. That life is marked by love, because God is love. Love brings about a community. Indeed, the Father's house is a community, the Father's family. While fully realised in heaven, with the salvation brought about by Jesus, the Father's family can be experienced on earth. This happens when the disciples live in love for one another, in obedience to Jesus' command and in imitation of Him. For the command is: *"Love one another as I have loved you."*

Looking after the needs of poor widows in the first reading was clearly a ministry of love. But preaching Jesus the Way, the Truth and the Life and praying were necessary to ensure arrival at the *"Father's house"*. The first reading highlights these various ministries the early Church was engaged in. Different members were assigned different ministries. But the whole community was involved in this assignment, while the apostles prayed and laid hands of those appointed.

Every member played a vital role, all under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, every member was a living stone making the Church, the *"spiritual house"* built on the *"keystone"* that Jesus, *"the living stone rejected by men but chosen by God"*, is. The community thus formed is indeed *"a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation"*. They are *"a people set apart to sing the praises of God"* mainly through their lives of love for God and for one another. They point and journey towards the *"Father's house"* in heaven.

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 8:5-8,14-17; 1 Peter 3:15-18; John 14:15-21

Last Sunday a point the liturgy of the word highlighted was the “*spiritual house*” founded on Jesus Christ “*the stone rejected by men but chosen by God*” and made up of “*living stones*”. That spiritual house is clearly the Church, the family of God on earth. It points to and moves towards the “*Father’s house*” which is God’s family in heaven.

Today’s readings provide further insights into the family of God on earth. The power that sustains and keeps the family going is the Holy Spirit. The Gospel carries Jesus’ promise to “*ask the Father*” to give the disciples the Holy Spirit, “*another Advocate*”, “*the Spirit of truth*”, “*to be with you for ever.*” Jesus insinuates that the Holy Spirit will continue His presence among His disciples: “*In a short time the world will no longer see me; but you will see me.*” In Jesus’ presence through the Holy Spirit, the disciples continue to enjoy His life: “*I live and you will live.*” Jesus’ presence assures the Father’s presence among His disciples: “*I am in the Father and you in me and I in you.*”

Indeed, the family of God on earth remains intact even after Jesus’ return to His Father because of the Holy Spirit whom He will ask the Father to give His disciples. Jesus assures His disciples of this: “*I will not leave you orphans.*” An orphan is one without parents and therefore without a family. Jesus’ disciples will continue to have a family or rather, to be a family, the family of God on earth. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus and in Him the Father will be among the disciples and they will continue to be God’s family.

God’s family is characterised by love. Love is explicitly reiterated in Jesus’ opening and closing statements in the Gospel: “*If you love me you will keep my commandments.*” Jesus’ commandments focus on love modelled on His own love: “*This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you.*” Mutual love among the disciples reflects their love for Christ and secures the Father’s love for them: “*Anybody who receives my commandments and keeps them will be one who loves me... and will be loved by my Father.*” Love is indeed the hallmark of God’s family on earth.

Love modelled on Jesus’ love to the point of laying down His life for all is possible through the Holy Spirit. Jesus poured out His Spirit on His disciples from His Father’s right hand. The Acts of the Apostles describes the great event of the

Pentecost. The event was the powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The Acts affirms the transformation of the Christian community by the Holy Spirit. Love became their way of life. They sold their property and held all their possessions in common, to share them with one another so that no one would have any need. That was the charismatic Christian community, the family of God on earth.

Today's first reading is taken from the Acts of the Apostles. It narrates the story of the deacon Philip proclaiming Christ to the Samaritans and working miracles among them. Philip had drawn many to believe in the word of God. They were *"baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus."* But that was not enough. They needed the Holy Spirit. To this end, *"the apostles in Jerusalem... sent Peter and John to them."* *"They laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit."*

Being baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus prepared the Samaritans for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on them. Their full incorporation into the Church, the family of God on earth, could happen only when Jesus and in Him His Father were truly present among them through the Holy Spirit.

The first reading has been taken as one of the scriptural texts to affirm and explain the Church's practice of baptism and confirmation. These are two of the seven sacraments of the Church. Together with today's Gospel, it throws light on an important aspect of the Church. As the family of God on earth pointing to the Father's house in heaven, the Church is the sacrament of salvation, life in the kingdom of heaven. Founded on Jesus and sustained by the Holy Spirit, the Church operates through the seven sacraments. The constitutional sacraments are baptism and confirmation, for they constitute the birth of believers as children of God and fully incorporate them as members of God's family. Love is necessarily their way of life. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they are able to love as Christ did, in a self-sacrificial way.

ASCENSION

Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:17-23; Matthew 28:16-20

The launching of a space craft into space captures viewers with awe. Yes, what a spectacular sight that is, especially when the craft exudes a trail of blazing light.

The ascension of the risen Lord into heaven could not but be an infinitely more spectacular and captivating sight. Taking place over two millennia before space exploration, it undoubtedly created a powerful impact and carved an inerasable memory in the minds of the apostles who witnessed it. The first reading from the Acts of the Apostles describes the spectacle in these terms: *“They were still staring into the sky”* even when *“the cloud had taken Him from their sight.”*

At that point, *“two men in white were standing near them and said, ‘Why are you men from Galilee standing here looking into the sky? Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, this same Jesus will come back into the same way as you have seen Him go.’* When would this return, this *“coming back”*, of Jesus happen? For sure, Jesus will return in all His glory at the end of time.

But Jesus’ return took place on the Day of Pentecost, ten days after His ascension. On that day, the Holy Spirit came like tongues of fire resting on the head of each apostle, accompanied by what sounded like a powerful wind from heaven. When they spoke, everyone gathered in Jerusalem from many different nations could hear the apostles speak in their respective languages (cf. AA 2:1-13). That was certainly as much a marvel to behold as the glorious sight of Jesus’ ascension.

Jesus’ return at the end of time, called the *Parousia*, and on the Day of Pentecost gives us vital elements of the significance of Jesus’ ascension. Before dealing with them, it is important to note one very specific reason for the ascension. In His farewell discourse to His disciples on the eve of His arrest and crucifixion, Jesus made it very clear to them that He would have to return to His Father, for He had come from Him (Jn. 16:28).

In the same farewell discourse, Jesus explained that His return to His Father had other reasons. He was to prepare a place in His Father’s house for each of His disciples. He added, *“After I have gone and prepared you a place, I shall return to take you with me, so that where I am you may be too”* (Jn. 14:3). Jesus will return at the end of time to take all His disciples to His Father’s house. But before

that, He will already have returned at one's death. At death, the body corrupts; but the soul lives on and Jesus takes it to heaven. His return at the end of time is to raise the body and reunite it with the soul so that the disciple will share in Christ's glorious resurrection and ascension to heaven.

Jesus' ascension has an important significance for His disciples not just upon their death but also in their lives on earth. Again, in His farewell discourse, He spelt out this significance: *"I shall ask the Father and He will give you another Advocate to be with you for ever"* (Jn. 14:16). Later in the discourse, He explained, *"It is for your own good that I am going, because unless I go, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I do go, I will send Him to you"* (Jn. 16:7).

From Jesus' discourse, it is clear that Jesus would send the Holy Spirit in order to be with His disciples for ever. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus and the Father, so that both Jesus and the Father would be involved in sending Him. The Holy Spirit would be Jesus' new presence with His disciples on earth. Jesus and the Father are one in the Spirit and thus His new presence with His disciples in the Spirit is also the Father's presence. On these grounds, Jesus gave His disciples this assurance: *"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love Him; and we shall come to Him and make our home with him"* (Jn. 14:23). The Spirit empowers Christ's disciples to love His Father and, in this love, to love all His children on earth.

In the light of the two elements constituting its significance, one point about Jesus' ascension is clear: the presence of Jesus, the Son of God made Man. He came down to earth to be the Immanuel, "God among us". When He returned to His Father after His mission on earth, He sent down His Spirit to be His new presence among His disciples. His presence is also the presence of His Father. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus and His Father make their home in the disciples on earth. When they leave the world in death, Jesus takes them to His Father's home. At the end of time, He will raise their bodies to reunite with their souls in heaven. God's home on earth is His presence with and in the disciples. His home in heaven is His everlasting presence to which Jesus brings the disciples. The Immanuel is everlasting.

Thus, His promise in the Gospel: *"I am with you always; yes, to the end of time."* It was to assure all humankind of this eternal presence of His that He sent His apostles out to *"make disciples of all the nations, baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."* For sure, Jesus wants all to be with Him forever.

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 1:12-14; 1 Peter 4:13-16; John 17:1-11

Conversations reminiscing the times one enjoyed with a recently departed loved one when he/she was still living are a common feature. Somehow these conversations serve to fill the gap left by him/her and perhaps give a feeling that he/she is still somehow present.

To some extent the New Testament is a product of such reminiscences of Jesus among His disciples. He was put to death on the cross. He rose from the dead and ascended to His Father's right hand. His ascension was celebrated last Thursday. While after His resurrection, He appeared and talked to some of His disciples for forty days, after His ascension He sent His Spirit to be present with them forever. His Spirit's presence is in fact His own presence.

The death and resurrection of Jesus followed by His ascension were extraordinary events manifesting His power. These were not only talked about among the disciples but were also proclaimed as core events in Jesus' mission to the world. They constituted what is called the *kerygma*, the core Gospel of Jesus Christ. This *kerygma* was embellished with episodes gathered from different reminiscences about Jesus and also led to faith reflection on them.

Among the disciples' reminiscences about Jesus their Lord and Master today's Gospel presents His prayer to His Father. It follows His long farewell discourse on the eve of His death. For sure, the disciples must have been strongly impacted by this discourse and prayer of Jesus precisely because He offered them on the eve of His arrest and crucifixion. At this critical moment of His life, Jesus focused on His disciples and His Father. He thus addressed the disciples and His Father.

Even while praying to the Father His mind was on His disciples. He reported to His Father that He "*had finished the work*" the Father had given Him and thus glorified the Father. He had done this by "*making the Father's name known*" to His disciples, so that "*they had kept His word*" and come to believe that "*the Father had sent Him.*" Jesus explicitly affirmed that in this faith of theirs, His disciples had received eternal life which was "*to know You, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.*"

Jesus was well aware that because the disciples had come to believe in Him and belonged to the Father, the world, that is, non-believers, would reject and persecute them. He therefore prayed the Father to protect them and keep them

faithful to the Father's word which He had given them. In this way, they would enjoy eternal life. In other words, they would continue to *"know the Father as the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He had sent."*

In the light of the biblical concept of knowing as relationship, Jesus prayed His Father to keep His disciples faithful in their relationship with the Father and with Himself. They would need the Father's protection in times of rejection and persecution coming from the world. The protection was not so much from the persecution the disciples would face but from giving up their relationship with Jesus and in Him with the Father. For even if they should lose their earthly lives in their persecution, they would continue to have eternal life.

Before facing His own persecution and condemnation to death, Jesus was truly concerned for His disciples. His long farewell discourse to them was not enough; at the end of it He turned to His Father to ask Him to protect them. They belonged to the Father and He had given them to Jesus. They were indeed the common property of the Father and Jesus.

In the light of this common ownership of the disciples, glorification in Jesus' prayer consists in preserving their relationship with Jesus and the Father. Jesus had glorified the Father by making His name known to them and leading them to keep His word. Now Jesus asked the Father to glorify Him by keeping them faithful to their relationship with Him and the Father, especially in persecution.

The Father's response to Jesus' prayer is to send His disciples the Holy Spirit. In the words of the second reading, this Spirit is *"the Spirit of God", "the Spirit of glory"*. He would empower them to *"have some share in the sufferings of Christ"*. In Jesus they would glorify the Father. Jesus saw this as the Father glorifying Him.

The first reading taken from the Acts of the Apostles narrates the community of believers gathered with the apostles and Mary, the mother of Jesus, *"in the upper room"* to await the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. They followed the instruction the risen Jesus gave them just before He ascended to heaven. The Holy Spirit came down on them like tongues of fire on the Day of Pentecost. The Acts records how filled with the Holy Spirit the apostles and some disciples of the Lord suffered persecution and remained faithful to the Lord. There was no doubt that the Father answered Jesus' prayer.

As He was concerned for the disciples of His time, Jesus is also concerned for us. He has also given us His Spirit to keep us faithful in our relationship with Him.

PENTECOST SUNDAY

Acts 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12:1-7,12-13; John 20:19-23

Today we celebrate the day of Pentecost. In the Old Testament, Pentecost is the Greek term for the Jewish Feast of Weeks – so named because it fell on the fiftieth day after the ceremony of the barley sheaf during the Passover observances. It marked the beginning of the offering of the first fruits.

Christians employ the term for the day of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the apostles. It took place fifty days after Jesus' resurrection. It marked the birth of the Church and the beginning of her mission, entrusted by Christ to and carried out by the apostles.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the first reading differs from that in the Gospel. The former depicts a very dramatic show involving *"the noise of a powerful wind filling the entire house"* where the apostles had gathered, followed by *"tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on the head of each of them"*. The latter presents in one verse the risen Jesus *"breathing on the apostles and saying: 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"* The difference does not rule out the reality of the apostles receiving the Holy Spirit from the risen Lord. In addition, both accounts highlight mission as the essential purpose of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. He was given to empower the apostles to carry out the mission the risen Lord entrusted to them.

The Gospel explicitly affirms the risen Jesus saying to His apostles: *"As the Father sent Me, so am I sending you."* Sending is the essence of mission. Jesus models His apostles' mission on His own. He was sent by His Father to bring peace, *shalom*, to all fallen humankind. This peace amounts to the total well-being of every person. It has two dimensions: forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. Of course, reconciliation with God results in sharing in His eternal life. All this is salvation. That was why when He appeared to them, the risen Lord told His disciples: *"Peace be with you."*

Jesus sent His apostles out to forgive sins and He gave them the Holy Spirit to empower them to do that. This was a mission to bring the fruit of Jesus' own mission to the world: to reconcile fallen humankind with God through forgiveness of sins. As such it was a follow-up on Jesus' saving mission.

In the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, after receiving the Holy Spirit the apostles “*preached about the marvels of God*”. The core marvel was the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Following that was the call to repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

An important point to note in the first reading is that everyone from the twelve nations gathered in Jerusalem understood the apostles preaching in their own respective language. Gen. 11 explains the building of the Tower of Babel as the cause of multiple languages. Because “*the whole earth had one language and few words*”, human beings were able to plan the Tower of Babel with its top reaching the heavens, God’s dwelling place. Their goal was to make a name for themselves and compete with God. Pride and being gods underlay the project. God therefore divided their languages and scattered humankind over the face of the earth. In this way, they could no longer proceed with their project.

Confusion of language and scattering of people over the face of the earth were considered a result of the sin of pride expressed through the ambitious project they were undertaking. In contrast, the gathering of the people of all tongues in Jerusalem and their ability to understand the apostles on the day of Pentecost were evidently the result of salvation. Forgiven of their sins and reconciled with God, saved people are also reconciled with one another and become a community again.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was to empower the apostles to continue the mission of Christ by bringing the salvation He had brought about to the entire world. Today, the Church, filled with and empowered by the Holy Spirit, still exercises this mission.

FEAST OF THE HOLY TRINITY

Exodus 34:4-6,8-9; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; John 3:16-18

A sublime mystery indeed – the Holy Trinity. It is a mystery because it is beyond human understanding, human reasoning and human calculation. In fact, it does not belong to the human realm in any of its areas. Rather it pertains totally to the divine realm.

Nonetheless, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit constituting the mystery of the Holy Trinity want and have a lot to do with human creatures, with all human beings in the world and in all generations. Creation and history have shown this. Sacred Scriptures, as the word of God, have revealed this. The word of God has unveiled the meaning of creation and historical events as God's acts in favour of His human creatures. In the fulness of time, the Word of God became flesh in Jesus Christ and came, sent by God the Father, into the human world to bring salvation.

The classic text affirming this loving intervention by God in favour of fallen humanity is Jn. 3:16-17, two of the three verses of today's Gospel. It proclaims God the Father sending His Son into the world to save all humankind. Salvation is needed because human beings have fallen into sin. In sin, they stand to be condemned, to perish in eternal death. Salvation means bestowing eternal life.

The Son of God is God's "*only Son*". In sending Him into our world, God the Father was "gifting" Him to all fallen humankind. The Gospel categorically affirms this: "*He gave His only Son.*" Giving is parting with a possession or a belonging. It is therefore a sacrifice. God's sacrifice in today's Gospel is not just of a possession or belonging, but of His own Son, a Person who is very much part of the Father as they are One and have the same life. God the Father is therefore giving up an essential part of Himself in His Son.

Why would God do that? That "why" has two aspects: the purpose and the reason for God's sacrificial act. The purpose is to save all fallen humankind: that they "*may have eternal life*". The almighty and transcendent God did not need humankind at all. He could have left them to perish since they had chosen that path. But, in the words of Hosea the prophet, "*He is God, not man.*" As God, He loves and He loves unconditionally. The reason why He was all out to save fallen humankind was His unconditional love for them: "*God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son.*"

If God loves and loves unconditionally it is because *"He is love"* (1 Jn. 4:16). In affirming this, John the evangelist touches the heart, the essence of God's being. Love always moves out of the self to the other. Thus, as love, God is triune: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As love, the Father *"begets"* His Son and their love for each other is so intense and intimate that the Holy Spirit proceeds from it. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and the Son in total, perfect and intimate love with each other. In that total, perfect and intimate love, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one God.

As love, the triune God is not closed in within Himself; on the contrary, He moves out of Himself and as He reveals in His word in the Scriptures, He created human beings *"in His own image"* (Gen. 1:26,27). Bearing that image, human creatures share in God's nature of love, relate with Him in love and relate with one another as well. In His love for them, the triune God put at the disposal of His human creatures the entire world and universe He had created for them. It was in this given universe and the world in it, that human beings were to live out their relationship with God and with one another. Indeed, the triune God desire right from the very beginning of time to have everything to do with mankind. Living out this relationship in time constitutes human history marked by relationship with God.

As history unfolded, the man and the woman went against the love God had created them for. They decided to replace *"the image of God"* in them with their own image. They rejected God's love and walked out of it. They headed for destruction: *"from dust you came and unto dust you will return"* (Gen. 3:19). But the unconditional love of the God who is love moved Him to reach out to fallen humankind. While their bodies would return to dust in death, God sent His Son to the human world to give life to them: their souls would live and be brought to the eternal paradise of which the earthly paradise, the garden of Eden, was only a foretaste.

History interpreted in the light of the word of God has shown that the sublime mystery of the Holy Trinity, God the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit, wants to have everything to do with humankind on earth. For God is love. Love undergirds God's total self-gift in His Son Jesus to the entire fallen humankind. With His ascension to His Father's right hand, the risen Jesus *"gifted"* the Holy Spirit to all humankind to be His new presence not just among them but also within them. For He assured His disciples and therefore all of us: *"I will ask the Father and He will give you another Advocate to be with you forever"* (Jn. 14:15). *"My Father will love you and we will come and make our home with you"* (Jn. 14:23).

FEAST OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

Deuteronomy 8:2-3,14-16; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; John 6:51-58

Obstacles to the Christian faith are many. Among them are shocking pronouncements and even repulsive offers made by Jesus Christ, the person at the heart of Christianity.

Today's Gospel presents one such pronouncement and offer by Jesus: *"I am the living bread which has come down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh for the life of the world."* It is not surprising that Jesus drew a strong reaction from the Jews: *"How can this man give us His flesh to eat?"* Indeed, in making such an offer, Jesus appeared to be out of His mind.

Yet, Jesus did not retract or change His words. Not only did He stick to them but He also took them further with more explicit statements. He qualified them with categorical solemnity: *"I tell you most solemnly."* His further elaboration on His offer that the Jews stumbled over was therefore founded on His own seriousness and certitude of the truth of His claims.

Jesus' further elaboration ought therefore to be taken seriously. *"If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you will not have life in you."* Its negative formulation carries a strong positive affirmation which the next statement enunciates: *"Anyone who does eat My flesh and drink My blood has eternal life."* These two statements are a clear development on Jesus' claim: *"I am the living bread."*

Bread is food to be eaten in order to live. Jesus came into our world to bring life. He affirmed the need to consume His flesh and His blood to receive the life He was offering. He further asserted: *"For My flesh is real food and My blood is real drink."* This assertion was a deliberate reiteration of the need to "eat" His flesh and "drink" His blood to have life, that is share in His eternal life.

How will a disciple who eats Jesus' flesh and drinks His blood have eternal life? Jesus spelt out two ways in which eternal life would be acquired. The first is: *"I shall raise him up on the last day."* Resurrection is of course a rising from death to life. Jesus could assure it because He had power to do it. He showed His power by Himself rising from the dead on the third day. The second way consists in a mutual indwelling between Him and the disciple: *"He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood lives in Me and I live in him."* In the natural order, the food and

drink consumed enter a person's body and become part of him/her. At the same time, the person is vitalised through the needed nutrients the food and drink provide. In a similar but limited way, eating His flesh and drinking His blood the disciple and Jesus become an "integral part" of each other. There is an indwelling between them, whereby the disciple participates in the life of Jesus – eternal life. That participation takes place here but will be definitively consummated in the resurrection from the dead on the last day.

Jesus' flesh and blood belong to His human nature, to Him as a human person. His eternal life belongs to His divine nature, to Him as Son of God. This mystery undergirds Jesus as the fundamental sacrament: His invisible divine Sonship is made visible and experienced through Him as Man. As Man, He was subject to physical death and He suffered it in a violent way on the cross. There, He offered His flesh and blood in sacrifice. On the third day, He rose to life, to eternal life, thereby returning to His divine status as Son of God. As Son of God, He offered eternal life to all those ready to accept it. On the last day He will raise them to eternal life.

Jesus the fundamental sacrament instituted the Eucharist as the sacrament to enable His disciples to celebrate memory of His death and resurrection for all generations to come. Memory in the biblical sense is making present a past mystery without repeating it. The Eucharist makes the crucified and risen Jesus present in the here and now without crucifying Him and His rising to life again. In the Eucharist, Jesus offers His disciples His own flesh broken and blood poured out on the cross to eat and drink in the forms of bread and wine. In instituting the Eucharist at the Last Supper He offered the twelve apostles the bread and chalice of wine saying: *"This is My body"* and *"This is My blood. Do this in memory of Me."*

On the cross, Jesus showed His love for His disciples to the end. In the Eucharist, He perpetuates this love of His for all generations of His disciples to come. In that love He invites them into a mutual indwelling with Him. He shares His life with them as much as He shares in their lives. In this way, in their lives on earth, the disciples have confidence that Jesus is present in them to accompany them in their ups and downs. At the same time, they are assured of a share in Jesus' eternal life which will find consummation in their resurrection on the last day.

The Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ celebrates Jesus' love for all of us expressed in His total self-giving to us that we may live forever. Yes, His flesh is real food and His blood is real drink for this eternal life.

FEAST OF THE ASSUMPTION

Apocalypse 11:19; 12:1-6,10; 1 Corinthians 15:20-26; Luke 1:39-56

In his Apostolic Constitution, *“Munificentissimus Deus”*, issued on 1 November 1950, Pope Pius XII declared the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary an article of faith. After completing her earthly life, the Blessed Virgin Mary was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory. The Eastern Orthodox Church professes the same faith and expresses it as the *“Dormition of the Theotokos”*, that is, the *“Falling asleep of the Mother of God.”*

These dogmatic declarations of faith were neither sudden nor arbitrary. They were made after a long-standing belief by the faithful of both the Latin and Orthodox Churches that Mary, the Mother of God, was taken up body and soul into heaven. Such belief is derived from the scriptural proclamation of the salvation Jesus brought to all fallen humankind through His death and resurrection. Jesus is the Son of God made man. God chose the Blessed Virgin Mary to conceive and give birth to Jesus in her virginity. In His humanity, Jesus died on the cross and brought forgiveness of sins to all sinful humankind. Following that He rose to life and brought eternal life to them. The second reading asserts this great mystery thus: *“Death came through one man; in the same way the resurrection of the dead has come through one man. Just as all men die in Adam, so all men will be brought to life in Christ.”*

In her position as His Mother, the Blessed Virgin stood to benefit from Jesus' salvation. She who gave flesh to the Son of God made man was graced with the privilege of being taken up body and soul into heaven, be it in her sleep or at her death. This privilege of hers was surely *“in the proper order”* with *“Christ as the first-fruits”*, followed by *“those who belong to Him.”* While these latter will rise from the dead *“after the coming of Christ”*, His Mother was conferred the privilege at the end of her earthly life.

As His Mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary played an important role in Jesus' mission on earth. Her acceptance of God's choice of her came from her total obedience to God's word. After she had given her *“yes”* to God, she immediately visited her relative Elizabeth who, in her old age, as she had been told, had also conceived a son. That encounter between the two great women was also an encounter between their two sons, John the Baptist and Jesus. At the bottom of it all, Mary brought Jesus to Elizabeth and John the Baptist. That was Mary's role,

explicitly affirmed in the Gospel today. Another episode comes to mind, but it is narrated in another Gospel, the Gospel of John. That was the wedding feast at Cana where Mary played the role of directing the servants of the bridegroom to *“do whatever He [= Jesus] told them.”*

Returning to today’s Gospel, we hear Elizabeth proclaiming Mary *“blessed”* because *“she believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.”* It was her faith that made Mary burst out in praise of God in her *“Magnificat”*, her song of praise. In that song, she acknowledged God’s mighty works of mercy, that is, of salvation to all the descendants of Abraham of all generations. That work of salvation was clearly brought about by Jesus whom she carried in her womb. She considered her position as His mother among the *“great things the Almighty had done for her.”* It was a great privilege bestowed on her, for it associated her closely with the mission of Jesus for the salvation of the world.

Her role, however, was not without sufferings for the simple reason that His mission was marked by the cross. The first reading uses apocalyptic language to depict these sufferings. A huge red dragon with its evil power sought to eat up the son borne by a woman clothed in glory. That son *“was to rule all the nations”* and *“was taken straight up to God and to his throne, while the woman escaped into the desert, where God had made a place of safety ready.”* While interpreters see the woman primarily to mean the Church, many do not rule out Mary, because the son refers to Christ the Saviour. Satan, symbolised by the red dragon, sought to destroy Jesus; this surely brought sufferings to Mary His Mother. The Gospel of John depicts Mary sharing her Son’s sufferings at the foot of His cross (19:25-27).

Jesus’ death on the cross was Satan’s work. But Jesus turned it into His own laying down of His life so that fallen humankind could have life to the full (Jn. 10:10). To this end, He rose to life three days later. In this way, He brought eternal life to those who believed in Him.

Mary’s assumption body and soul into heaven is her entry into eternal life and participation in her Son’s glory. It therefore bears testimony to the reality of the salvation brought about by Jesus. It thus assures us that we will also receive this life after our death and we will rise from the dead at the end of time.

FEAST OF ALL SAINTS

Revelation 7:2-4,9-14; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

In the Apostles' Creed we say, "I believe in the communion of saints." The celebration of the Feast of All Saints flows from this article of faith. The first reading from the Book of Revelation contributes to the biblical foundation for this faith of ours.

The vision the author of the book had was of *"people who have washed their robes white again in the blood of the Lamb."* The Lamb is Jesus Christ sacrificed on the Cross for the sins of the world. His blood washed all sinners clean. Saints therefore are sinners made clean by Christ through His blood.

The author saw *"a hundred and forty-four thousand, out of all the tribes of Israel."* There seems to be a great restriction here, numerically as well as ethnically. But the next verse breaks the restriction with its affirmation of *"a huge number, impossible to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe and language."* In the light of this latter verse, the symbolic meaning of the numerical and ethnic references of the former verse becomes clear.

A hundred and forty-four thousand is a multiple of twelve, twelve times twelve times one thousand. The *"tribes of Israel"* specify the people of God of the Old Testament, with their twelve patriarchs. From this ethnic group came the Messiah, Jesus Christ. He established the new people of God, the new Israel of the New Testament, built on the twelve apostles. One thousand is a number signifying multitude. Therefore, the saints comprise the people of God of the Old Testament and the New Testament; they are a large number coming from *"every nation, race, tribe and language."*

Sainthood in essence is divine childhood. It harks back to God's intention when God created human beings in His own image (cf. Gen. 1:26-27). A fundamental purpose of God's image is for human beings to share in His life and relate with Him. Just as a child receives life from his/her parents and shares in their life, so receiving life from God and sharing in His life make human beings His children. But it is very unfortunate that instead of happily living as God's children, human beings strive to be His equal. In a symbolic way, the creation story describes this human strife in terms of desiring and eating the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil (cf. Gen. 3). The consequence of this strife was self-destruction.

But in His mercy, God promised fallen human beings salvation. Gen. 3:14-15 carries that promise of God when He cursed the serpent: *“I will make you enemies of each other: you and the woman, your offspring and her offspring. It will crush your head and you will strike its heel.”* Jesus Christ, born of the virgin Mary, is the fulfilment of this great divine promise.

Everyone in the world stands to benefit from the salvation brought by Jesus Christ through His blood. That salvation is a twofold reality: forgiveness of sins and eternal life. It is indeed there; but everyone needs to appropriate it, that is, to accept it personally.

For this, a response is called for. The response consists in living one’s life in tandem with Christ’s salvation. It means turning away from sin and living out eternal life. It ultimately means living in good relationship with God and with neighbour. The way to lead this life is laid down in the “Charter of Life” given by Jesus in the “Beatitudes” in today’s Gospel.

The first beatitude articulates relationship with God in terms of being “poor in spirit.” It means trusting and counting on God totally. Living with such attitude amounts to possessing the kingdom of God where one lives in the eternal presence of God and shares in His eternal life.

The first beatitude undergirds all the other beatitudes; these deal with good relationship with neighbour. To be “gentle” is to be kind to others. To “mourn” is to lament the loss of the sense of God in the world. To “hunger and thirst for what is right” is to seek God’s justice for those who are exploited and marginalised. To be “merciful” is to reflect God’s mercy to the poor and needy. To be “pure in heart” is to have religious and moral integrity. To be a “peacemaker” is to promote “shalom” – that is, total well being of the human person – and to reconcile factions.

The final beatitude addresses the persecution disciples of Christ will have to face because of their faith in Him. It exhorts them to stand firm and be faithful to Him in these times of persecution. They are assured of inheritance of the kingdom of heaven.

The “Charter of Life” is meant for all of us today as much as for those in Christ’s time who seek to appropriate Christ’s salvation, to own it. It promises us that the kingdom of God is ours and we will see God. Let us strive to be faithful to Christ’s beatitudes.

FIRST SUNDAY - BAPTISM OF THE LORD

Readings: Isaiah 42:1-4,6-7; Acts 10:34-38; Matthew 3:13-17

People generally appreciate and are encouraged by praises for their achievements. Many leaders of the world look for and wallow in such praises, even though often these praises should lack sincerity. Human praises, though useful and valuable, pale before God's praise in significance and value. God's praise is truthful and matters most.

At His baptism by John in the River Jordan, Jesus received His Father's praise and favour in the form of a testimony: *"This is My Son, the Beloved. My favour rests on Him."* In all truth, Jesus was the Son of God existing with Him from all eternity. It was with Him and through Him that God created the entire universe, and it is in Him that everything that exists has its being. For sure, the Father's testimony of Him in today's Gospel expresses all this divine status of Jesus.

But when Jesus went to John for baptism, He stood as a real Man, a real human person. John's baptism was one of repentance, meant for sinners deciding to return to God. Jesus had no sin. But He sought baptism from John. Here, He expressed His total solidarity with sinful humankind to declare to His Father on their behalf their decision to repent. Here, Jesus emptied Himself of His divinity to embrace sinful humanity. Such was His humility and love for fallen humankind.

Baptism is a washing and involves the use of water. Immersion into the water and emergence out of it symbolise being washed clean of sins. Through this humble and self-emptying gesture of His, Jesus took upon Himself the sins of all humankind to wash them clean. What He articulated in this gesture He was going to achieve definitively at His death on the cross. There He was going to have His body broken and blood shed for the forgiveness of sins. There, He was going to take the place of all fallen humankind to pay the death penalty due to their sin. It was for this reason that Jesus related His baptism with His death on the cross. He did this in His response to the request of the two brothers, James and John, for the highest places in His Kingdom: *"Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised?"* (cf. Mk. 10:38).

Sins are acts of violence against oneself, against neighbour and against God. Jesus' death on the cross is God's answer to this violence. The answer is not just non-violence but becoming victim to human violence which comes from hearts of jealousy and hatred. It is in this sense that today's first reading from Isaiah

describes Jesus, God's servant, thus: *"He does not break the crushed reed, nor quench the wavering flame."* This is His way of *"faithfully bringing true justice until it is established on earth."* This is His way of bringing salvation.

Jesus' humble and gentle way of bringing salvation goes against human expectation. That was why John the Baptist was taken aback when Jesus came to him: *"It is I who need baptism from you, and yet you come to me."* Jesus' response was in tandem with His humility and gentleness: *"Leave it like this for the time being; it is fitting that we should, in this way, do all that righteousness demands."* The righteousness refers to God's plan of salvation that involves non-violence and even victimhood.

Jesus had come to fulfil this plan of salvation, alone but yet not alone, as the Trinity was involved in His mission. This became clear at Jesus' baptism, when the Holy Spirit descended on Him like a dove and the Father bore testimony to Him. The Father was pleased with Jesus and praised Him as His Son because He expressed His submission to the Father's plan of salvation for all humankind and readiness to carry it out in a humble, non-violent and self-sacrificing way.

Jesus' greatness lay in His humility and fidelity to His Father's will to save all fallen humankind. His baptism by John expressed His fidelity. *"The heavens opened"* meant reconciliation of sinful humankind was now possible. God also broke His silence when He bore public testimony to Jesus as His beloved Son and declared His approval of His fidelity to His mission.

SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Readings: Isaiah 49:3,5-6; 1 Corinthians 1:1-3; John 1:29-34

Many non-Christians know a lot about Jesus and perhaps some of them a lot more than Christians. Still, they are non-Christians because they do not believe that He is the Son of God made man whom God the Father anointed with the Spirit and sent to bring salvation to the world. In short, they do not know Him in any personal way.

Knowing about Jesus and knowing Him personally, though mutually enriching, are not the same thing. Knowing about Jesus is acquiring information about Him from different sources including even the Scriptures. Knowing Jesus is encountering and experiencing Him in a personal way so that a personal relationship with Him is built up.

John the Baptist was one sent to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. On seeing Jesus coming towards him, John recognised and pointed Him out to his disciples: *“Look, there is the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.”* He further clarified that he had spoken about Jesus as the man coming after him but ranking before him. His baptism with water was to reveal Him to Israel.

Yet, John very honestly confessed, *“I did not know Him myself.”* It would strongly appear that John made a distinction between knowing about Jesus and knowing Him personally. What he had revealed to Israel about Jesus was what he had been informed. But when John baptised Jesus, he encountered Him in a personal way through the Holy Spirit. At His baptism, *“the Holy Spirit came down on Jesus from heaven like a dove and rested on Him.”* Though it was this Holy Spirit *“who sent John to baptise with water”*, it was only at His baptism that He revealed Jesus to John as the one who was *“going to baptise with the Holy Spirit.”*

By the power of the Holy Spirit, John’s personal encounter with Jesus at His baptism endorsed all that he had known about Him. Thus he was able to declare, *“Yes, I have seen and I am the witness that He is the Chosen One of God.”* The Gospels of Matthew (3:13-17) and Mark (1:7-8) in their baptism narratives record the Father’s voice bearing Jesus this testimony, *“This is My Son, the Beloved.”* Luke’s Gospel affirms that Jesus *“will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire”* (3:16). Today’s Gospel passage from John seems to put together essential elements from these Synoptic Gospels about the identity of Jesus as the Beloved

Son of God and His mission to baptise with the Holy Spirit. John's personal encounter was with this Jesus whom he baptised.

In this personal encounter of his, John was led to a faith relationship with Jesus. He articulated his faith in these words: *"Yes, I have seen that He is the Chosen One of God."* He is the Son of God made man. His baptism with the Holy Spirit is His death on the cross which is paying the death penalty for the sins of all humankind. He was sacrificed like a sacrificial lamb. John bore personal witness to Jesus as *"the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."*

John's personal knowledge of Jesus affirmed and enriched his knowledge about Him as one who existed and ranked before him. While in the past he had spoken about Jesus from what he had learned from different sources including the scriptures, he now bore personal witness from his own encounter and experience of Him as the Chosen One of God, that is, the Beloved Son of God, sent to bring salvation to the world by His sacrificial death on the cross.

It is important for us as Christians to know Jesus in a personal way. This can happen only by the power of the Holy Spirit and often through events and experiences in life. This personal knowledge yields a relationship with Jesus. As this relationship deepens, we will want to know more about Jesus. This desire leads us to study the Sacred Scriptures and the Church's teachings. Such study, however, should be not just an academic exercise, but more importantly a faith experience. It will be truly a faith experience if the Holy Spirit is allowed to play His role – to give His inspiration, His guidance, His enlightenment and above all, His deepening of one's faith.

THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Readings: Isaiah 8:23-9:3; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13,17; Matthew 4:12-23

By his Motu Proprio, "*Aperuit illis*" (= "He appeared to them" [= 2 disciples of Emmaus]), dated 30 September 2019, Pope Francis established the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time every year as the "Sunday of the Word of God." Today is the first time we celebrate the "Sunday of the Word of God."

The Word of God is His communication in love with His children aimed to establish a relationship of love with them. By creating all human beings in His own image God desired to strike this love relationship with them. God has been faithful to this relationship of love down through the ages of human history.

Today's Liturgy of the Word bears witness to God's unfailing fidelity to His relationship with humankind. The first reading from Isaiah talked about the people of Israel living under Assyrian domination about 700 years before Christ. They felt they were living in darkness. But there was a greater darkness enveloping them: it was the darkness of their sin, their rebellion against God. In fact, this darkness of sin brought about their oppression by a foreign power. Left with no apparent hope of liberation, they felt they were living in the shadow of death. God came in to promise them a great light to come and fill them with joy.

Today's Gospel presents Jesus as that light. In narrating the appearing of Jesus, it quotes Isaiah's prophecy in the first reading. It also times Christ's coming with the arrest of John the Baptist, the last prophet to prepare the people's hearts for Christ's coming. Thus, Jesus started His public ministry after John and all the OT prophets had prepared the hearts of people for Him.

All these years of preparation were necessary because people were hard-hearted as they preferred to live in darkness, the darkness of sin. They must now decide to turn away from their sinfulness to be ready for the coming of the Messiah and be bathed in His light.

What was this light brought by Jesus? It was the kingdom of heaven. Jesus proclaimed it in His call to the people: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.*" The kingdom of heaven amounts to a life of love relationship with God. God first took the initiative to desire this relationship and offered it through Jesus. God's offer called for acceptance – a response from people and indeed from us. The response takes the form of repentance, a turning away from

the darkness of sin to a life of love with God. It amounts to God is walking in the light of Christ.

After proclaiming the kingdom, Jesus proceeded to call His first four apostles from two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew, James and John. They responded. Their response was first of all to Jesus' call of repentance and acceptance of life in the kingdom. While all this was personal to the first four apostles, their call and response also reflected God's deeper and far-reaching will, the will to extend the call to all humankind in every corner of the earth and of every generation.

These apostles were fishermen. Jesus called them to drop this occupation of theirs to become "*fishers of men*". Jesus called them to "fish" people for Him and draw them to the kingdom of heaven. In the kingdom all will enjoy God's love and live in the light of Christ. With this call of the apostles and their positive response, the word of God started to transcend the boundaries of space and time.

Today, we are so privileged to have received and responded to the word of God proclaimed by the prophets of old, fulfilled by Jesus and entrusted to the apostles to extend to all nations of all time. With this great privilege there comes a responsibility. We have been given the responsibility to proclaim the word of God to others.

As we celebrate the Word of God Sunday, we are reminded of this call Christ has given us: "*Go out to the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to all nations.*" In His fidelity to His love relationship with all His human creatures, God wants to involve us. What is our response?

FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Readings: Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31; Matthew 5:1-12

Everyone yearns for happiness. Health and wealth are generally thought to be essential ingredients of happiness. Great efforts are put in to have good health. Hard work aims to be successful in life and success is generally perceived in terms of wealth. Some deem success and wealth in terms of power. So, one should strive to be healthy, wealthy and even be in power to be happy.

But human experience shows that often this is not true. For a healthy and wealthy person may not necessarily be happy. A person in power may find happiness eluding him or her. Many of these people face a whole host of challenges that worry or even stress them up beyond their ability to handle. The happiness they seek somehow deludes them. What then are they left with? Pains and sorrows, frustrations and even regrets.

The way to true happiness is not the way the world advocates, but the way Christ offers in today's Gospel. Christ spells it out in terms of eight different but inter-related attitudes which have been commonly called the "eight beatitudes". The term "beatitude" is taken in the sense of the happiness intended by the Greek *makarios*. It conveys the idea that happiness is fundamentally a blessing.

Blessings come ultimately from God. This is what the eight beatitudes highlight. These blessings revolve around "*the kingdom of heaven*" whose citizens are "*sons of God*", that is, children of God. In the kingdom, the children of God "*see*" Him as Father, that is, they enjoy a relationship of love with Him as children with their father. All that is possible because of the Father's "*mercy*" flowing from His unconditional love. In that relationship of love, the Father satisfies all the needs of His children and as a result, they find "*comfort*".

For sure, full experience of all these blessings takes place in the kingdom of heaven. There is a common association of this with the next life, or life after death. But the kingdom happiness can already be experienced on earth. It happens when one lives one's life on earth with the kingdom as its goal. This is what the beatitudes in today's Gospel affirm and this is where they have total relevance for Christ's disciples on earth.

Faithful disciples of Christ will not be drawn by the ways of the world to strive for happiness. Rather than pursuing wealth, power and success advocated by

the world, they will totally count on God by being *“poor in spirit”*. To this end, they will strive to reflect God’s attributes by being *“gentle”* and *“merciful”* to others. Where there are conflicts, they will do their utmost to sow seeds of peace and reconciliation, that is to be *“peacemakers”* as God wants it. For sure, reflecting God the Father’s attributes amounts to living out their status as His children and ensures that *“theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

Striving to reflect God’s attributes naturally goes against the currents of the world’s mentality. At times, it will draw opposition and hostility from certain quarters in the world, especially when these see that their values are contradicted or their consciences are pricked. When such hostility turns physical, disciples of Christ will *“mourn”* in pain. But behind their tears of persecution there is the comforting confidence of possessing the kingdom where they will share in the eternal life of God the Father. That confidence in God’s blessing sustains the happiness of those persecuted *“on My (= Christ’s) account”*.

The beatitudes spelt out by Christ guarantee true and lasting happiness because they are rooted in God’s blessings. In His unconditional love for all humankind, God blesses us with the offer of life in His kingdom, which is a life of divine childhood. An offer calls for willing acceptance. It is for each disciple to make a personal decision to accept or reject God’s offer. What is *my* decision: to accept or reject this divine offer? Do I want to hear Christ’s words: *“Happy are you...”*?

FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Readings: Isaiah 58:7-10; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5; Matthew 5:13-16

Salt and light are elements of nature God created. Each has its own properties or qualities which enable them to serve the function God intended for them.

Salt serves to give taste to food, to preserve food and even to heal or at least give relief. We know how tasteless food without salt is. We also know how salted fish and meat, eggs and vegetables are not only tasty but can also keep. We have also experienced how gargling with salt water can help to give relief or perhaps even heal sore throat. When God created salt, He gave it all the properties to serve all these functions. These properties identify salt and determine its functions.

Similarly, light is absolutely important to us. It enables us to see and enjoy nature, to see and move around safely. The principal source of light in creation is the sun. With light, there is also heat, to a greater or lesser degree. So, light enables us to see and with its heat, it gives us energy and certain vitamins that we need to be healthy. Like salt, light has inherent properties to identify it as well as enable it to serve the purposes for which God created it.

This brief and perhaps oversimplified explanation of salt and light shows that identity and function are clearly inseparable. This inseparable link very likely underlies Christ's metaphorical application of them to His disciples: "*You are the salt of the earth*" and "*You are the light of the world.*" Transferring function to mean mission, we see that identity and mission (vocation) are intrinsically tied.

The unpacking of Christ's application of the metaphor reveals His intention for His disciples. First of all, their identity derives from Him as the Christ sent by His Father to bring salvation to sinful humankind. Coveting that salvation, they seek to follow Him and assume their identity as His disciples. A disciple necessarily picks up qualities of the master, to be like him. In His Sermon on the Mount of which today's Gospel is a part, Christ the Master articulates the qualities that identify His disciples. He starts off His sermon with the beatitudes (last Sunday's Gospel), attitudes that mark off His disciples. The foundation of these attitudes is primarily the kingdom of heaven in which His disciples are children of God. These beatitudes with their foundation are actually Christ's own attitudes and identify Him as Son of God made Man. In the rest of the Sermon on the Mount Christ takes up some specific implications of the beatitudes.

Christ was totally faithful to the mission He had received from His Father to the point of being persecuted unto death. He was crucified because His values and lifestyle went against the currents of the world and especially of Jewish leadership of His day. This latter was heavily marked by hypocrisy, empty piety and strict religious observances rather than fidelity to God's will. Jesus manifested a totally opposite lifestyle, one that was in line with the kingdom of heaven. This made Him "*salt of the earth*" and "*light of the world*". He brought life and light to fallen humankind, which gave purpose and meaning to their lives on earth.

Christ's disciples are truly so only when they take on His mindset and undertake the mission to which they are called as Christians. That mission is in reality a share in Christ's own mission – to proclaim the kingdom of God. This is their mission flowing from their identity as disciples of Christ. Like Him, they are to carry it out not just by word of mouth but by their very lives. Like Christ, they are to proclaim the kingdom of heaven primarily by living out the kingdom values articulated in the beatitudes. In this way, they will give meaning and purpose of life as well as shine a light on the way to the kingdom to those who are lost in the darkness of a sinful world.

In the light of today's Gospel, let us do a self-examination. Am I a true disciple of Christ? Do I take on His mindset and lifestyle? Do I play my role as "*salt of the earth and light of the world*"? Am I making a difference as a Christian to my family and to those around me?

SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ecclesiasticus 15:15-20; 1 Corinthians 2:6-10; Matthew 5:17-37

Wisdom is the theme underpinning today's liturgy of the word. Wisdom is the quality which guides a person to live a life in a positively meaningful way. It seeks one's well-being as well as that of the others, so that one is always in good relationship with others.

Wisdom is often gained from experience. This pertains to human wisdom. But there is also wisdom that comes only from divine revelation; it is divine wisdom. Human wisdom cannot match divine wisdom – God's wisdom.

Today's first reading (from Ecclesiasticus) highlights divine wisdom. It says: "*vast is the wisdom of the Lord; He is almighty and all-seeing.*" Then it spells out very explicitly that "*His eyes are on those who fear Him and He notes every action of man.*" This is because He created the entire universe, the world and all creatures in them – animate and inanimate, including human beings. The whole of creation came into existence according to God's wisdom. It constitutes one sphere in which God's wisdom is at work. In this sphere, human wisdom must respect and work in line with divine wisdom.

But there is another sphere of divine wisdom which St. Paul in 1 Corinthians refers to as "*the hidden wisdom of God*", a wisdom "*none of the masters of this age have ever known*". This wisdom concerns "*our glory before the ages began... (which) God has prepared for those who believe Him.*"

This sphere of divine wisdom has to do with the destiny of man and creation. It is an eternal destiny. God created human beings to share in His glory – that is, to share in His eternal life. The Gospel reading clarifies that this sphere of wisdom is revealed in the Law and the Prophets – that is, in the Scriptures. Jesus has come to fulfill them by revealing to the full the hidden wisdom of God. Jesus associates this wisdom with "*the kingdom of heaven*" where the believer shares in God's eternal life and enjoys glory for eternity.

Jesus came into our world to open and point out the way to the kingdom of heaven. Today's Gospel presents a part of this way through a comparison with the way of the scribes and the Pharisees. It presents Jesus telling His disciples: "*If your virtue goes no deeper than that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.*"

How is one's virtue to go deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees? What is the virtue of these groups of Jewish lawyers and teachers? It is to stick to the external observance of the Mosaic Law and their own traditions. They keep the letter of the Law but not its spirit. The virtue that goes deeper than this is the observance of the spirit of the Law. This consists in good relationship with God and good relationship with neighbour. It is in line with divine wisdom.

Jesus gives His disciples a few examples to illustrate His point: the spirit of the commandment not to kill is to respect life out of love for neighbour. In this regard, anger is prohibited by the same commandment because it goes against love. The next example concerns adultery. Adultery is not confined only to sexual relationship with anyone other than one's spouse. It includes lustful desires for them. The commandment against it is aimed to uphold respect and love for all human persons and the sacredness of marriage. Moving on to another example, Jesus takes up the binding nature of oath. For, oath serves to protect the truth. Truthfulness has essentially to do with love and respect for one's neighbour as well. In total truthfulness, there is no need to swear by God, by heaven or by Jerusalem. Without truthfulness, swearing becomes a false declaration.

The commandments in the Law and the Prophets and their spirit all flow from God's wisdom. In essence, they aim to promote a life of love. They are intended to lead and help God's children to love Him with their whole heart, their whole soul and their whole strength, and to love one another. This is the spirit of the law and touches the heart of eternal life in the kingdom of heaven.

The significance is clear: anyone wishing to enter the kingdom of heaven should live their lives in accordance with this divine wisdom. In the context of today's Gospel, keeping the Law and the Prophets – that is, keeping the commandments revealed in them – aims to keep good relationship with God and with neighbour. This attitude is the virtue that goes deeper than that of the scribes and the Pharisees and the qualification for entry into the kingdom of heaven.

To cultivate this "deeper virtue" is thus to strive to live by the wisdom of God. This is possible only through the Holy Spirit, *"for the Spirit reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God"*, as the second reading concludes. Indeed, divine wisdom comes from God and we can receive and practise it only by the help of the Spirit of God. In the final analysis, Jesus has opened the kingdom of God to us and given us the Holy Spirit to lead us into it.

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Leviticus 19:1-2,17-18; 1 Corinthians 3:16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

“Be holy, for I, the Lord your God am holy.” This is God’s call to His people in the first reading. *“Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* This is Christ’s call to His disciples in the Gospel. How do you feel about each of these calls?

Understandably, our responses are generally negative: “No; that’s not possible.” “How could God or Christ be so unreasonable? How can we imperfect and sinful human beings ever reach the standards of the all-holy and perfect God?” “If that is God’s demand of me, I am doomed and damned.” We can add on to the list of these negative responses.

Are God’s and Christ’s expectations of us really unreasonable? Do they make demands beyond our ability to meet them? Will they leave us to perish in hopeless and helpless situations because we cannot meet their demands? A closer look at the readings will help us understand the calls God made to His people and Christ made to His disciples.

In the first reading, *“be holy”* is concretely spelt out in terms of relationship with neighbour: *“Love your neighbour as yourself.”* Love vanquishes hatred and vengeance. Love seeks the good of neighbour as much as one’s own. On this score, it embraces fraternal correction for betterment not just of one’s neighbour but of oneself as well. Love relationship with neighbour flows from an experience of God’s love and constitutes a response to it.

Relationship lies at the core of the OT concept of holiness. To be holy in the OT is to be separated from in order to be separated for. With reference to relationship, the first reading sees the separation as from hatred for those who hurt and offend and a desire to take revenge on them. This separation results in forgiveness of offenders and even restoration of relationship with them. Separation is thus from hostility for relationship with neighbour.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus takes up God’s call to be holy but rephrases it thus: *“Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* He also articulates it in terms of relationship with neighbour. He thus instructs His disciples not to follow the “eye for eye and tooth for tooth” demand, but to “turn the other cheek” when the right cheek is hit and to give more than what is asked for. Taking this point further, Jesus calls for forgiveness of enemy, which goes beyond love of

neighbour. Loving friend and foe alike is modelled on God's goodness and generosity towards bad and good men, dishonest and honest men alike. It reflects God's perfection and makes one *"perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect."*

In sum, God's call for holiness and Jesus' call for perfection amount to demands for radical efforts to live in good relationship with people. These demands may at times be very difficult to meet, but they are not impossible, especially with help from the Holy Spirit. Clearly, one very difficult area is forgiveness, especially when the hurt caused is very deep. Forgiveness calls for extreme generosity. But once offered, forgiveness destroys hatred and turns foe into friend. Many people have transcended their hurts to forgive those who caused these hurts. This is evidence that forgiveness is possible. Forgiveness yields good relationship and is an unmistakable expression of love.

Good relationship with neighbour and forgiveness of an enemy make one *"holy as God is holy"* and *"perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect."* When in the wilderness His people radically rejected Him in favour of a golden calf, God forgave them and continued to accompany them in their journey towards the Promised Land. When Jesus was hanging on the cross, He prayed His Father to forgive His enemies on the grounds that they did not know what they were doing.

As disciples of Jesus Christ and as children of the one Father in heaven, it is our mission to love friend and foe and, in this way, to draw all into a life of love with one another. In this lie our holiness and our perfection, modelled after the holiness and perfection of God our heavenly Father.

EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 49:14-15; 1 Corinthians 4:1-5; Matthew 6:24-34

At face value, not to worry about one's life goes against human experience and human wisdom. For, a carefree approach to life easily leads to neglect of one's well-being. Presuming God will be there to provide one's every need without one's effort may amount to the sin of presumption.

Yet, Jesus in today's Gospel seems to be calling for such attitude: *"Do not worry"* about what to eat or drink and about what to wear. *"Your heavenly Father knows you need them all."* For illustration, Jesus gives the examples of *"the birds in the sky which the heavenly Father feeds"* and *"the flowers growing in the fields"* like which *"not even Solomon in all his regalia was robed"*. Is Jesus calling for an absolutely carefree life? Is Jesus, for all His wisdom, so naïvely advocating blind faith in His Father to the point of presumption? If not, what is Jesus' teaching?

The key to understand Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel lies in His call to focus on the kingdom of God: *"Set your hearts on His kingdom first, and on His righteousness, and all these other things will be given you as well."* The kingdom of God amounts to relationship with God. For sure, this relationship with God will be totally fulfilled in heaven, but it is already achievable in one's life on earth.

For, Jesus came down to earth to make this relationship a reality. He was the Immanuel – "God with us". After His ascension to heaven, He asked His Father to pour out the Holy Spirit on His apostles and the other disciples to be His new presence among them. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Son and His Father. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus continues to dwell not just among His disciples but also within each of them. With Him, the Father also takes up His dwelling in each disciple. In His farewell discourse to His disciples He told them: *"My Father and I will make Our home in you."* Thus, the Holy Spirit continues the

Immanuel – the divine presence among Jesus’ disciples and within them, while they are still on earth.

Living in the divine presence leads to an intimate relationship with Jesus and God the Father through the Holy Spirit. It is “*setting one’s heart on God’s kingdom*”. It motivates and urges one to choose and serve God above all things. In the Gospel, serving God is expressed in terms of being “*slave*” to Him and “*all things*” are represented by “*money*”.

When one serves only God, one lives one’s life totally for Him. To live this life, one needs “*money*” to buy food, drink and clothings. One therefore needs to work daily. But throughout the day, as one works, one’s heart is set on God’s kingdom and one’s purpose is to serve God. The divine presence one enjoys within oneself undergirds one’s personal and intimate relationship with God the Father in God the Son through God the Holy Spirit. The consciousness or even experience of the Immanuel and intimate relationship with God give full meaning and value to one’s life on earth. All that one does every day and the money one earns to meet all earthly needs fulfil their purpose of serving God. They are seen as serving God and reaping from God’s providence, as “*these other things are given*” by Him.

In sum, Jesus is not teaching us to take on a carefree and negligent attitude as well as live in presumption. Rather, He is instructing us to focus on God and live our lives for and in relationship with Him. For this He is calling on us to “*set our hearts on His kingdom and His righteousness*”, to believe in and be conscious of His presence among and within us. We are to do this throughout our earthly life. To this end, we are called to do what is necessary to meet our daily needs. In our response, we are confident that God will bless our efforts and provide all our daily needs. We will thus not “*worry about tomorrow*”. We will not allow worries to paralyse us. Rather, we will let our focus on God and His kingdom urge us to a live in “*His righteousness*”.

NINTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Deuteronomy 11:18,26-28,32; Romans 3:21-25,28; Matthew 7:21-27

Disciples of the Lord live their life with one goal in mind: to enter the kingdom of heaven and share in God's eternal life.

Filled with the hope of achieving this goal, it will be utterly shocking to hear the words of Jesus, *"I have never known you; away from me, you evil men!"* With these words, Jesus is shutting the "evil men" (a generic term that includes women as well) off from His kingdom. This is especially so for those rejected by Jesus when they claim to have *"prophesied, cast out devils and worked many miracles in Jesus' name"*. These are indeed great and highly commendable works. Carried out in Jesus' name, they are even greater. Surely, disciples who have done them qualify to enter the kingdom. How and why then are they cast out of it? Wherein lies their failure or fault?

Jesus gives the answer in the second part of today's Gospel: *"Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a sensible man who built his house on rock."* The criterion for entering the kingdom of heaven is a personal listening and obedience to Jesus' words. It takes priority over doing great works in His name. For, fidelity to Jesus' words ensures good personal relationship with Him. It translates into genuinely good works in life.

What are these good works? For sure, in a general way, they are works of love: love of God and love of neighbour. But we need to consider them in the light of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7) which today's Gospel passage concludes. *"These words of mine"* in Jesus' concluding words hark back to His teaching in the Sermon. The Gospel readings since the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time have been from this Sermon. To appreciate Jesus' words in it, it is useful to recapitulate the main ideas or at least some of them in the Sermon.

Jesus opens His Sermon with the beatitudes, thus highlighting their importance to happy discipleship. In them, He spells out the attitudes His disciples ought to have in order to be built on a solid foundation. Clearly God is this solid foundation. Different facets of this foundation are projected: inheriting *"the kingdom of heaven"* and even *"the earth"*; being *"comforted and satisfied"*; *"having mercy shown them"*; *"seeing God"* and *"being called sons (children) of God."* Building on this solid foundation calls for total trust in God and focusing on Him in one's life on earth, reflecting His gentleness, comfort, righteousness, mercy, making peace and even suffering persecution.

Disciples with these attitudes make a positive impact on the world. They become *“the salt of the earth”* as they preserve it from perishing, and *“the light of the world”* as they lead it *“to give praise to the Father in heaven”*. The good works of these faithful disciples are based on what the *“Law and the Prophets”*, that is, the Scriptures teach. These have to do with the ten commandments. Love of neighbour is the spirit or virtue undergirding all these commandments. Love ensures that their observance is authentic and thus qualifies for entry into the kingdom of heaven.

Love has no room for revenge. Instead, it leads to forgiveness of enemies. It reflects the Father’s unconditional love for all humankind shown in His equal blessings *“on bad men as well as good”* and *“on honest and dishonest men”*. In loving as the heavenly Father does, to the point of forgiving their enemies, the disciples live as His children and reflect His perfection. In this way, they truly *“set their hearts on His kingdom”*.

Claiming to do great works in the name of Jesus without personal fidelity to Him does not make a real disciple of His. In all likelihood, it is a show of the self, a self-glorification, rather than proclaiming the glory of Jesus. Such works are empty, not great. The true disciple is one who *“listens to all these words of Jesus and acts on them”*. He/she is truly focused on God and His kingdom. Loving God and counting on Him lead the disciple to love neighbour and enemies. He/she reflects the attitudes of God: gentleness, righteousness, mercy, peace and forgiveness. He/she does not back out even in the midst of persecution. His/her daily acts become great because they glorify God.

In Jesus’ words as He concludes His Sermon on the Mount, the disciple who faithfully keeps the words of Jesus is building his/her house on solid foundation, that is, on God. He/she is focused on Him and strikes a personal relationship with Him. He/she qualifies to enter the kingdom of heaven.

TENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Hosea 6:3-6; Romans 4:18-25; Matthew 9:9-13

Rejection is a terrible experience as it gives rise to a feeling of being worthless and insignificant, and thus of being useless and unwanted. On the contrary, acceptance is very encouraging and uplifting for it acknowledges the dignity and worth of a person.

Today's Gospel depicts both experiences in one person: Matthew the tax collector. He was rejected by the Pharisees and most, if not all, of the Jews. His rejection came from his office of collecting taxes from the Jews for their Roman colonisers. It reached a point where he was considered, like all such tax collectors, a sinner. As a Jewish officer in the service of the Romans, a foreign government, he was deemed a traitor of his race. Since the Jews considered themselves the chosen people of God, his office amounted to a betrayal of God Himself and therefore a sin. There was no way he could make his way back to their community, except by totally giving up his employment. Even then, total acceptance was not a sure deal.

While Matthew had to radically opt out of office to secure some degree of acceptance from his fellow Jews, he had a totally different experience from Jesus. He was *"sitting by the customs house"*, at his tax collecting desk performing his duty dutifully. None other than Jesus the Rabbi saw him there. He did not wait for him to clear from his desk before paying attention to him. He did not even just hold a conversation with him. Instead, Jesus made a radical call: *"Follow Me."*

What did such a call mean for Matthew? For sure, he felt uplifted. It was not just a fellow Jew but Jesus the Rabbi who addressed him. It was not just a passing attention that Jesus gave him but a call to follow Him. That meant being in the continuous company of Jesus and relationship with Him. Through this call, Jesus showed a total acceptance of one deemed a traitor and sinner by the Jews and their leadership. However, by His own authority, Jesus, a Rabbi and therefore a Jewish leader, fully accepted Matthew into His company.

Matthew was certainly uplifted and overwhelmed by this acceptance from Jesus. He therefore *"got up and followed Him"*. It was a spontaneous and total response, but a response following the acceptance. The other Jewish leaders would have required the response before their acceptance. That was the radical difference between Jesus the Rabbi and the Jewish leaders including their rabbis.

Of course, Matthew was overjoyed at his call by Jesus the Rabbi. He expressed his joy through a dinner. Whom did he invite to that dinner? For sure, Jesus and His disciples, and also Matthew's own friends. Quite expectedly, these latter were his fellow tax collectors and sinners. The joy marked by the dinner and surrounding it stood in total contrast with the sentiments of the Pharisees. These were certainly unhappy that Jesus whom the public held in high honour and called Rabbi should not only pay attention to a tax collector but also call him to His company. They continued to watch Him. Now they were even more agitated to see Him in the company of tax collectors and sinners at the dinner. So, they took the matter up with Jesus' disciples: *"Why does your Master eat with tax collectors and sinners?"*

Overhearing the question, Jesus responded. His response took up a reality from human experience: *"It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick."* He applied it to His own mission, the purpose of His coming: *"And indeed I did not come to call the virtuous, but sinners."* Jesus' response answered the question raised by the Pharisees. It was the reason why He was in the company of tax collectors and sinners. But it also explained His call of Matthew, which the Pharisees must also have questioned. He called Matthew the tax collector and public sinner because He had come to call sinners.

That response from Jesus was a double-edged sword. It did not just answer the question of the Pharisees, but also took them to task. In judging Matthew and his fellow tax collectors as sinners, they were actually acknowledging themselves as virtuous. As such, they felt they had no need of Jesus and therefore remained outside the realm of His call. In this way, they stood in total contrast to Matthew. He responded promptly to the call and benefitted from the healing Jesus gave; they, on the contrary, adamantly refused to respond and had no way of being healed, although they needed it as much as Matthew. In this frame of mind, they could not experience the joy that Matthew did.

The call of Matthew in today's Gospel has great relevance to us. All of us are sinners. God does not reject us in our sinfulness. He does not wait for us to repent or to convert before calling us. In Jesus He had come to call us. In His eyes we are precious. We need to respond by *"getting up and follow Him"* as Matthew did. This means, we need to repent, turn away from our sinful ways. In this response, we will experience great joy. That's the love God has for us even in our sinfulness. We can and ought to respond because in His love He wants to accept us into His company – to be part of His family.

ELEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Exodus 19:2-6; Romans 5:6-11; Matthew 9:36-10:8

To be without a capable and caring leader is to have to manage one's life without systemic guidance and protection. Loss of direction, chaos and vulnerability are natural consequences. Despair and desperation, fear and frustration are prevalent.

Today's Gospel presents Jesus encountering crowds *"harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd"*. He thus exhorted His disciples to *"ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers to His harvest."* Even as He prayed, He played His part to bring about God's response.

God will surely not leave His people without a leader. The liturgy of the word today affirms this. In pastoral terms, the responsorial psalm acknowledges that God Himself is shepherding His flock through His appointed leaders or shepherds. He *"is faithful from age to age"*. His fidelity guarantees His care for His people down through the centuries and millennia until the end of time.

In this regard, the first reading narrates a very important episode in Old Testament history. It figures two central elements: the role played by Moses as God's chosen leader for the people of Israel; and God's choice of these people as His own and consecration of them as *"a kingdom of priests"*. As slaves in Egypt for four centuries, there was no way for them to have leader. Neither did they have any hope of ever being liberated and becoming a nation of their own. God had to intervene. He did so by choosing Moses to be their leader and liberator. He empowered Moses to work His marvels for them. Once liberated, the people left Egypt for the land God had promised to give them through their patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The episode in the first reading took place in the wilderness on their long journey to the Promised Land. They had reached Mount Sinai. There, God explained to Moses His purpose behind all His intervention: *"I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to Myself."* The metaphor of an eagle with its wings connotes power and height. It underscores God's impenetrable protection and leadership for the people, exercised through Moses. By bringing the people to Himself in the wilderness where they had no one to rely on, He sought to choose them to be His *"very own"* people and become their God. He wanted to strike a special relationship with them. That God-people relationship is technically called the covenant. While there was no question about God's fidelity to them, the

people's part was *"to obey His voice and hold fast to His covenant."* That meant observing His commandments.

But God did not choose the people of Israel just for themselves and for their own good. Rather, He intended their choice to benefit all the nations as they also belonged to Him. To this end, He clarified: *"I will count you a kingdom of priests."* The role of a priest is to mediate between God and people. Through His chosen people, God would exercise His leadership over *"all the earth (which) is His"*. God owns all the nations as much as His chosen people. Just as He exercised His leadership for His people through Moses, He would do it for all the nations through His chosen people. He is truly the universal shepherd.

From His chosen people Jesus was born. He was God's own and only Son who became Man to be the "new Moses" for all the nations. Exercising God's leadership for all nations, Jesus is the Good Shepherd. In today's Gospel, He played the role of the Good Shepherd for the harassed and dejected crowds bereft of a good leader. While exhorting His Father, *"the Lord of the harvest to send labourers to His vineyard,"* He did His part to make His Father's response to His prayer a reality. He took the initiative to appoint twelve apostles to share His responsibilities as the Good Shepherd and serve as leaders for the people.

Jesus then sent His apostles out to extend God's pastoral guidance, care and providence first to *"the lost sheep of the House of Israel"*. But after His resurrection and ascension, He poured out the Holy Spirit to them to empower them to take their mission to all the nations. By the power of the same Holy Spirit, they carried out this mission and appointed successors to continue it. In this way, God continued to exercise His universal leadership through the apostles and their successors from generation to generation till our day.

As Christians, we are God's new people, consecrated as *"a kingdom of priests"* for all the nations of the world. God has constituted us thus in the new covenant sealed with the blood of His Son Jesus Christ. He has given us the Holy Spirit to bring His leadership, His pastoral care, providence and guidance, to our world to bring it back from chaos and loss of direction to His path to Himself. Our Christian vocation is not just for our own benefit but for mission. We are called to be a priestly people and missionary disciples. We are unworthy of this call and mission. But God has chosen us to bring His leadership to the world. Let us respond to His call and choice enthusiastically and generously in our world that is *"harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd"*.

TWELFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 20:10-13; Romans 5:12-15; Matthew 10:26-33

Fear is a common and dreadful experience. It causes worries and panic. It sometimes leads to depression. Fear can sometimes cripple a person not in a physical sense but in the sense of being unable to move on in life. Fear comes from many causes, for example, pain and suffering, serious sickness, death.

Today, Jesus tells His twelve apostles as He sends them out on mission: *“Do not be afraid.”* Having said that, He singles out one fear factor: the loss of body and soul in hell. This loss comes about from a betrayal of Jesus. For, Jesus will *“disown”* His traitors *“in the presence of His Father in heaven”*. In effect, it means they will be shut off from the kingdom of heaven while hell awaits them.

This is the only fear Jesus has for His disciples. To avert it, they should *“declare Him in the presence of men”* for then Jesus *“will declare Himself for them in the presence of the Father in heaven.”* With that declaration from Jesus, they will be admitted to the kingdom.

The kingdom of heaven is what Jesus was sent to the world to proclaim and inaugurate. He chose the twelve apostles to send them out also to proclaim it. To prepare them for this mission, He privately taught them the mysteries of the kingdom. They were now to bring His teaching to the public: *“telling in the daylight”* and *“proclaiming from the house-tops”* what He had *“told them in the dark and in whispers”*.

From His experience of opposition and rejection, Jesus forewarned the twelve of the persecution and even death in the hands of their opponents, some of whom might even be family members. He did not promise removal of these terrible sufferings nor deliverance from them. What He assured them of was God the Father’s providence and care for them. Certitude of the assurance rests on how little sparrows worth so little compared to human beings enjoy the Father’s care for them.

At worst, persecution would result in the destruction of the body. It could never touch the soul. At death of the body, the soul lives on in the kingdom where Jesus will declare His faithful disciple before His Father in heaven. Thus, Jesus exhorted the twelve not to be afraid but to go out and proclaim the kingdom of heaven. They were to draw people into the kingdom for there they would live for ever in the Father’s presence with Jesus Himself.

Persecution of disciples of Christ is still happening in today's world. In some cases, it takes the form of physical torture and imprisonment; in some others, it is through deprivation of rights and freedom; in yet others, it is psychological torture. Indeed, in places where Christ is rejected, following Him risks being persecuted. Yet countless disciples in different parts of the world courageously declare Christ and remain faithful to Him. Many have died a martyr's death.

To be martyr is to be a faithful witness. The word "martyr" comes from a Greek verb which means "to witness". Faithful witnessing to Christ takes multiple forms in life, all of which have great value and exert great impact. Thus, for example, when a Christian refuses to bribe or be bribed and in the process is deprived of a business or financial opportunity, he/she bears faithful witness to Christ. That witness will have its contribution to an honest and just society, even if at that point in time it may not be apparent at all. For sure, it amounts to a proclamation of the kingdom of heaven and a declaration of Christ.

Day-to-day witnessing to Christ in ordinary ways without fear is rooted in the firm belief and confidence that God is there to provide and take care of everyone, since He looks after sparrows. Living by this faith and confidence makes the disciple ready to face the ups and downs of life. More often than not, God does not remove the hurdles but accompanies the disciple in facing them. Confidence in this divine accompaniment gives the disciple courage to move on in life. When, for example, death comes one's way, the hope of the kingdom of heaven makes one look forward to it.

Jesus' exhortation, "*Do not be afraid*", in today's Gospel is not an empty one. For, His Father's providence and care Jesus backs it with are real. Evidence of it comes from creation represented by sparrows. Many faithful disciples of Jesus have also concretely experienced it through their fidelity to Jesus and His kingdom. For sure, in whatever circumstances, even in the worst ones like terminal illness or persecution, no disciple is ever alone, for God the Father is with them.

It is important for every disciple to carry out the mission Jesus entrusts them with: to proclaim the kingdom of heaven by living out the values of the kingdom: love, truth, justice and peace. In doing so, the disciple is declaring Christ "*in the presence of men*" and will hear Christ declaring him/her "*in the presence of His Father.*"

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

2 Kings 4:8-11,14-16; Romans 6:3-4,8-11; Matthew 10:37-42

One obstacle to becoming a Christian comes from Jesus' expectation and demand. In the first place, Jesus seems to be rather self-centred, as He calls for love of Him to precede that for one's parents. Secondly, following Him means embracing the cross, a life of suffering. Why would anyone accept this expectation and demand? Are they not unreasonable?

The answer to these and other similar natural and fundamental questions lies in Jesus' identity and mission. Who is Jesus? What has He done to deserve such love? Since today's Gospel reading which presents Jesus' apparently self-centred expectation and unreasonable demand is taken from it, we will draw our understanding of Jesus' identity and mission from the Gospel of Matthew. It is enough to consider chapter 1.

Matthew's Gospel opens with a long genealogy of "*Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham*" (1:1). Crossing three periods of fourteen generations each, the genealogy reached "*Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ*" (1:16). Jesus' birth took place in fulfilment of this prophecy of Isaiah: "*The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call Him Emmanuel*" (Is. 7:14), "*a name which means 'God-is-with-us'*" (1:23).

This opening chapter of Matthew's Gospel touches on the core of Jesus' identity and mission. His name Emmanuel drawn from Isaiah's prophecy affirms His Godhead, for He is "God-with-us". His birth of the virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. v. 20) undergirds His humanity: He is Man. He has a genealogy, a family tree like everyone else. Jesus is indeed God made Man. This is His identity: divine and human.

His title "Christ" means "the anointed One". On this title Isaiah has this to say: "*The spirit of the Lord YHWH has been given to Me, for YHWH has anointed Me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken, to proclaim liberty to captives, freedom to those in prison, to proclaim a year of favour from YHWH, a day of vengeance for our God*" (Is. 61:1-2).

Jesus, God-made-Man, was anointed with YHWH's Spirit and sent to bring good news to the poor, that is, to set free those held captive in sin by Satan. All fallen humankind falls into this category. Their liberation consists of forgiveness of sins

and bestowal of life. It is undoubtedly YHWH's favour. Jesus' mission as the Christ was clearly one of salvation.

Jesus exercised His mission very concretely in human history. This is one point highlighted by His genealogy. His ancestors named in His genealogy reflected the different stages of the unfolding of God's plan of salvation in different generations of history. God's plan culminated in Jesus' mission as the Christ.

The end-all of God's salvation is life with God. He had sent His Son to be with us and share His life with us through His death and resurrection. Today's second reading affirms it: *"When He (= Christ) died, He died, once for all, to sin; so His life now is life with God; and in that way, you too must consider yourselves to be dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus."* Surely life with God is invaluable, indeed, beyond compare. It must therefore be the top priority for all humankind, indeed, the goal of their lives on earth. This is particularly so for the disciples of Jesus.

In order to fulfil His saving mission, the Son of God first emptied Himself of His divinity in order to become Man. As Man, He again emptied Himself, this time, of His human dignity, when He was crucified. In His death, He took our place to pay the penalty for our sin. Jesus willingly undertook that self-emptying of both His divinity and human dignity in order to bring all fallen humankind to life with God. Jesus' double self-emptying was clear evidence of His total and unconditional love for all humankind. On this score, it is certainly reason enough for us to love Him above even our parents and loved ones, and even our lives on earth: *"Anyone who finds his life will lose it; anyone who loses his life for My sake will find it."* The *"life one will find"* is life with God which Jesus has come into the world to offer all humankind through His death and resurrection.

All this means that the choice for Christ calls for rejection of worldly lifestyle and values that are opposed to His teachings. Rejection of worldly values and lifestyle is easily construed as a judgement on those pushing for them without regard for God. These people will be strongly opposed to Jesus' disciples even to the point of rejecting and persecuting them. This is the cross Christ's followers must expect to carry. Even if they should lose their lives on earth in martyrdom, they will find life with God in His kingdom.

This is the only life that matters. That was why God became Man in Jesus and Jesus died on the cross. That is why He is calling us to love Him even more than our parents and our own lives, and to carry our cross to follow Him.

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Zechariah 9:9-10; Romans 8:9,11-13; Matthew 11:25-30

Learned people are those who have knowledge. Their knowledge comes from their learning; that is why they are called learned. Learning is a process of picking up lessons from sources of all kinds: creation and nature, people around, life's experiences, schools, all fields of sciences, academic resources, and so forth.

Whatever be the sources of knowledge, all of them derive from one common origin: God. He communicates knowledge in myriads of ways, even those that seem to be totally from human efforts. For sure, this is a declaration of faith. Unfortunately, however, there are negative attitudes towards faith. Two are singled out for mention. The first is that science does not need God. Science is no longer science if God has to be brought into the picture. The second is a corollary of the first: divine revelation cannot and must not be accepted since it cannot be scientifically proven or its claims are unscientific. These negative trends enunciate the strong belief that science and faith are unbridgeable poles.

In today's Gospel, Jesus addresses the issue in His prayer to the Father. On the surface level, He seems to be endorsing the strong belief behind the negative attitudes singled out above but in favour of revelation. For, He thanks His Father *"for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children."* He reiterates, on grounds of the mutual knowledge between Him and the Father, that He Himself reveals His Father to those of His choice. These *"children"* and people chosen by Him are those open to revelation. Those who rely on their own knowledge are excluded.

If this were Jesus' meaning in His prayer, He would clearly be very exclusive. His whole mission would be very lopsided, partial and sad. A fundamentalist interpretation of Jesus' prayer from the standpoint of faith and science being irreconcilable would take the *"learned and clever"* to represent scientists while *"mere children"* to refer to people of faith. But happily. Jesus' mission was inclusive and universal. He had come to save all humankind. No one was, is and will ever be excluded.

What did Jesus mean by *"these things"* that the Father has revealed and the *"mere children"* He has revealed them to? Jesus' meaning must necessarily have to do with all that He had come into our world to do. His call at the very start of His public ministry was: *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near at hand"* (Mt. 4:17). His entire ministry, all that He taught and did, was about the kingdom of

heaven. His call was meant for everybody. Thus “*these things*” must necessarily refer to Jesus’ ministry. He proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of heaven and demonstrated His authority through the miracles He worked. These miracles were signs of the dawning kingdom. He called all to the kingdom. Their response was to “repent”, to turn away from sin and turn back to God. It amounted to a radical change of attitude and lifestyle – from indifference to God or unbelief in Him to taking Him seriously in life.

Vis-à-vis Jesus’ call to repentance to enter the kingdom of heaven, “*the learned and the clever*” refer to those who choose to disregard God. They think that their knowledge is self-acquired and makes them self-sufficient. For they are convinced that it empowers them to lead a successful life. On the contrary, “*mere children*” and those “*to whom Jesus chooses to reveal the Father*” are those who are willing to accept the kingdom of heaven Jesus proclaimed and demonstrated with signs. The kingdom of heaven belongs to the divine realm and God the Father sent Jesus into our world to offer it to all humankind.

Jesus’ invitation in the second part of the Gospel offers a way to harmonise science and faith: “*Shoulder My yoke and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart.*” Jesus is God, the source of all creation and knowledge. In His humility and for our salvation, He became Man and subjected Himself totally to human conditions and limitations as well as to the laws of nature and thus to science. He had to learn and He did learn both religious and secular sciences. But at the same time, He was always open to His Father, daily discerning and doing His will so that He could reveal Him and His will to people.

In Jesus, revelation and science coincided and worked in harmony, because His Father was the source of both. One evidence of this is found in Jesus’ parables. There, Jesus used knowledge from natural science to convey realities about the kingdom of heaven. Those who accept Jesus’ offer of the kingdom will “*find rest for their souls*”. That is because in the kingdom they will be with God. The great St. Augustine understands Jesus’ offer very well when he affirms, “*My soul will be restless until it rests in God.*”

The “*learned*” in today’s Gospel can become “*mere children*” by learning from Jesus. Their repentance consists in becoming “*humble in heart*” and making room for divine revelation amidst their scientific pursuits for knowledge. Faith and science are not opposed to each other. Faith keeps science on course as its focus on God serves as a constant reminder that He is the source and goal of all knowledge.

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 55:10-11; Romans 8:18-23; Matthew 13:1-23

Last Sunday's homily upheld the correlation between science and divine revelation because God is the source of all knowledge. Jesus Himself used knowledge derived from science to convey divinely revealed truths. He did it in a particular way in His parables.

Today's Gospel presents the parable of the sower. Here, Jesus presents the word, that is, the divine truth of the kingdom of heaven, in terms from agricultural science. For that matter too, the first reading from Isaiah does the same. Isaiah illustrates the power and effectiveness of the word of God with examples from natural science. He observes that *"the rain and the snow come down from the heavens water the earth"* to make it fertile and give food to the sower. He uses this observation to affirm that God's word will achieve the purpose for which He conveys it. That is the power of God's word.

If God's word has such power that its positive effect is guaranteed, why then, in actual reality, does it yield different and even negative results? Jesus takes this issue up in today's Gospel. Agricultural science knows very well that there are different types of soil and crops and plants need the correct type of soil to grow and yield a harvest. Isn't it foolish to sow seeds on inappropriate land?

In addition, there are other factors that hamper any or lasting growth. The birds of the air will pick up and eat seeds that *"fall on the edge of the path"* leaving them no chance to germinate and grow. The sun causes seeds falling on *"patches of rock where they find little soil"* to be *"scorched and wither away"* the moment they start to germinate and grow. Thorns and thistles choke and kill seeds that fall among them. Doesn't this fail Jesus' knowledge of science?

In His explanation of the parable of the sower, Jesus identifies the seed with the *"word of the kingdom"*. Since He has come to proclaim the kingdom, by inference, He is the sower. In His ministry He encounters all sorts of people. He has come for all, regardless of their responses. That is God's love manifested by Jesus. It excludes no one; rather it embraces everyone. It is up to the individuals to give their responses.

Jesus identifies three categories of people who give negative responses. Those totally influenced by the evil one, the devil, are identified as *“the edge of the path”* and the *“birds of the air”* represent the evil one. Clearly, they reject the word of the kingdom. *“Patches of rock”* refer to those who initially give enthusiastic but superficial responses to the word. They give up in the face of *“trials and persecution”* and so their responses are short-lived. Those symbolised by *“thorns”* are those who allow *“the worries of this world and riches of the world to choke the word”*. In short, these are people who focus on earthly wealth and comfort at the expense of the word.

Jesus later exposes the inmost attitude of these categories of people. Here again, He has recourse to psychological science. He points out: *“Their ears are dull of hearing and they have shut their eyes, for fear they should see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their heart, and be converted and be healed by Me.”* Deep down in their hearts, they fear Jesus’ challenge to convert. They are unwilling to change their mentality and lifestyle because they prefer the kingdom of this world to the kingdom of God.

Jesus, however, acknowledges the positive responses represented by the *“rich soil”*. They are those who *“hear the word of God and understand it”*. The harvest yielded varies in degree, ranging from *“thirtyfold”* to *“sixtyfold”* and to *“hundredfold”*. What does this range mean? God accepts different degrees of response. This again points to His all-inclusive love. He makes room for every individual. As long as they make the effort to receive the word and respond to it, however limited it may be, God accepts it.

Jesus declares this of His disciples He is addressing: *“Happy are your eyes because they see, your ears because they hear.”* For sure, unlike those who are afraid to change, they respond positively to the word of the kingdom that Jesus has come to sow. But there is something more: they see and hear the fulfilment of prophecies regarding the coming of the Messiah: *“Many prophets and holy men longed to see what you see... and hear what you hear.”* Jesus is the promised Messiah. It is therefore not just the kingdom but Jesus who inaugurates it that the disciples are experiencing through their positive response, whatever be the degree of this response. Life in the kingdom is love relationship with Jesus; it is a sharing in the eternal life of the Son of God.

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 12:13,16-19; Romans 8:26-27; Matthew 13:24-43

Why is there so much of evil in the world? Why are there so many evil people in the world? Did Christ not come to save the world from sin and evil? Why has God not rooted out evil altogether? These and other related questions arise especially in the face of evil.

Through the parable of the wheat and the darnel in today's Gospel Jesus addresses the issue. He uses the parable to teach about the kingdom of heaven. He Himself is the sower who sows only good seed, the wheat. That is the kingdom of heaven where all is expected to be good. All good comes from Jesus the Son of Man.

But Jesus clarifies that He sows the good seed in the field of the world. That means, He inaugurates the kingdom of heaven in the world. An enemy, the devil, is also actively working in this world. He seeks to compete with Jesus and he sows darnel, wild grass. In this way, he seeks to destroy the wheat, the good that Jesus brings to the world.

The conversation in the parable between the owner of the field and his servant offers an insight into coexistence between the darnel and the wheat. The servant is ready to weed out the darnel; but the owner decides to leave the weeding out at harvest time to avoid the risk of weeding out the wheat along with the darnel. This will allow the wheat to grow, mature and be gathered into the barn at harvest time. The darnel will then be burnt.

The two parables that follow, though not directly connected with the first parable, also provide an insight into the coexistence between good and evil in the kingdom of heaven on earth. The parable of the yeast offers hope – the hope of good influencing and changing evil, like the yeast leavening the dough. When such influence takes place, the kingdom, like the mustard seed grown into the biggest shrub, will offer shelter to those who turn away from evil to be good.

In the light of these two parables, the owner of the field is seen to be motivated by hope to be patient and allow the darnel to continue to grow with the wheat. That reflects the attitude of God the Father. He sent His Son into the world to inaugurate the kingdom of heaven. He did it because Satan had lured humankind

into sin. Jesus, the Son of God, became the Son of Man to break the bonds of Satan and make it possible for sinful humankind to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus offered but not imposed the kingdom to one and all. Everyone would have to make a personal and free decision to accept Jesus' offer. While many have responded positively, others have yet to do so. God the Father patiently awaits such positive response from more people. He desires the positive response of those who have given it to influence those who have not yet done so.

While the wheat and darnel have been taken to apply to good and evil people, they also refer to the good and evil inclinations within a person. For, good and evil coexist within each one of us. Yes, the kingdom of heaven Jesus has inaugurated in our world has drawn many into it. But the sin that Satan has sowed in our hearts still shows traces, for we have not totally responded to Christ. God in His infinite wisdom allows us time to purify ourselves more and more. If He allows the weeding out of the darnel before harvest time, we may be weeded out of the kingdom. He patiently awaits our total repentance.

When we come to terms with the coexistence between good and evil within ourselves, we understand better the same reality in the world outside us. When we come to grips with the high possibility that weeding out all evil totally right now may result in our own destruction, we treasure much more deeply God's wisdom and patience in allowing evil to continue to coexist with good. Hosea announces God's words to His people: *"I am God, not man"* (11:9). Because He is God, His love is infinite and unconditional. His forgiveness is beyond human expectation. His salvation is universal and all-inclusive. His kingdom He sent His Son to inaugurate on earth is open to all humankind. As a result, everyone can experience life in the kingdom of heaven already on earth, even though not fully. This happens when one experiences God's love through His forgiveness and peace. Emerging from this experience is an overwhelming joy.

Such an experience urges its recipients to reach out to and relate with others in love with a readiness to apologise and to forgive. Deep down in their hearts, there is a great desire for reconciliation and peace. This is life in the kingdom of heaven. It is imperfect for as long as it is lived on earth where evil still exists. But it gives rise to hope, the hope that it will reach its perfection in God's paradise where evil has no place. This hope will serve to transform lives until they are fit for God's reaping for eternal life in His kingdom.

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

1 Kings 3:5,7-12; Romans 8:28-30; Matthew 13:44-52

If the Lord were to appear to each one of us now to offer us an opportunity to make any request of Him, what would we ask for? Our request would surely be what we desire most in our hearts.

Today's first reading presents the Lord offering the young King Solomon that kind of opportunity. Solomon did not ask for long life or riches, as the reading highlights. We may think that this was because he was still young and was thus not concerned about death. He did not need wealth since he already possessed it in his position as king. But it is surprising that he did not ask for "the lives of his enemies". For, he would certainly need power and strength to get rid of his enemies because they could cause his downfall, topple him or destroy his entire people.

Instead, Solomon asked for "a heart to understand how to discern between good and evil" so that he could "govern God's people" in the ways of God. Solomon realised the importance of good governance according to the mind of God – which was what he meant by "good". For, a people who lived in good relationship with God would enjoy His care and protection and therefore be united and strong. That in turn would be the greatest defence the nation and therefore the king had against his enemies. For Solomon, the greatest gift from God was the ability to live his life and lead his people to live their lives as God wanted it.

God was utterly pleased with the young king and granted him his request to a degree "*as none before him had had and none would have after him.*" As a result, in biblical tradition, Solomon was known to be a king of great wisdom. In the final analysis, what Solomon desired was a life pleasing to God and a people faithful to Him. God was at the centre of his life and the people constituted the focus of his attention. This was the treasure he sought and found.

Treasure is the word used in today's Gospel. Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to a treasure. On another occasion, Jesus tells His disciples "*where your treasure is, there will your heart be.*" Treasure so draws one's heart that one is prepared to go to any length to possess it. In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks of it in business terms: a person who has found a treasure or a pearl of great price is ready to "*sell everything he owns*" to buy it.

What is this kingdom of heaven? Why is it a treasure? In a way, Solomon's request of God illustrates it. It is a life of intimate relationship with God in which one just wants to please God and enjoy His love, care and protection. In that relationship with God, one experiences joy and peace – a joy and peace that the world cannot give. In the second reading, we are told that for those living in close relationship with God, He turns everything to their good. He justifies them and shares His glory with them. This undergirds the great value of the kingdom of heaven and makes it a treasure.

In the kingdom of heaven, God is at the centre of one's life. So, one lives one's life for Him. One becomes His child – an image of His Son Jesus Christ. One cannot focus on God without paying attention to His other children. This means, one is also drawn into close relationship with all God's children, sharing with them the love one experiences from God. All this is precisely the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of heaven is a *"treasure"*, a *"pearl of great price"*, because in it there is eternal life of peace and joy. Who get to inherit it? Those who sell all that they have in order to buy it. Those who live their entire lives for God and for others – in accordance with Christ's command: *"Love one another as I have loved you."* How has Christ loved us? To the point of laying down His life on the cross for us. This is proof of what a treasure the kingdom of heaven is.

With and in Christ we have the most valuable treasure – eternal life in the kingdom of heaven – and become children of God. An unmistakable evidence of this is Christ's gift of the Holy Spirit to His disciples. Knowing how weak they are, He gives them the Holy Spirit to enable them to *"buy the treasure"* and keep it. For sure He does not want them to miss it.

Is the kingdom of heaven our treasure? If so, it is definitely what we will ask for from God. It is also what we will live our lives for. Like Solomon, we need wisdom from God. Only He can give it to us. This wisdom puts us in a position to discern between what is good and what is evil and the strength of will to pursue what is good and discard what is evil. When God gives us the Holy Spirit, He gives us this wisdom as well, for wisdom is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

Back to the question posed at the beginning of this homily: what will we ask from God? The answer is now clear – the kingdom of heaven. Indeed, we want that kingdom because in it we have eternal life. To this end, we would also want to have the Holy Spirit!

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 55:1-3; Romans 8:35,37-39; Matthew 14:13-21

Problems and needs of the world are numerous and enormous. One question bound to be raised is: why does the Almighty God not solve all problems and meet all needs? A related question is: does He not care?

Elements for an answer can be dug out of today's Liturgy of the Word. God certainly does care, because He loves us. Evidence of this, as the second reading from Romans points out, is His sending His Son to our world. Indeed, *"the love of God (is) made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord."* There is nothing too much for God to do to show His love for us. His Son emptied Himself of His divinity in order to become Man in Jesus Christ. As Man, He came into our world to dwell among us and bring life to us fallen humankind. He did this by emptying Himself of His human life and dignity on the cross in order to bring us forgiveness of sins. Following that, He rose to life and brought us life, eternal life.

God did His part and is calling us to do our part. The Gospel narrates the well-known story of Jesus feeding five thousand men, not counting women and children, with five loaves and two fish. The onset of dusk moving into night created a critical situation for the big crowd who had come to Jesus for healing. His disciples were for sending them away so that they could buy food to eat. Jesus wanted the disciples to feed them.

All that the disciples had were five loaves and two fish, very little compared to the big crowd they had to feed. But for Jesus that was enough, if they were prepared to selflessly sacrifice all of that little for His cause. Indeed, they readily offered it to Jesus. He *"took the five loaves and the two fish, raised His eyes to heaven and said the blessing. And breaking the loaves He handed them to the disciples who gave them to the crowds."* Not only did all have enough to eat, but there were twelve baskets full of scraps remaining. The little from the disciples proved to be much more than enough for the big crowd.

In the narrative, Jesus clearly turned to His Father and then involved His disciples to address the critical situation befalling them and the crowd. This meant, the Father intervened through the selfless sacrifice the disciples made. Objectively,

the food was very little compared to the big crowd. But subjectively, it amounted to a total giving, and therefore, a big sacrifice because it was all that they had. The feeding of the five thousand was certainly a miracle. The miracle came from God working through Jesus, but Jesus sought to engage His disciples. The story rings out a call to us to do our part, however little that may be, to address the problems and needs our world faces. It calls us to turn to God to bless our part. He will do the rest. Miracles will happen. Yes, God does care because He loves us. He wants us also to care by doing our part. He chooses to address our problems and needs through our involvement.

The first reading from Isaiah extends God's call to His people, and therefore all of us, to *"come to the water all who are thirsty"* and *"to buy corn without money and eat, wine and milk at no cost."* It is a call to go to God Himself. He is ever ready to provide and feed all. But unfortunately, as He points out, we *"spend money on what is not bread and our wages on what fails to satisfy."* Our attention and focus are wrongly directed. We have become selfish and self-centered. We look to satisfy our own needs and turn our eyes away from the poor and the needy. We are not forthcoming to play our part to address our world's problems and needs while complaining and questioning God about them.

But one may argue that individual efforts can never have a worldwide impact. The parable of the yeast in the Gospel of two Sundays ago gives an answer. The yeast leavens the dough all through. Efforts of individuals are like the yeast. They make a difference and an impact on others, drawing many also to put in their efforts. A domino effect is thus caused and contributes to meeting needs on a broader scale.

The first reading highlights God's fidelity to His covenant with David. Assurance of this fidelity of God was necessary during the exile which was brought on them because of their infidelity to their covenant with Him. What they were called to do was to heed God's invitation: *"Listen to me, and you will have rich food to enjoy. Pay attention, come to Me. Listen, and your soul will live."* Conversion of hearts by turning to the Lord was called for.

Today, God is extending the same call to us. Conversion of heart means turning to the Lord for help but also doing our part, however little this may be, to alleviate the needs of people around us. God does indeed care and He chooses to do it through us.

NINETEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

1 Kings 19:9,11-13; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:22-33

An Anglican criminal lawyer in Kuching makes it a point to drop in daily at the Blessed Sacrament Chapel in St. Joseph's Cathedral or St. Peter's College Chapel or the Carmelite Chapel to pray. In his situation as a criminal lawyer he faces serious challenges. He finds peace in his prayer visits to these various chapels. That's because he focuses on the Lord. He also finds courage to handle his cases.

Focus on the Lord, and courage comes. Lose that focus, and fear sets in. The Gospel today drives home this point. After feeding more than five thousand people with five loaves and two fish, Jesus sent them home. He also sent His disciples ahead of Him in a boat. Then, He Himself "went to the hills to pray".

Jesus prayed because He felt the need to focus on His Father and experience a profound relationship with Him so as to continue His ministry. With that focus, He was able to walk on the stormy waters of the lake to catch up with His disciples. They were "*battling with a heavy sea, for there was a headwind.*"

No one had ever been known to walk on water, much less in a stormy lake. Thus, on seeing Jesus doing it, the disciples immediately thought: "*It is a ghost.*" Probably, they were also influenced by the common association of the sea with evil spirits. They mistook Jesus for a ghost, the Saviour for a destroyer, the Lord for Beelzebul, the prince of devils. They were overcome with fear.

Jesus' words to them were clear and firm: "*Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid.*" The identification formula, "*It is I*", is tied to God's self-revelation to Moses in the burning bush: "*I am Who I am.*" As much as Moses encountered YHWH God in the burning bush, Peter and the other disciples were now face to face with YHWH God in Jesus Christ in the stormy sea. Indeed, Jesus walking on the stormy waters was the Lord, the Son of God made man. In His presence, they should have been filled with courage.

The Lord's presence to His disciples was one of love and protection as they faced the stormy lake whipped up by the strong headwind. They should now have confidence to row safely to their destination. On Jesus' self-identification, Peter immediately asked to be allowed to walk on the water as well, as a way of verifying it, thus his words, "*If it is You, Lord.*" Jesus responded spontaneously: "*Come!*" This response reflected His original call to Peter: "*Come, follow Me.*" It

throws light on Peter's intention: he wanted to be a true disciple of Jesus by imitating Him in walking on the rough waters.

With all that good intention, Peter focused on Jesus the Lord, stepped out of the boat to walk on the water like Him. But the moment he felt the force of the wind, he shifted his focus – from Jesus to himself, from the Lord's power to his perceived danger in the storm. He now thought of the danger he was in as well as his lack of power to get out of it. He started to doubt and thus sink, despite being in the presence of Jesus. If he had continued to focus on the Lord, count on Him and follow Him, he would have had been able to stay afloat.

Peter's reaction in today's Gospel reflects his character and discipleship. He was often impetuous and made very bold claims. But when faced with real challenges to his safety, he was quick to step back. That was clear in his claim to lay down his life for the Lord when Jesus predicted abandonment by all disciples. But in Jesus' trials, he denied the Lord three times to save his own skin. The Lord's assessment of him in today's Gospel was to the point: *"Man of little faith. Why did you doubt?"*

Peter faced an internal tussle: he wanted to be a true disciple of the Lord but in times that mattered, he failed. His saving factor was his ability to still turn to the Lord for salvation: *"Lord! Save me."* The Lord *"put out His hand at once and held him."* After denying the Lord three times, he broke down in repentance. The Lord forgave him. After His resurrection, the Lord met him and the other apostles in Galilee. That was where He had called them to follow Him. Assembling them in Galilee was giving them a new start. So, He commissioned them to *"go out and make disciples of all nations."* The Lord never gave up on them. For that matter, He never gives up on anyone at all.

In our life as Christians, we face many challenges and sometimes serious ones. These challenges come from different sources – some even from within ourselves. The sea is sometimes very stormy. Christ comes walking to us. He tells us: *"Courage. It is I! Do not be afraid."* We need to focus on Him.

It is this focus on Him that gives us calm and peace. The assurance of His presence, protection and love casts out all fear in us and gives us the confidence and courage to "walk on the stormy waters", that is, to live as Christians, even in the midst of serious challenges. For, it is His power that enables us to face these challenges. Even when we fail and fall, we can still turn to the Lord. He will forgive and accept us! He will still allow us to continue to be His disciples.

TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 56:1,6-7; Romans 11:13-15,29-33; Matthew 15:21-28

The claim to a particular religion being superior to others or being the only true one bespeaks of a narrow-mindedness that blatantly defies God's all-inclusive and all-embracing will of salvation. Indeed, God wants to save everyone because all have sinned. Today's Liturgy of the Word affirms the universality of God's salvation.

The first reading taken from Third Isaiah addressed the people of God who had returned from the Babylonian exile. These people had been sent to exile as a punishment for their infidelity to their covenant with God, which ultimately amounted to their infidelity to the God of the covenant. Now that God had brought them back from exile to their homeland, He called on them to practise "*justice and integrity*". But God's call was not just for His people; it was also for "*foreigners*" who were "*clinging to His covenant*". He would "*make them joyful in His house of prayer*" – the Temple of Jerusalem rebuilt after the return from exile. God's covenant was not just with the people of Israel but also with foreigners, the Gentiles. His house of prayer was meant not just for the people He had originally chosen in the Sinai Covenant, but also for the Gentiles whom He now included in the Covenant.

Against the backdrop of God's will to save everyone, today's Gospel presents us something rather troubling. In the story of the Canaanite woman seeking Jesus' cure for her daughter, Jesus made two disturbing remarks. The first was to His disciples: "*I was sent to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.*" Jesus sounded very exclusive and seemed also to depict God as exclusive: God had sent Him only to bring salvation to the people of Israel.

The second statement was Jesus' reply to the Canaanite woman: "*It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the house-dogs.*" This statement is not only troubling but insulting as well. In the light of the earlier remark, "*children*" here means the people of Israel. The Canaanite woman is included among the "*house-dogs*" – not just mere foreigners but people of lowly state, looked down upon but paid attention to only for their services they rendered – like house-dogs watching their masters' house.

From His remarks, it appears that Jesus was straying from God's universal salvation. Because many from the "*house of Israel*" had been lost, for sure, Jesus

felt a responsibility to seek them out. Because of the human limitations His incarnation had imposed on Him, He took that as His first mission. But, as the Gospel episode shows, He was ready to break out from the boundaries of Israel to meet a request of faith from any Gentile. The faith of the Canaanite woman made her *“kneel at Jesus’ feet”* and address Him as *“Lord.”* Her humility led her to accept Jesus’ remark about house-dogs and be contented with *“the scraps that fall from the master’s table”*. In her faith, the Canaanite woman was a foreigner *“clinging to God’s covenant”*, as asserted in the first reading. Her case was a sure evidence of the universality of God’s salvation Jesus was sent to bring to the world. Jesus put aside His primary concern imposed by limitations of His Incarnation and attended to the Gentile woman.

The Letter to the Romans in today’s second reading affirms Paul working very hard to bring the Gospel of salvation to the Gentiles. Paul considers himself to *“have been sent to the pagans (Gentiles) as their apostle.”* In his years of working among the Gentiles and reflection on it, Paul came to an important conclusion about the Jews. They were the chosen ones of God. They were called to bring the salvation they had received from God to the world. Unfortunately, they failed to live as God’s chosen ones as they repeatedly sinned against God. In this failure they could not possibly be faithful to the mission God had given them.

When God sent Jesus to the *“lost sheep of the House of Israel”*, many of the Jews rejected Him as the Christ, the Messiah. In so doing, they failed to accept the salvation He had come to bring to them and the world. Because of this, Paul saw the process of salvation being reversed: it was now the Gentiles who would bring the Gospel of salvation to the Jews.

The Bible is clear about the universality of God’s plan of salvation carried out by Jesus Christ: it is meant for Jews and Gentiles alike – that is, all humankind. While the Incarnation restricts Jesus to one place at a time, His *“being lifted up”* (His death on the cross followed by His resurrection and ascension – that is, paschal mystery) uproots Him from this restriction to reach the entire humankind of all time. In His infinite capacity, He has countless ways of applying to people of all faiths the salvation He had achieved. In their joint declaration (signed in Abu Dhabi on February 4, 2019), Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al Azhar affirm: *“The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings.”* That’s the universality of God’s salvation for all mankind.

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 22:15,19-23; Romans 11:33-36; Matthew 16:13-20

Many articles and books have been written about Jesus Christ. While all have their value, we need to get down to the very personal and experiential level of our encounter with Him. Here, we hear Jesus asking us, “*Who do you say I am?*”

No disciple can ever dodge this personal question from Jesus. Salvation comes from Him. He has objectively brought it to all humankind; but everyone is called to appropriate it for himself or herself. To this end, a personal decision is called for. This personal decision must necessarily flow from one’s personal encounter with Jesus in life and experience of who He truly is.

This is why today’s Gospel narrates the story of Peter’s confession of faith. This episode took place in Caesarea Philippi. The event and its place setting are not accidental, but rather, deliberate, with a purpose in mind.

Peter and his fellow apostles called by Jesus had been following Jesus for quite a while. Matthew presents the story more than half-way through his Gospel. We note Mark’s Gospel has the same story and locates it exactly at its mid-point. It is important to bear in mind that at this point, Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem where He would be handed over to men, tried and put to death. But He would rise on the third day.

At this point of their journey, Jesus did not want His disciples, the apostles He had called and chosen, to follow Him with regrets. Thus, He wanted them to be clear about His identity, not as they had heard people say of Him, but as they had personally experienced of Him. For, only then could they follow Him authentically. After asking them who people were saying about Him, He threw the question point-blank to them: “*Who do you say I am?*”

Peter responded on behalf of his fellow disciples: “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*” None of the impressions people had of Jesus hit this mark. After following Him for quite a long while, His disciples had got some inkling about His true identity. But this was supplemented by a divine revelation. That won Jesus’ commendation of Peter’s response: “*Simon, son of Jonah, you are a happy man! Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but My Father in*

heaven.” Peter confessed the full identity of Jesus. With that, he and his companions could authentically follow Jesus to Jerusalem to meet His destiny.

The place of the story was Caesarea Philippi. The name came from a win-win gesture between the Roman Emperor, Augustus Caesar, and Herod’s son, Philip. Augustus Caesar had given the city to Herod the Great. After rebuilding it, Philip changed its original name Panion to Caesarea Philippi (compound of Caesar and Philip). In antiquity, the site was called Panion because it was dedicated to the god Pan. Worship of this god was commonly carried out here.

This historical background of the site of the event has a bearing on the significance of Jesus asking His disciples His true identity. Peter’s response marked the disciples’ faith in Jesus at two levels: at the religious level, Jesus, not Pan, was the “*Christ the Son of the living God*”; at the political level, Jesus, not Caesar the Roman Emperor, was the Christ, Saviour of the world.

Thus, mid-way on their journey with Him to Jerusalem, Jesus got the certitude that His disciples were given revelation of His true identity and were sure of whom exactly they were following.

It was at this point that Jesus was ready to build His Church, the community of His disciples, on Peter: “*You are Peter and on this rock I will build My Church.*” This was part of Jesus’ intention or purpose. Heading towards His cross in Jerusalem, He wanted to appoint Peter as leader of His Church. The firmness of Peter the rock came from Christ Himself as much as his confession of faith in His identity came from His Father. That would make him able to withstand attacks “*the gates of the underworld*”. Moreover, he would be in a position to be given “*the keys to the kingdom of heaven*”. With this, he would be able to “*bind and loose*”. These are rabbinic terms conveying the authority to interpret the Torah (Law of God given through Moses). The authority was meant to indicate what was permitted and was not. It would mark Peter’s primary place and authority as teacher of the Church. The other apostles would enjoy such authority but in communion with Peter their leader, provided they remained founded on their confession of faith in Jesus, “*the Christ, Son of the living God*”.

We are disciples of Jesus. We are His Church founded on Peter and the apostles. In order to help us authentically follow Him and belong to His Church, Jesus is now asking each one of us: “*Who do you say I am?*” What is my answer?

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 20:7-9; Romans 12:1-2; Matthew 16:21-27

Today's Gospel is an immediate sequel to last Sunday's Gospel. The entire story revolves around Peter's confession of the identity of Jesus. Last Sunday, Jesus commended Peter: *"Simon, son of Jonah, you are a happy man! It was My Father in heaven who revealed this (confession of faith) to you."* But in today's Gospel, Jesus reproached him: *"Get behind Me, Satan. You are an obstacle in My path, because the way you think is not God's way but man's."*

What was exactly happening here? How could Jesus have so quickly changed His mind about Peter? The straightforward answer to these questions lies in Peter's mistaken concept about Jesus' identity: *"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."* He could not accept the Christ who would suffer. Jesus in today's Gospel predicted for the first time that in Jerusalem He would *"suffer grievously... and be put to death and to be raised up on the third day."* Jesus' prediction shocked Peter to the core and he protested very strongly: *"Heaven preserve You, Lord."* Peter's understanding of the Christ, the anointed One, came from the prevailing belief of his day that the Christ would be a powerful figure who would liberate the Jews from foreign domination. He could therefore not die or at least, not be killed. Jesus pointed out to Peter: *"the way you think is not God's way but man's."*

Jesus went to the bottom of things. He saw in Peter's strong protest the work of Satan. Thus, His most strong words: *"Get behind Me, Satan."* He addressed these words not to Peter but to Satan. He detected Satan coming to obstruct or even to destroy His mission as the Christ. Thus, His words to Satan: *"You are an obstacle in My path."* Satan had come to tempt Jesus just as he did in the wilderness where twice he challenged Jesus to prove His identity as the Son of God (cf. Mt. 4:1-11; Lk. 4:1-13). There he tempted Jesus in person; here he used Peter, a close disciple, to do it.

Jesus, the Son of Living God, was the Christ, the one anointed and sent to bring salvation to all fallen humankind. His path would be one of suffering leading up to His death on the cross. But He would rise on the third day. His disciples would have to follow Him in the same path in order to find life. He made this very clear to them: *"If anyone wants to be a follower of Mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for My sake will find it."* Discipleship cannot but

mean taking on Jesus' attitude and embracing His way of life, the way of the cross.

For sure, discipleship of Jesus is attractive in its goal which is eternal life. But the way to it makes one hesitate because is the way of the cross. It is not uncommon for those wanting to embrace this discipleship to go through a struggle. Peter in today's Gospel is a good example. He professed the revelation from the heavenly Father that Jesus was "*the Christ, the Son of the Living God*" (Gospel of last Sunday). That identity was divine and majestic. It made following Him most attractive. But when told of Jesus' suffering and cross, despite His resurrection, Peter struggled. Suffering and the cross were hard to accept. Satan took opportunity of this to make use of him to tempt Jesus.

We could identify with Peter. His struggle reflects ours. We feel great to have Jesus, the Son of the Living God, as our Christ, our Saviour. We feel honoured to be made children of His heavenly Father in Him. We eagerly desire the life that He is offering, the life of the children of God. But we want an easy religion. So, we hesitate when our faith imposes a choice between earthly life and eternal life, a choice between worldly treasures and the treasure of the kingdom. When discipleship entails suffering and the way of the cross, our readiness to continue in it flickers. This hesitation on our part is fertile ground for Satan to sow seeds of infidelity. For sure, he will jump on this opportunity to lure us away from Christ and from God.

It is important in such struggle to cling tightly to Jesus and seek His intervention. We need Him to command Satan coming to exploit our struggle, "*Get behind Me, Satan.*" Jesus is our Christ, our Saviour, come to set us free from Satan's hold. We need Him. We need to be faithful to Him at all times, especially when fidelity entails suffering. To this end, in the words of the second reading, we are "*not to model ourselves on the behaviour of the world, but be modelled by our new mind, the will of God.*" Rejecting suffering in discipleship is taking on the world's behaviour. It is human thinking. Accepting it is obeying the will of God.

If discipleship of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God, entails suffering and the cross, or even the loss of earthly life, it ultimately leads to eternal life, a participation in God's own life. It makes the disciple a child of God in Jesus. Nothing that the world offers can come anywhere close to this divine identity.

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ezekiel 13:7-9; Romans 13:8-10; Matthew 18:15-20

No one is an island. Technological advancement, especially in the area of the internet, has shrunk the world into a global village. Life in this global village brings countless benefits, but it also imposes serious responsibilities.

Today's Liturgy of the Word highlights the responsibility of fraternal correction. Fraternal correction is needed for growth: growth of the individuals and growth of their community, society and even the world. Whilst important, fraternal correction is not easy to exercise. Among the many reasons for this two are particularly common. The first is the fear of damaging a good relationship, creating hostility and ultimately losing a dear one. Such consequences can bring terrible embarrassment in one's encounter with the person corrected, especially when the encounter is frequent. Avoidance of encounter is a natural choice or even compulsion. The compulsion to avoid can become a great burden and bring stress.

The second is the realisation of one's own defects and weaknesses. This gives rise to an attitude of self-questioning: "Who am I to point out so-and-so's weaknesses?" Fraternal correction here could lead to a backlash from the person corrected: "Who are you to correct me? Look at yourself first." This calls to mind a point in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "How can you take a speck from your neighbour's eye when you have a beam in your own?" The backlash could also result in the loss of a dear one and turning him/her into an enemy.

It is certainly a lot easier just to keep quiet and humanly speaking, more prudent to live and let live. But this passive attitude leaves the community none the better, if not worse. There is also the ambience of faith we live in that calls us to move out of passivity. The first reading from Prophet Ezekiel carries God's call to the prophet to do his part in getting a wicked man to "*renounce his ways and repent.*" The death of the wicked man in his sins will be blamed on the prophet if he remains passive. But the prophet "*will have saved (his) life*" after he has carried out his duty, even if it has not produced any positive result.

Faith in God rings out a very strong call to better the human community. The Gospel brings this call to another level – the Christian level. For it touches on the community of Christ's disciples. This community is a Christian community

founded on Christ's presence. Jesus affirms, *"Where two or three meet in My name, I shall be there with them."*

In a Christian community, fraternal relationship lived in the name of Christ is indispensable. The community's well-being calls for a genuine exercise of mutual responsibility and courage in carrying out fraternal correction. Jesus in the Gospel lays down a three-step procedure for fraternal correction. The first step consists in a private correction. If that does not work, one or two other members of the community are called upon to help, or at least to give their evidence. Should that also fail, a report is to be made to the community.

The community is the Christian community. Gathered in Christ's name, it is marked by His presence and therefore enjoys His authority *"to bind and to loose"*. In Rabbinic tradition, this refers to the authority to teach. This teaching authority involves imparting truth and moral behaviour. By inference, it necessarily involves pointing out falsehood and wrong behaviour. In effect, it endorses right behaviour and renounces wrong conduct by Christ's authority.

Fraternal correction for a better and more authentic Christian community is a responsibility that every member is tasked with. Its exercise must be sincere and integral. The second reading cannot be any clearer regarding how responsibilities are to be exercised, including fraternal correction: *"If you love your fellow men you have carried out your obligations... You must love your neighbour as yourself. Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour."*

Love of neighbour stirs up a desire for the neighbour to grow. Love gently draws the heart to carry out fraternal correction. Love is not just of a particular individual. It extends to all members of the community. In this light, love of neighbour is love of the community.

The growth of a community, be it secular or religious, depends to a large extent on its leadership. In their love for the community and desire for its growth, leaders must be open to fraternal correction. In this regard, they must not just expect to correct those under their charge but also be corrected by the latter. Leadership open to correction lends itself to genuine service of the community. It is the stepping stone to servant leadership, the kind of leadership Christ asks for from His disciples. It serves to effectively better the community.

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ecclesiasticus 27:30-28:7; Romans 14:7-9; Matthew 18:21-35

Today's Gospel is a continuation of last Sunday's Gospel. Both present Jesus' teaching on community life: fraternal correction in last Sunday's Gospel, and forgiveness in today's Gospel.

Jesus gave His teaching on forgiveness in response to Peter's question: *"Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?"* Peter's question assumed the need for forgiveness for good relationship with neighbour and for the good of the community. He had heard the Lord teach about forgiveness. Even the Lord's Prayer made mention of forgiveness. Jesus had stressed that forgiveness from God the Father required one's forgiveness of others. From this standpoint, it is imperative for one to forgive one's offending neighbour in order to receive God's forgiveness.

Peter's question was about the frequency one ought to forgive. He threw in the number seven times. In the Jewish mind, seven symbolises perfection or totality. In the light of this symbolism, Peter's suggestion would seem to advocate totality of forgiveness. It would have to be granted till it reached its perfection. No doubt Peter meant to paint a picture of total generosity, but he seemed to be putting a cap to it to qualify as perfect forgiveness.

Jesus took Peter's generosity to an immeasurable extent: *"Not seven, but seventy-seven times"*. The Greek text reads, *"Seventy times seven times"*, totalling 490 times. The point Jesus was making here was that forgiveness was to have no limits and ought to be granted as often as needed. There would never be a point where one could claim forgiveness to have reached its perfection or totality and there was no need to grant it anymore.

Forgiveness, like fraternal correction, will always be needed for the betterment of the community. This is because of human weaknesses, particularly selfishness and pride. Forgiveness liberates both the forgiver and the forgiven from the hurt caused and negative emotions arising. It enables both parties firstly to be reconciled, then to renew fraternal relationship and finally to move on in life in the community. Surely, this works to the advantage of both parties as well as of the community.

Forgiveness has its counterpart in apologising. Apology is called for from the party that has hurt the other. By it the offending party humbly and honestly acknowledges his or her wrong-doing. He/she seeks reconciliation and restoration of damaged relationship. Deep down in his/her heart there is a genuine desire to move on in life in the community. For that all obstacles must be removed.

Admittedly, forgiveness and apologising often encounter great hesitation on the part of the offended and offending parties. This is because of human pride. When one's ego is hurt, pride easily takes the better of the person. With pride, forgiveness is seen as giving in to the offender. On the part of the offending party, the oft-given excuse is, it takes two hands to clap. Apologising means admitting that the offended party bears no blame.

Part of the difficulty to forgive is memory. The adage is often heard: "*Forgive and forget.*" Unfortunately, this saying gives rise to a mistaken notion that forgiving either means or must include forgetting. Yet, forgiving is an act of the will, a decision one makes. Remembering hurt belongs to the memory, a different area of a person's make-up from that of the will. Indeed, one can forgive without forgetting the hurt received.

Two things need to be noted about memory of hurt. The first is positive. Memory will likely make the offended party cautious in his/her dealings with the offending party. This is good especially when the offending party has a habit of hurting. Cautiousness does not mean rejecting the offending party, but protecting oneself from further hurt. The second thing about memory is negative. It could lead the offended party to revisit the hurts to the point of withdrawing forgiveness. If so, it is bound to sour up relationship.

A very important point about forgiveness of neighbour is its relationship with forgiveness from God. Through the parable of the unforgiving servant, Jesus drives home the point that God's forgiveness becomes beneficial when one shows forgiveness to an offending neighbour. This in no way means that God's forgiveness is conditional on forgiveness of neighbour. God's forgiveness is always there, without limits and conditions. But a person's acceptance of it is required and is expressed through his/her forgiveness of others from the heart. Forgiveness of God works when members of the community are prepared to forgive one another from the heart.

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 55:6-9; Philippians 1:20-24,27; Matthew 20:1-16

“*My ways are above your ways,*” proclaims God in the first reading. God’s ways have an important bearing on our lives. The Liturgy of the Word today illustrates it.

The second reading affirms, “*Christ will be glorified in my body, whether by my life or by my death.*” This affirmation conveys two points about God’s ways beyond any human imagination. The first is explicit: a weak and sinful individual believer can glorify the all-holy Christ by his/her life or death. There is no doubt that this is the working of God’s grace. Brought by Christ, God’s grace empowers His disciples to glorify Him even in their far from illustrious lives and eventually in their deaths, provided they live their lives in faith.

The second point undergirding the affirmation in the second reading concerns God’s dealing with fallen humankind. Instead of meting out strict justice and condemning all of them to perish in their sinfulness, He showed His unconditional love. His mercy and forgiveness were an essential part of His unconditional love. In this love, He sent His Son into the human world to bring salvation to all fallen humankind. As if this was not enough, His Son emptied Himself of His divinity to become Man to the point of being a slave who was obedient unto death (cf. Phil. 2:6-11). In this act of love, He took the place of sinful humankind to pay the death penalty due to sin. In this way, He won for all humankind forgiveness of sin. Following that, He rose from the dead and brought life to forgiven humankind. Such were God’s ways, above our ways.

Our ways are often fraught with deficiencies and injustice. But even if they are marked by strict justice, they cannot compare with God’s ways. For, His unconditional love took over from His justice in His dealing with His fallen human creatures. The parable in today’s Gospel underscores this point, while also demonstrating that God does not breach justice.

The landowner provides work for labourers. Many of them stand “*idle in the market place*”. The landowner goes out in search of them at different hours of the day. With everyone of them he agrees to pay “*one denarius a day*”, which was the normal day’s wage in Jesus’ time. At the end of the day, the earlier

employees are disgruntled with what their latter fellow workers get. They now demand justice, that is, payment to be based on the hours of work put in.

The twist in the parable comes from the employer's response: *"My friend, I am not being unjust to you; did we not agree on one denarius?... Why be envious because I am generous?"* First of all, he has not breached any agreement, which for every employee is one denarius a day. Acting on the terms of this agreement is justice. Secondly, his decision to pay the last comers the same day's wage as the first ones is his generosity. In fact, all his employees stand to benefit from this generosity of his. Without it, they would have been left unemployed.

The landowner's generosity reflects God's generosity towards all of us. It led to the satisfaction of His justice by His sinless Son paying, on our behalf, the death penalty due to our sins. Following that, through His Son's resurrection, He bestowed life, eternal life, on all forgiven humankind. All humankind of all generations stood, still stand and will stand to receive this same eternal life: the generations before and after Christ. This happens in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus intends the parable of the landowner to reflect the reality of God's unconditional love and generosity in offering eternal life to all humankind in His kingdom. The different hours of employment in the parable reflect the different generations of human beings being called into His kingdom. There, times and eras do not count any longer, for all enjoy a share in God's own eternal life and are His children. *"Thus, the last will be first, and the first last."*

Indeed, God's ways are above our ways. But they have an important bearing on our lives. The parable presents the landowner, in his generosity, providing work to unemployed people. They are paid to work in his vineyard and are therefore expected to work. Indeed, they need to do their part. In the same way, in His generosity and love, operating beyond our expectation and imagination, God sent Christ to call us into His kingdom. Entry into the kingdom will take place at the end of our lives on earth. But it requires of us to work on earth by living the values of the kingdom and conforming our lives to God's will. When we do this, will *"glorify Christ... by our lives and by our deaths."* In sum, we are called to live our lives as Christ's disciples and children of His heavenly Father.

We deserve nothing from God. But in His unconditional love, God offers us a share in His own eternal life. Do I appreciate and want to accept this offer?

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ezekiel 18:25-28; Philippians 2:1-11; Matthew 21:28-32

The parable of the two sons in today's Gospel was Jesus' response to a question the chief priests and the elders of the people asked Jesus: "*By what authority do you do these things? And who gave you this power?*" What do "these things" refer to? Two earlier events: Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and cleansing of the Temple.

The chief priests and elders of the people were angry with Jesus especially for driving out of the Temple those who were transacting business and money-changers. So, they put the question to trap Jesus so that they could put Him to death. Jesus answered their question with a counter-question: "*John's baptism – where was it from? From heaven or from human beings?*" Either answer would get the chief priests and elders into trouble. So, they refused to answer the question.

Jesus also refused to answer their question and instead gave them the parable of the two sons. The parable was clearly aimed at the chief priests and the elders of the people. They were the leaders in Jerusalem and the Temple was their symbolic centre. They did not accept John's baptism because John's movement was not Temple-centered. Yet John was held in high regard by people. By asking them a question about John the Baptist, Jesus put the chief priests and elders in a fix – they were challenged either to contradict their own position regarding the Temple or incur the wrath of the people.

John was the forerunner of Jesus. He had come to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. He was "*a pattern of true righteousness*" and called for repentance. His call was in tune with God's call to the people of the Old Testament – to turn away from their sins and turn back to Him. Now that the Messiah was coming, the call was even more urgent. Yet the chief priests and elders who claimed to champion God's will refused to heed it, while tax collectors and sinners responded.

Jesus gave the parable of the two sons to set in sharp relief the difference in mentality between the chief priests and the elders on the one hand and the tax collectors and sinners on the other. Quite clearly, the second son represents the chief priests and elders. He said "*Certainly, sir*" to his father but did not go to the vineyard to work. His hypocritical conduct represents the attitude of the chief

priests and elders. They were all out to advocate God's will but failed to carry it out.

The other son said "No," but thought the better of it and carried out his father's command. This reflects the mentality of the tax collectors and sinners. They rejected God's call to repentance at first but later responded to it, very likely by going to John the Baptist for his baptism.

While giving the parable, Jesus Himself is the Son of God the Father and His response to His Father is a total and whole-hearted "Yes." Clearly, this response is totally different from that of the two sons in the parable. He said "Yes" right from the start and was committed to His response. Jesus total and whole-hearted response to His Father transformed human existence completely. The second reading, taken from the letter to the Philippians, underscores this great mystery.

Christ Jesus is God; but in humility, He emptied Himself of this divinity of His; He put aside, so to speak, His divine status. He became as men are – that is, He became Man. His humility took Him to the lowest level of human existence: He became a slave and served all fallen humankind. More than that, He accepted the violent and humiliating death hard-hearted humanity condemned Him to – death on a cross. Indeed, Jesus readily accepted all this humiliation in total obedience to His Father's will to save disobedient human race from self-destruction. Jesus' "Yes" to the Father was absolute and total. His Father's acceptance of it was His exaltation of Jesus: He *"raised Him high and gave Him the name which is above all other names. Every knee would bend at the name of Jesus and every tongue acclaim Him as Lord."*

All of us now stand the enjoy the fruit of this interaction between Jesus and His Father. We have been forgiven of our sins, liberated from eternal death and granted a share in God's life. We have been totally transformed and become children of God the Father.

As God's children, we are to take on Christ's attitude. Thus, the second reading exhorts us, *"In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus."* Like Christ, then, we must say "Yes" to God the Father and carry out His will, which is that we must be *"thinking of other people's interests"*, ready to empty ourselves of self-interests and serve them. The Father will accept our obedience and grant us eternal life.

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 5:1-7; Philippians 4:6-9; Matthew 21:33-43

“Below expectation and beyond expectation” could be a perspective from which to reflect on today’s readings, especially the Gospel. Our way of life and the fruit we bear fall below God’s expectation. Yet, what God has done and will continue to do go beyond our expectation.

The first reading gives us the famous song of the vineyard from Isaiah. The song sings of the love of the singer’s “friend (*‘beloved’ in the Hebrew text*) for his vineyard”. Every detail in the song conveys an aspect of the meticulous care the friend took of his vineyard in which he “planted choice vines”. Naturally his expectation was for the vineyard to produce good grapes; but instead “sour grapes were all that it gave.”

From what follows, it is clear that the song depicts God and the care He took of His people made up of the “House of Israel and men of Judah”, that is, those in the northern and southern kingdoms. Such care included His liberation of them from slavery in Egypt to bring them to the land He had promised Abraham, their ancestor, to give them. On their way, at Sinai He sealed a covenant with them to make them His own people and to be their God. After forty years of sojourn in the wilderness, He brought them to the Promised Land and established them as a great kingdom.

But what was the outcome? The people’s infidelity to the covenant and disobedience to God. This certainly fell far short of God’s expectation. The song could not be any clearer and stronger in conveying this failure of the people than through its very skilful play on words in the concluding lines of the first reading: “He expected mishpat (= justice) but found mishpach (= bloodshed), tsedaqah (= integrity) but only tse’aqah (= cry of distress).” Far from the fine grapes God had expected after all His meticulous care of it, the vineyard produced sour grapes.

In His disappointment, God exposed His people to invasion by Assyrians and Babylonians. That resulted in their exile. Nonetheless, He still acted in their favour. He did not mean to destroy His people through their exile but give them a lesson to secure their conversion. He later brought them back from exile and restored the land to them. For God was God and not man. His ways were not man’s ways. His ways went beyond human expectation.

Through the parable of the vineyard, today's Gospel reading recalls this story of God's people. The vineyard refers to the people and its owner to God. After doing everything necessary to ensure their safety and fruitfulness, God "*leased*" the vineyard to "*tenants*". That means, God entrusted His people to the care of leaders like the priests, elders and scribes. At the time of harvest, God sent servants to "*collect the produce*". These servants refer to the prophets God sent to His people to call for repentance. As was often the case, many of these prophets were rejected and some were even killed by the leaders. In the end, God sent His Son in Jesus on the grounds that "*they will respect My Son.*" But as it turned out, the leaders claimed ownership of the people and swayed them over to demand that Jesus be crucified.

Little did the leaders and the people realize that Jesus would rise from the dead. Through His resurrection, Jesus brought life even to those who had put Him to death on the cross. On this score, as Jesus' quotation from Ps. 118:22-23 affirms, "*It was the stone rejected by the builders that became the keystone. This was the Lord's doing and it is wonderful to see.*" Indeed, the crucified and risen Jesus became the foundation of the kingdom of God, beyond anyone's expectation.

Yet another point beyond expectation came from Jesus' words, "*I tell you then, that the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.*" The kingdom of God could never be destroyed. Rejected by those chosen to inherit it, it passed into the hands of new "*tenants*" – the apostles chosen by Christ for the new people of God, the Church.

The Church is universal. She embraces the Old Testament people of God as well as His new people. The produce she yields for God is none other than the life that Jesus came into the world to bring to all fallen humankind. This life is marked by justice and integrity. We are this universal Church. We stand to possess this life, which is eternal life in the kingdom. Jesus is the cornerstone and stands as our guarantor.

Humankind has fallen far below God's expectation. But God has transformed this fall into a platform where He acted beyond any human expectation. He has rescued sinful humankind from death. He has turned His Son's death into a life-giving event. On this score, eternal life in the kingdom has now become our expectation. To meet it, we must yield "*fine grapes*", that is, justice and integrity.

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 25:6-10; Philippians 4:12-14,19-20; Matthew 22:1-14

Everybody desires a good life. The great majority work hard to earn it. Some have recourse to unethical ways to get it, like cheating, bribery, corruption and even killing. Yet, however good a life one may have, it is only transitory; it will one day come to an end.

The only lasting good life is life in God's kingdom. Today's first reading portrays it in terms that human experience associates with good life on earth: *"rich and juicy food, fine strained wines"*. In addition, suffering will end and death will be destroyed. Those who have found entry into the kingdom will *"exult and rejoice that He [=the Lord] has saved them"*.

Through a parable addressed to *"the chief priests and elders of the people"*, the Gospel today presents God's invitation to His kingdom. The parable is about a king hosting a wedding feast for his son and sending out his servants to extend his invitation to it. Three waves of invitation were sent out, the first two being to the same group of people. After these invitees' rejection of the first invitation, the king still sent out some more servants to invite them again, because his banquet had all been prepared. Again, the invitees turned down the invitation. Some were busy with their farm, some others with their business; but *"the rest seized his servants, maltreated them and killed them."* This violence and murder threw the king into a rage. He went all out to destroy them and burn their town. Following that, the king sent out his servants again this time to anyone *"on the crossroads"* they could find, *"bad and good alike"*.

The parable conveys the salvation God offered first to the Jewish people in the Old Testament and later to the Gentiles in the New Testament. The servants sent out with the first invitation were the prophets. The Jewish people rejected and even maltreated the prophets. The second wave of invitation to the same group of people was because the wedding banquet was ready. This indicates the era of Jesus, the Son of God. The servants sent out then included the apostles. The Jewish leaders, represented by the *"chief priests and elders"* led the people to reject them and put some to death. The burning of the people's town refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. The parable presents it as God's punishment on His people for their violence and murder towards His prophets and apostles.

With its rejection by the Jews, the Gospel of the Kingdom was offered to the Gentiles. The command to the servants, *“Go therefore” (poreuesthe oun)* points to the great commission at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, 28:19: *“Go and make disciples of all nations...”* The nations belonged to the Gentile world. Everyone was invited, *“bad and good alike”*. What was required for admission to the banquet was a *“wedding garment”*.

The wedding garment refers to the repentance Jesus called for as He began to proclaim the message that *“the kingdom of God was close at hand”* (Mt. 4:17). At a later stage of His public ministry, Jesus specified the criterion for admission into the kingdom on judgement day (Mt. 25:31-46). It consisted in looking after the needs of the poor and needy represented by the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the sick and those in prison. Taking care of them amounted to taking care of Jesus Himself: *“I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did it to Me”* (Mt. 25:40).

One man stealthily gatecrashed into the kingdom without the wedding garment. He was one who did not repent. In Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount, this man was one who called *“Lord, Lord”* but failed to do the will of God the Father in heaven (cf. Mt. 7:21). So, he was cast out.

The parable of the wedding feast depicts God’s offer of salvation not just to the people of the Old Testament but also to those in the time of Christ as well as those beyond, even right to our own generation. That salvation is eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. Life in the kingdom is for real. It is good and secure as with it there are no more sufferings and death, as the first reading portrays.

The criterion for admission is repentance followed by good deeds especially towards the poor and needy, which the wedding garment designates. We now need to ask ourselves: Are we wearing the wedding garment? What is the focus of our lives on earth – earthly treasures and pleasures or the treasure of God’s kingdom? Do we think that faith in God and fidelity to Him are just too troublesome and limit our freedom? So, we are inclined to ignore Him totally? Are we looking beyond our earthly lives to envision the only good life there is, which is found only in the kingdom of God? Are we living in the hope of the salvation God sent His Son Jesus into our world to offer us?

If our attitudes are wrong and we are straying from the kingdom of God, let us change path. It is never too late to repent and do good to others. God is patiently waiting for everyone of us because He is eager to admit us into His kingdom.

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 45:1,4-6; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5; Matthew 22:15-21

Every citizen has rights but also duties towards their country. Among such rights is religious freedom. This is the freedom to embrace a religion of one's choice and practise it freely. But there are countries where religious authorities encounter serious challenges from civil authorities.

Today's Gospel offers a fundamental principle to meet these challenges. In the time of Jesus, Palestine was a Roman colony. Its citizens had to pay taxes to Caesar, the Roman Emperor. As expected, they were not happy. The tension between their duty and unhappiness became an attractive issue for the Pharisees working in cahoots with the Herodians to *"trap Jesus in what He said"*. As things turned out, it also became an occasion for Jesus to give a fundamental lesson on the relationship between the Jews' duty to Caesar and to God, as well as Caesar's duty to God through his obligations to his citizens.

The issue Jesus was challenged with was: *"Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"* It was a double-edged sword. A positive answer from Jesus would land Him in trouble with the Jewish citizens. On the other hand, a negative answer would bring the wrath of the powerful Roman Emperor on Jesus.

But Jesus *"was aware of their malice"* because He was all-knowing. With that knowledge of His, He responded beyond His conspirators' expectation. Given a denarius, a Roman coin, as He requested, He asked them a very obvious question: *"Whose head is this? Whose name?"* Obviously, Caesar's head and name were inscribed on the coin. The consequence too was obvious: the coin belonged to Caesar, the Roman Emperor.

Jesus' answer was simple and logical: *"Very well, give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar."* By virtue of the same logic, the next part of His response was: *"and to God what belongs to God."* At face value, Jesus' response seemed to make a clear separation between state and religion. The two were seemingly different spheres without one having to do with the other.

Nevertheless, at its deeper level, Jesus' response was not all that clear-cut. Paying taxes to the Roman Emperor was a duty insofar as the Jews were citizens not just of Palestine but of the Roman Empire. For sure, they enjoyed certain rights as Roman citizens. But paying their secular dues did not cancel out their religious duties. The Roman Emperor was their earthly ruler but not their God.

There was only one God, the Creator of the universe, the One who sent Jesus into the world to bring salvation to all fallen humankind.

God was God not only of the Jews but of all humankind, including the Roman Emperor. He had created every human person in His own image (Gen. 1:27). Every human person therefore belongs to Him and must be given back to Him. The Roman Emperor, and for that matter, every earthly ruler must respect this property of His. On these grounds, every earthly ruler must first of all acknowledge God's universal lordship and accept his/her own position as reflective and representative of it. He/she must thus govern those under his/her charge with respect for God's will.

This is clear in the first reading. There Isaiah prophesied the rise of Cyrus, the Persian Emperor, towards the end of the exile of God's people in Babylon. This Persian King would issue a decree for the safe return of the exile to their homeland. The prophet saw the exile as God's punishment on His unfaithful people and their return as His care for them. In all of this, He made use of earthly powers: the Assyrians, the Babylonians and the Persians. God was in control and all earthly kings ruled as instruments of His.

So, in the time of Jesus, Caesar was also God's representative on earth. All citizens belonged to God and Caesar must give them back to God. An important part of this giving back was to allow them to practise their faith freely and duly. This would entail providing them, where necessary, all they needed to practise their faith fully, without meddling with this practice.

Jesus' response provides the fundamental principle for the challenging harmonious relationship between state and religion in any country. Every lawful government is put there by God to look after the well-being of all its citizens. It must itself acknowledge that they belong to God and must give them back to God. They do this by governing the nation with due respect to God's will which essentially consists in justice and equality. Adherents of a religion must fulfil their duties towards the state and comply with state laws. The state authority must respect and uphold the citizens' right to practise their faith freely and support it even financially where necessary. *Caesar must also give back to God what belongs to God!*

THIRTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Exodus 22:20-26; 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Matthew 22:34-40

Discrimination is widespread in the world. Whatever form it takes, it divides people and causes sufferings including violence and bloodshed to a lot of people. For sure, it goes against the mind and purpose of God when He created humankind in their multi-faceted plurality. God's intention was, and still is, for all humankind to live as one, in peace and harmony.

The Joint Declaration by Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahman Al Tayyeb of Al-Azhar (Abu Dhabi) on 4 February 2019, entitled *HUMAN FRATERNITY*, affirms this intention of the all-wise and almighty God. "The great divine grace makes all human beings brothers and sisters... It is therefore crucial to establish in our societies the concept of *full citizenship*" "based on the equality of rights and duties".

The stance of the Joint Declaration is biblically founded. Today's Liturgy of the Word provides evidence of it. The first reading presents the Lord's command to His people to treat strangers well, to look after widows and orphans, as well as not to exploit poor and helpless people in society. This command had its grounds in the fact that the people of God had been slaves in Egypt before. There they were foreigners, poor and oppressed. As their discriminated situation contravened God's intention, He came to their rescue by liberating them from slavery and bringing them to the Promised Land to become a free nation of their own.

Though given to them, the resources of the land were for everybody, including foreigners. When equitably shared, these resources would allow all to live comfortably. There would thus be no poor among them. But God foresaw that the greed of some would give rise to injustice, oppression and corruption. So, He stipulated laws to uphold the dignity and rights especially of the poor and foreigners and promote their well-being. God's intention was all-inclusive for He loved everyone equally.

In the Gospel, Jesus' answer to the Pharisees harked back to the covenantal law which God gave His people through Moses. The first commandment came from Dt 6:4-5: "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*" The second was taken from Lev. 19:18: "*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself:*

I am the Lord.” Jesus’ comment on the second commandment that it resembles the first draws a similarity between them. That means, observing one is observing the other as well. Loving God with one’s whole heart, mind and soul translates into loving neighbour as oneself.

Both these commandments bear the affirmation that the Lord is God. In other words, they come from the authority of the Lord who is God. The Lord is God of all and for all. He is all-embracing and His commandment is all-inclusive. But “neighbour” in the Old Testament understanding of the second commandment is restricted to the people of Israel. Although “foreigners” are provided for in the first reading, they are given “left-overs” in that crops accidentally unharvested were to be left for them. The Old Testament view of neighbour is far from being all-inclusive.

Jesus extends the concept of “neighbour” beyond the boundaries of one’s own people to include foreigners and one’s “enemy”. He does it very clearly in His parable of the good Samaritan. Samaritans were descendants of mixed marriages between Jews and foreigners. History turned them into enemies of the Jews. It was a Samaritan who attended to a Jewish victim of armed robbery (Lk. 10:29-37). In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is explicit and categorical: “*Love your enemies*” (Mt. 5:43). He advocates forgiveness (Mt. 6:14-15). Thus, the commandment to love God with one’s whole heart, mind and soul includes love and forgiveness of enemies. Forgiveness is the clearest expression of love. Genuine and wholesome love forgives. It is all-inclusive as it extends even to one’s enemies.

Inclusivity stands in stark contrast to discrimination. Therefore, one has no room for the other. God’s intention when He created humankind in their plurality was all-inclusive, not discriminatory. As Christians, we are called to adopt inclusivity as our way of following Christ. If we claim to believe that the Lord is our God and love Him with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind, then we must love our neighbour as ourselves. Our neighbour is everyone, regardless of background: gender, race, culture and religion. For, everyone is a child of God and has equal rights to all that God has put at the disposal of humankind for a decent life. The bottom line, as the document *HUMAN FRATERNITY* affirms, is that all human persons on earth are “*brothers and sisters to be supported and loved*”. Loving them is truly loving God wholeheartedly and ensures observance of all commandments given by God.

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Malachi 1:14-2:2b,8-10; 1 Thessalonians 2:7-9,13; Matthew 23:1-12

Scandals, principally sex and finance, caused by leadership in the Church have shocked and caused many to even give up their faith. Clericalism which claims superiority and exclusive privilege has served as a protective shield for priests and made matters worse. While understandable, leaving the Church or worse still, giving up the faith, is no solution to the issue, but aggravates it.

Today's liturgy of the word offers elements for the real solution because it addresses the same issues rocking Church leadership today. Malachi, in the first reading, accuses priests of *"having strayed from the way and caused many to stumble by their preaching."* In this way, they *"have destroyed the covenant of Levi"*. What has led to this accusation?

In Malachi's days, the people had returned from exile in Babylon and undertaken to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. But they faced many serious obstacles; as a result, they became discouraged. Corruption and exploitation were widespread. Priests were interested in their own wealth and well-being, rather than encouraging and helping the people to rebuild the razed temple. Moreover, instead of leading the people to foster their covenantal relationship with God by preaching the covenantal law which God had given them through Moses, they embraced *"partiality in their administration."* Their administrative partiality took the form of self-interest and perhaps of favouritism and cronyism too.

In the given situation, what solution does the first reading offer? The concluding verses of the first reading carry the solution. Through a rhetorical question, it calls for seeing God as *"the one Father"* of all, wherefrom *"faith with one another"* follows. This is going back to *"the covenant of our ancestors"* which sees all as equal members of the covenant with the one God who is Father of all. Equality demands the practice of justice. Priests cannot worthily offer true worship of God without fidelity to the covenant. They are called to return to the covenant.

In the Gospel Jesus also hits out at the teaching authority of His day. The teaching *"chair of Moses"* was occupied by *"the scribes and the Pharisees."* Jesus' strong criticism of them boiled down to their *"not practising what they preach."* They were laying heavy burdens on others that they were not prepared to carry; they sought attention at public gatherings; they demanded to be acknowledged

as “*Rabbi*”, which means “My great one”. All this manifested their desire for position and power; but more seriously, they had no qualms abusing their authority and power. Such mentality corresponds to today’s clericalism. Thus, Jesus’ strong criticism against the scribes and Pharisees also applies to those leaders of the Church guilty of clericalism and abuse of power and authority.

What solution does Jesus give? The titles and positions He lists out refer to leadership across the board of human communities, from the family to the wider society. The bottom line is that leadership comes from God. It derives its authority from God and must therefore be exercised in submission to Him. It translates into concrete situations God’s loving care for all His children.

Fathers and mothers derive their authority and responsibility from God the heavenly Father. They represent God to their children. Rabbis are masters seeking to lead their disciples to the same God, the one and only Master. Because God is the Father of all, rabbis and their disciples are basically brothers and sisters. Where Jesus Himself is concerned, all teaching must be drawn on His, for He is the only Teacher.

Jesus Himself does not only teach but has shown the most perfect example of leadership derived from God. He emptied Himself of His divinity to become not just a man but a slave obedient unto death on the cross (cf. Phil. 2:6-11). Jesus’ leadership was servant leadership. He exercised it in humility and total selflessness. At the end of it, His Father exalted Him far above all names.

The opposite of clericalism is servant leadership. Servanthood is Jesus’ solution to the mess the Church faces today. Its undergirding motive is submission to God’s will. Jesus teaches that God’s will is love and love translates into selfless service. Thus, to be a true father in the family, a true rabbi (or a great one) and a true teacher in the community, one needs to show selfless love in humble service. Only through humble service does an earthly leader reflect the loving and selfless Father in heaven and Christ the Teacher.

Just as Christ was exalted after His self-emptying, so the leader who humbles himself/herself to serve his/her sisters and brothers will be exalted. Exaltation comes in the titles God gives them: father/mother, rabbi, teacher.

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 6:12-16; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

Last minute doers and procrastinators are never fully prepared for any event entrusted to their charge. Even giving them more than ample time for preparation will not help. For at the bottom of it all, they have a “tidak apa” or a “couldn’t care less” attitude that gives rise to a lack of commitment. As a result, the event entrusted to their charge suffers. Sometimes even the most essential elements of the event are dropped because of rushed preparation.

As we approach the end of the liturgical year, our attention is focused on the critical event that will take place at the end of time. The second reading from 1 Thessalonians takes this point up. Well, the end-time gives the impression of being very, very far away. But not so for Paul and the Thessalonians: it was imminent. To be sure, after some wait, they found that it was not so.

The end-time has to do with the second coming of Christ. What that happens, He executes judgement on all humankind. It is therefore vital to prepare for it. But because it feels so far away, the tendency is to think that there is a lot of time to prepare for it. Yet, that preparation is to be made only within one’s lifetime. Even then, there may be a tendency to take things easy or to procrastinate especially when one is still young.

Today’s Gospel addresses the critical event taking place at the end-time: the Lord comes to judge and bring His faithful disciples into His kingdom. He is depicted as the bridegroom and His disciples as bridesmaids. In the custom of Jesus’ day, bridesmaids were the bride’s companions when the bridegroom came to take her. The ten bridesmaids in the parable fall into two groups: five who are ready as they have their lamps and the oil in hand; the other five have their lamps but no oil which is so vital for their lamps to be lit. The first lot are ready to enter the follow the bridegroom into the wedding hall. The second lot are advised to go and buy oil. But it is midnight and shops are closed; this will certainly delay them for the arrival of the bridegroom, to the point that they will be too late for it. That is the price they have to pay for being procrastinators or last-minute doers.

But there is a point of greater importance than being too late: the bridegroom’s statement: *“I tell you solemnly, I do not know you.”* This harks back to the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount in Mt. 7:21-23: *“It is not those who say to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the person who*

does the will of my Father in heaven. When the day comes many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, cast out demons in your name, work many miracles in your name?' Then I shall tell them to their faces: I have never known you; away from me, you evil men!"

In the light of this conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount, the lamp in the parable of the ten bridesmaids refers to the name of Jesus and faith in Him. Indeed, all disciples of the Lord profess His name and confess He is Lord. This is just one element of discipleship. The other element which is of equal if not more importance is *"doing the will of the Father in heaven"*.

Prophesying, casting out demons and working miracles in Jesus' name may be tendered as profession of faith in Him. But they may also be attempts to seek name and fame. If so, they are selfishly motivated. In such cases, claiming to perform them in the name of Jesus is gravely wrong. It does not express discipleship.

True discipleship is essentially following Jesus in doing the will of His Father. That is the oil which is to go with the lamp. A life thus lived is what Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount means when He says: *"Your light must shine in the sight of men, so that, seeing your good works, they may give the praise to your Father in heaven"* (Mt. 5:16). That light comes only when there is oil for the lamp to be lit. The lamp is lit when genuinely good works, that is, works of true love, are carried out. That light is required for the bridegroom, that is, the Lord, to know us as His disciples and lead us into His kingdom. Genuine faith in Jesus necessarily leads to good works. St. James in his epistle says, *"Faith without good works is dead"* (2:17).

It is therefore imperative that we do not just profess faith in the Lord but follow Him to do His Father's will – by a genuine life of love. It is also important that we do not delay or procrastinate. Discipleship is a lifelong commitment; it is lived in every moment of life on earth. Delaying or procrastinating it may prove to be too late for the coming of Jesus the Bridegroom at the end of time. This is the meaning of Jesus' call at the end of the Gospel: *"So stay awake, because you do not know either the day or the hour."*

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Proverbs 31:10-13,19-20,30-31; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6; Matthew 25:14-30

One criticism atheists level against believers is that their freedom is curbed by their God. He has high expectations and often makes unreasonable demands. Why bother about believing and obeying God?

The parable in today's Gospel seems to back up the atheists' position. The third servant who was given one talent articulates their thinking. Knowing his master to be "*a hard man, reaping where he has not sown and gathering where he has not scattered*", he "*hid his talent in the ground*". When his master returns, he gives him back the entire talent. What's wrong with that? Yet, his master throws him "*out into the dark, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth*".

To grasp the meaning of the parable, it is important to take its literary context into account. It is part of Jesus' fifth and final discourse in Matthew's Gospel (Mt. 24:1-25:46). The discourse focuses on Jesus' return at the end of time to judge all humankind and bring those who qualify into His Father's kingdom. The criterion for entry into the kingdom consists in caring for the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters, represented by the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned. Jesus identifies Himself with these socially destitute people. The talents in today's parable signify services rendered to these people.

In today's parable, the master is about to embark on a long journey. This has a bearing on Jesus as He too will soon depart from earth. He will be crucified in Jerusalem. Following that He will rise from the dead and ascend to His Father's right hand. But He will return at the end of time. Then, like the master in the parable, He will call for reckoning of talents used; that means, He will judge who qualify to enter the kingdom.

The servants symbolize Jesus' disciples. In view of His departure, Jesus entrusts to His disciples His own work of proclaiming the kingdom of God and drawing people to it. He wants to ensure that in His absence people keep on being prepared for His second coming and qualify to enter the kingdom of God. The basic criterion is mutual love and service, especially to the socially destitute. Jesus' disciples are to use their talents to carry out the mission He is entrusting them.

The parable exposes the responses of the servants. The one given five talents makes five more. Similarly, the one given two talents makes two more. They both make a twofold return. In terms of the mission entrusted to them, they draw twice the number of people they are expected to draw into the kingdom. Winning the master's and therefore Jesus' approval, they are entrusted with greater responsibilities in the mission and invited to share His joy.

The third servant hides the one talent given him. In other words, he does nothing with his talent. He takes for his excuse his master's harshness and accuses him of *"reaping where he has not sown and gathering where he has not scattered."* In the servant's mind, the master is passing his own responsibility to him. When he returns, he will claim credit for the work which he has not done. The servant's excuse and his accusation aim to blame the master for shirking his own work.

The master calls him a *"wicked and lazy servant"*. He is wicked not just because he is being judgemental about his master, but more so because he is totally unconcerned about salvation. He could have *"deposited the talent with a banker to gain interest"*. That means he could have sought help. But his laziness and indifference have taken the better of him. This third servant reflects the disciple who ignores Jesus' mission of proclaiming the kingdom and drawing people into it and does nothing to advance it. Instead, he accuses Jesus of exploiting him to get credit for what He has not done.

The master *"throws him out into the dark, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth"*. In the literal sense of the parable, there is no place for him in his master's employment. Cast out of that employment, he will find it impossible to survive and encounter great hardship. In the symbolic sense of the parable, such a disciple of Jesus fails to gain entry into the kingdom of God. Outside the kingdom, he will only suffer in eternity.

God is a loving God who created us in His image as He wanted us to share in His own life in paradise. When we fell, He sent His Son Jesus to bring us back to His kingdom. There we will share God's own life. As His disciples, we are called to continue Jesus' mission to draw people into the kingdom. Each one is to give a personal response to Jesus' call.

FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING

Ezekiel 34:11-12,15-17; 1 Corinthians 15:20-36,28; Matthew 25:31-46

The Church's liturgical year ends with the Feast of Christ the King. This is because the liturgical year celebrates God's plan of salvation. Jesus Christ came as a humble servant into our world to carry out this plan. This was more than 2,000 years ago. At the end of time, He will come again, but this time as King of the Universe, to bring all the saved into His kingdom.

At His first coming, Jesus was born an individual human person – born to a concrete family, that of Mary and Joseph, belonging to a concrete race, the Jewish people. The wise men from the East knew Him as “the infant king of the Jews”. But the royal figure lived His adult life as a servant. That was because He had emptied Himself of His divinity to become a slave obedient unto death (cf. Phil. 2:6-11). His sole purpose was to bring God's salvation to all fallen humankind.

On the eve of His death, Jesus powerfully crystallised His entire life as a servant in His gesture of washing the feet of His disciples. Throughout His ministry He was at the service especially of the poor and the needy. He cured the sick, cleansed lepers, gave sight to the blind, made the deaf and dumb hear and speak, fed the hungry and raised the dead to life. He was frequently found in the company of sinners to bring them forgiveness.

For sure, His ministry drew flaks from the religious leaders of His day, both out of jealousy and out of displeasure with His apparent disregard for the Jewish laws like the washing of hands before eating and keeping the Sabbath. In the end, these leaders were bent on doing away with Him. They succeeded in securing the approval of Pilate, the civil authority of the day, to crucify Him. Over His cross was written, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” His crown was a crown of thorns. He was condemned to death on the cross not for any crime but for dedicating His life to total service to people. On the cross, He still prayed His Father to forgive those who nailed Him to it: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Yes, the King of the Jews forgave His enemies. This forgiveness was in tandem with His mission of salvation from His Father. Though offered to the Jews first, that mission was meant for all fallen humankind. It was universal.

At the end of time, Jesus will come again, but as King of the Universe to bring all saved men and women into His kingdom. The saved are those who fulfil the criterion today's Gospel presents: *"giving food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the imprisoned"*. The criterion is in tandem with Jesus' own earthly ministry. In other words, it consists in faithfully imitating Him by serving in love. This amounts to genuine discipleship.

But there is something else at play in this criterion. It is found in Jesus' words: *"In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me."*

Jesus identifies Himself with the poor and the needy at His second coming. This is because through His self-emptying He chose to be in full solidarity with them during His first coming. Thus, in serving these socially and economically vulnerable people, His disciples are actually serving Him. It means, a true disciple of Jesus is one who imitates Him by serving in love and serves Him in the process.

True disciples will hear Jesus' invitation at His second coming: *"Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world."* They will undoubtedly be allowed entry into the kingdom of heaven. On the contrary, as the second part of today's Gospel asserts, those who ignore the plight of their unfortunate sisters and brothers will be sent to *"eternal punishment"*. The fate of these people represented by the *"goats"* follows the logic in Jesus' discourse on His universal judgement.

Jesus' discourse is coherent. But it calls to question all His teachings about the love and mercy of God as well as His call to His disciples to be merciful. If the unjust are doomed to eternal punishment, where is mercy? We do not understand how, but we are assured of it by Jesus' prayer for forgiveness of His persecutors while on the cross. Jesus the King of the Universe will temper His justice with His mercy as He judges the wicked. From this viewpoint, it stands to reason to interpret the second part of Jesus' discourse as intended to cross the important teaching that injustice on earth resulting in the plight of the socially and economically vulnerable is evil and must be rectified through adequate care of them.

To be a Christian is to imitate Christ and serve Him by serving others, especially the poor and the needy. This is the criterion by which Christ the King will judge suitability for entry into the kingdom of heaven. While His mercy will be at work for sure, it is still important to strive to be as genuine a disciple of His as possible.

CLOSING WORDS



Beloved Sisters and Brothers in the Lord,

It has been quite a heavy commitment but a prolonged joy to bring this commemorative homily sharing to its completion. For you, it will very likely also be quite an effort and discipline to go through the homily for each Sunday faithfully. I thank you for your perseverance and do understand if you discontinue the practice at some stage.

We have completed the three-year cycle of the Sunday Liturgy of the Word. It means three years have passed since you started to peruse this sharing of mine. At this stage, I have this triple hope to convey: i) that at least some of my homilies will benefit you; ii) that off and on, if not every time, when you read my sharing, you will remember me in prayer; iii) that your prayer is that I practise what I preach and will eventually obtain Jesus' promise of eternal life in all the Gospels that I preach.

When I set off to produce *SHARING GOD'S WORD IN EUCHARISTIA* to gratefully commemorate the fiftieth year of my priestly ordination, there was no way I could tell if I could ever complete it. For health had not been totally in my favour. Thank God, I did complete it. From now on, I could only commend my spirit to the Lord and journey on in hope toward the kingdom of heaven which Jesus proclaims in the Gospels. The kingdom of heaven remains the goal of my life as much as I am sure it is yours as well. I thank Him for His continued grace. I pray God to give us the determination and perseverance to make our way into it. May He grant all of us entry when the time comes.

Once again, thank you for your prayers and support. God bless you.

Yours as ever in the Lord,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John', with a long horizontal stroke extending from the end of the signature.

John