



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

YEAR A

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SEASONS AND FEASTS	SUNDAYS IN ORDINARY TIME
ADVENT	
First Sunday 1	Baptism of the Lord 63
Second Sunday..... 3	Second Sunday 65
Third Sunday 5	Third Sunday 67
Fourth Sunday 7	Fourth Sunday 69
CHRISTMAS	
Christmas Midnight 9	Fifth Sunday 71
Christmas Day 11	Sixth Sunday 73
Holy Family 13	Seventh Sunday..... 75
Epiphany 15	Eighth Sunday 77
LENT	
Ash Wednesday 17	Ninth Sunday 79
First Sunday 19	Tenth Sunday 81
Second Sunday 21	Eleventh Sunday 83
Third Sunday 23	Twelfth Sunday 85
Fourth Sunday 25	Thirteenth Sunday 87
Fifth Sunday 27	Fourteenth Sunday 89
HOLY WEEK & EASTER TRIDUUM	
Passion / Palm Sunday 29	Fifteenth Sunday 91
Holy Thursday 31	Sixteenth Sunday 93
Good Friday 33	Seventeenth Sunday 95
Easter Vigil 35	Eighteenth Sunday 97
EASTER	
Easter Sunday 37	Nineteenth Sunday 99
Second Sunday 39	Twentieth Sunday 101
Third Sunday 41	Twenty-first Sunday 103
Fourth Sunday 43	Twenty-second Sunday 105
Fifth Sunday 45	Twenty-third Sunday 107
Sixth Sunday 47	Twenty-fourth Sunday 109
Ascension 49	Twenty-fifth Sunday 111
Seventh Sunday 51	Twenty-sixth Sunday 113
Pentecost 53	Twenty-seventh Sunday 115
FEASTDAYS	
Holy Trinity 55	Twenty-eighth Sunday 117
Body and Blood of Christ 57	Twenty-ninth Sunday 119
Assumption 59	Thirtieth Sunday 121
All Saints 61	Thirty-first Sunday 123
	Thirty-second Sunday 125
	Thirty-third Sunday 127
	Christ the King 129

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.

YEAR B

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SEASONS AND FEASTS	SUNDAYS IN ORDINARY TIME
ADVENT	
First Sunday 1	Baptism of the Lord 63
Second Sunday..... 3	Second Sunday 65
Third Sunday 5	Third Sunday 67
Fourth Sunday 7	Fourth Sunday 69
CHRISTMAS	
Christmas Midnight 9	Fifth Sunday 71
Christmas Day 11	Sixth Sunday 73
Holy Family 13	Seventh Sunday..... 75
Epiphany 15	Eighth Sunday 77
LENT	
Ash Wednesday 17	Ninth Sunday 79
First Sunday 19	Tenth Sunday 81
Second Sunday 21	Eleventh Sunday 83
Third Sunday 23	Twelfth Sunday 85
Fourth Sunday 25	Thirteenth Sunday 87
Fifth Sunday 27	Fourteenth Sunday 89
HOLY WEEK & EASTER TRIDUUM	
Passion / Palm Sunday 29	Fifteenth Sunday 91
Holy Thursday 31	Sixteenth Sunday 93
Good Friday 33	Seventeenth Sunday 95
Easter Vigil 35	Eighteenth Sunday 97
EASTER	
Easter Sunday 37	Nineteenth Sunday 99
Second Sunday 39	Twentieth Sunday 101
Third Sunday 41	Twenty-first Sunday 103
Fourth Sunday 43	Twenty-second Sunday 105
Fifth Sunday 45	Twenty-third Sunday 107
Sixth Sunday 47	Twenty-fourth Sunday 109
Ascension 49	Twenty-fifth Sunday 111
Seventh Sunday 51	Twenty-sixth Sunday 113
Pentecost 53	Twenty-seventh Sunday 115
FEASTDAYS	
Holy Trinity 55	Twenty-eighth Sunday 117
Body and Blood of Christ 57	Twenty-ninth Sunday 119
Assumption 59	Thirtieth Sunday 121
All Saints 61	Thirty-first Sunday 123
	Thirty-second Sunday 125
	Thirty-third Sunday 127
	Christ the King 129

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 63:16-17; 64:1,3-8; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37

The saying, “Familiarity breeds contempt”, is well known. Becoming too familiar with a person can bring about a loss of joy and even a sense of dislike for him/her. This may result in a yearning for a new company, and new thrills. To resolve this, sometimes separation or absence is advised, following another saying: “Absence makes the heart fonder.”

Perhaps, familiarity with God underlay Israel’s fatigue with Him. After a few centuries of life with God in the Promised Land, they lost all excitement. Observing God’s commands day in and day out became boredom for them. As a result, life with God felt like drudgery.

What then did the people do? They looked for what they thought would give them new thrills. So, they broke off from God and went their own way. They chose new partners in pagan gods and idols. As if to enhance their choice, God arranged for the Babylonians to deport them to their own country. Thus, their exile there.

Exile was truly living in God’s absence. For all that stood for God was gone: the Temple of Jerusalem had been destroyed; and priests were scattered in the land of exile. Over time, the feeling of emptiness in the absence of God crept in. In addition, subjection to a foreign power in a foreign land brought on hardship, even though the people were not too badly treated.

It was then that those in exile began to appreciate how much God actually loved them and provided them “milk and honey”, that is, good life, in the Promised Land. So, they started to look back and yearn for life with God. They began to long for the blessings they used to enjoy from God in the Promised Land. All this made them realise that life away from God was totally empty. They turned to God in prayer.

The first reading from Isaiah carries their prayer. They addressed God as “*Lord*”, “*our Father*”, “*our Redeemer*”. They acknowledged Him as “*the potter*” while they themselves were the “*clay, the work of His hand*”. He had looked after them as no other god did. Yet, they were foolish enough to rebel against Him – “*to stray from His ways*”. Since they had decided to walk out of Him, God “*hid His face from them and gave them up to the power of their sins.*” As a result,

they *“all withered like leaves as their sins blew them away like the wind.”* Life away from God was empty.

As they lamented their terrible experience of the absence of God, they pleaded with Him very fervently, *“Return, for the sake of your servants, the tribe of your inheritance. Oh, that you would tear the heavens open and come down – at your Presence the mountains would melt.”* With a sense of urgency, they cried to God and pleaded with Him to return to them. They earnestly desired His presence. For only He could take care of them and satisfy their every need.

In answer to His people’s prayer, God came to them in the person of Jesus. Jesus is the Son of God made man and born of the Virgin Mary. He is the Immanuel, God-among-us. Jesus came to offer salvation to His people and all fallen humankind. To this end, He inaugurated the kingdom of God and invited all humankind to repent and enter it. That coming of Jesus took place more than two thousand years ago.

But Jesus will come again at the end of time to judge all humankind. To those who have responded to His call He will allow entry into the kingdom. When will this second coming take place? In today’s Gospel Jesus says no one knows. But He asks everyone to *“stay awake”*, that is, to be ever prepared for His second coming.

The word *“Advent”* means coming. In the Church’s calendar, it refers to both Jesus’ first and second coming. Its season is a time of waiting. Disciples after the first coming of Christ are surely waiting for His second coming. Staying awake to be ready for it is a call to be faithful to Him every day by keeping what He taught at His first coming. To sustain this effort, the celebration of His first coming at Christmas is helpful. For it serves to bring God’s love to the fore: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not be lost, but may have eternal life”* (Jn. 3:16). It also gives the assurance of God’s fidelity to His work of salvation. For sure, Jesus will come again at the end of time to grant this life to all who believe in Him. He will come to bring them into His kingdom.

We desire to enter God’s kingdom, for there we will be in His eternal presence and enjoy a share in His eternal life. To qualify for entry, it is imperative to *“stay awake”* at all times and be ever prepared for Christ’s second coming.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 40:1-5,9-11; 2 Peter 3:8-14; Mark 1:1-8

Slow or patient? This is a question that touches on time. Its answer depends on factors like perspective, situation, mood and so forth.

Today's second reading considers these time categories with respect to God: *"The Lord is not being slow to carry out His promises, as anybody else might be called slow; but He is being patient with you all."* Two factors play a role in this consideration. The first is that *"with the Lord, a 'day' can mean a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day."* Time is a created category that does not apply to God the Creator. Secondly, God is patient for a purpose: He wants *"nobody to be lost and everybody to be brought to change their ways"*. He gives time to all human beings to repent and turn back to Him so as to receive life from Him as He promised. He is always faithful to His promises.

Time categories play a role in the season of Advent. For its waiting, like any other waiting, involves the passage of time. The waiting is for *"the Day of the Lord"*. The day is a day of judgement oriented towards *"the new heavens and new earth, the place where righteousness will be at home"*. These terms depict God's kingdom where there is eternal life which He promised. The waiting for the day should be marked with personal preparation: *"Do your best to live lives without spot or stain"*. This is a call to conversion, that is, a call to turn away from sin and live in faithful relationship with the Lord so as to share in His eternal life.

The call to conversion is a running thread through the Scriptures. In today's Liturgy of the Word, it is tied with time. The first reading from Isaiah carries a message of consolation to the people of God in exile in Babylonia. The exile was God's punishment for their sins. Babylonia was very far away from Jerusalem, God's city on earth. The Temple of Jerusalem, God's dwelling place on earth, had been destroyed by the Babylonians. Thus, in exile, the people were living away from God and experienced His absence. It was only after six to seven decades that the prophet Isaiah was sent to them to proclaim that the Lord their God was *"coming with power" "like a shepherd"* to bring them home. But for now, God was giving them time to *"atone for their sins"*, that is, to convert

so that He could bring them home to His presence. He patiently waited for them to do this. About five centuries later, God's presence shifted from the Temple of Jerusalem to Jesus Christ, His Son made man. Jesus came to bring salvation to all sinful humankind.

Today's Gospel reading opens the Gospel of Mark and proclaims, "*The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ.*" The proclamation affirms Jesus as the "Good News"; He is both its owner and the content. The news is good solely because Jesus has come into our world to bring God's presence into our midst to enable us to share in His eternal life. Its beginning has to do with the messenger, John the Baptist, whom God sent ahead of Jesus.

John came to prepare the hearts of people for the coming of Jesus. He did it by administering "*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" Those accepting his baptism indicated their desire to receive Jesus who would "*baptize with the Holy Spirit*". Taken together, John's baptism of repentance and Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit convey the reality that those receiving them personally accept the eternal life Jesus came to bring to all humankind. In effect, they want to live in God's eternal presence and share His life.

Repentance, for sure, is necessary. For respecting the freedom of every human person, God does not force His decision or desire down their throats. So, Jesus came to offer eternal life to every person, but left them free to decide whether to accept or reject it. Repentance is a free decision to accept it. The repentance John the Baptist called for echoes the words of Isaiah in the first reading: "*Prepare a way for the Lord, make His paths straight.*" Repentance means straightening out one's life to conform it to God's will. It is therefore important that we "*do our best to live lives without spot or stain.*"

God is now patiently waiting for us to do that. His desire is that when Jesus comes again at the end of time, we will qualify to follow Him into His kingdom to be in His eternal presence and share in His life. God is not slow to act, but patient with us. His patience is our opportunity to convert and be saved.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Zephaniah 3:14-18; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:10-18

Traditionally, the Church calls today “Gaudete (Rejoice) Sunday” or “Sunday of Joy”. Joy is the red thread running through all three readings.

In the first reading, the prophet Zephaniah, addressing the people of God as “*daughter of Jerusalem*” and “*daughter of Zion*”, called on them to “*shout for joy*” and “*rejoice with all their heart.*” These people had abandoned their God for idolatry. Among the idols was wealth which they had resorted to corruption and cheating to obtain. They thought wealth was going to give them joy. All along, the prophet had been condemning these sinful practices and announced God’s harsh punishments for them. One form of punishment was conquest and domination of the people by foreign powers. When that came, all their wealth would be gone and of course their joy would vanish along with it.

In today’s first reading, the prophet changed his tone and message; he proclaimed joy. This was because he saw God coming to intervene in love by “*repealing their sentence and driving their enemies away*”. For sure, God’s power was far greater than that of all the enemies put together. There was no doubt that to protect His people, He could stay any form of attack from their enemies. But more than that, the prophet assured the people: “*The Lord, the king of Israel, the Lord your God is in your midst.*” Indeed, God’s presence in their midst guaranteed everything else of concern and importance. Above all, as the reading asserts, “*He will renew you by His love*” and in this renewal, “*He will dance with shouts of joy for you.*” God Himself would radiate His joy in His love for His people. That joy was surely enduring and lasting.

The second reading depicts this joy in terms of being “*always happy in the Lord*” and gives the reason for it: “*the Lord is very near*”. It ought to be noted that the Letter to the Philippians speaks from the perspective of the Lord’s second coming at the end of time. Since its timing is unknown, it is wise to anticipate its imminence so as to prepare well for it. For then the Lord’s coming brings joy.

While the second reading speaks of the Lord’s second coming, the Gospel today alludes to it and proclaims the imminence of His first coming. John the Baptist appeared on the scene. His mission was to prepare the hearts of people primarily for Jesus’ coming which was so imminent that “*a feeling of expectancy had grown among the people who were beginning to think that John might be*

the Christ". John very humbly and honestly disclaimed the people's identification. He then drew the people's attention to Jesus and affirmed, "*He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*" Here, he referred to Jesus' first coming, spanning from His public ministry to His ascension followed by His outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Then John asserted that Jesus would "*gather the wheat into His barn... and burn the chaff in a fire that will never go out*". This is an analogy for judgment at the end-time. It means John also talked about Jesus' second coming.

Both comings would require preparation. The Gospel, therefore, presents people, including tax collectors and soldiers, asking John the Baptist, "*What must we do, then?*" He told them to share with the needy and not to exploit or intimidate people for personal monetary gains. Living these attitudes in life would put one in good stead to encounter Jesus the Saviour at His first coming and face Jesus the Judge at the second not just without fear but more so with joy.

Thus, John the Baptist "*announced the Good News*" to the people. The Good News was a development of the "*news of great joy*" the angel announced to the shepherds. There, the good news was the birth of Jesus the Saviour (Lk. 2:10); here, it was Jesus coming to exercise His public ministry. These announcements were two stages of one good news of joy: God coming in Jesus to live among humankind and save them all.

Jesus had already come to bring salvation consisting of forgiveness of sins and bestowal of eternal life. Now, He is with us through His Holy Spirit whom He sent from His Father's right hand and continues to offer us forgiveness of sins and eternal life. At the end of time, He will come again to separate us from evil so as to bring us into His Kingdom.

Advent is a time when we prepare to celebrate Jesus' first coming and await in hope for His second one. In between these two comings, He is present with us through His Holy Spirit. His unfailing presence fills us with joy and gives us the confidence to look forward to His second coming to lead us into His Kingdom. This means we will be in His eternal presence to share in His eternal life. Surely, this fills us with hope and everlasting joy – the joy Gaudete Sunday proclaims!

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

2 Samuel 7:1-5,8-11,16; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

We often look after our own interests before we ever think of God. Or we turn to God only when we feel we need Him. Sometimes this attitude pricks our consciences and makes us feel somewhat guilty. Then we try to make up for our guilt.

That seems to be David's experience in today's first reading. The king had built himself a magnificent palace and settled comfortably in it before it dawned on him that the Ark of God was kept in a tent. The Ark of God represented God who had made a covenant with the people of Israel whereby He made them His own people and He became their God. Sometimes called the Ark of the Covenant, it was a chest that contained the two tablets of commandments which God had given His people through Moses to observe as their part of the covenant. David felt uncomfortable if not totally guilty about not building a fitting Temple for the Ark. He shared his feeling with prophet Nathan.

God knew very well what was going on in David's heart and mind. Through Nathan He told David He did not need David to build Him a house. On the contrary, David needed Him. In reality, He had been looking after David and His people. David was initially a shepherd, but God raised him to be a leader for the people. Indeed, God always had the interest of David and His people at heart.

David should have appreciated God's care and blessing for him much earlier and therefore proceeded to build the Temple before building his own palace. However, for God, even this late appreciation was never too late. In fact, it was good enough for Him to make David this promise: *"Your house and your sovereignty will always stand secure before Me and your throne be established for ever."* That was God's loving attitude towards David.

God's fidelity to His promise to David saw its definitive fulfilment in the coming of Jesus. On this score, when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to announce God's choice of her to be the mother of His Son made Man in Jesus, he proclaimed, *"The Lord God will give Him (= Jesus) the throne of His ancestor David. He will rule over the house of Jacob for ever and His reign will have no end."* The angel's proclamation harks back to God's promise to King David and affirms Jesus as its fulfilment. As Man, Jesus came from the line of David through Joseph who was of the House of David. Mary, His Mother, also

belonged to David's lineage. As Son of God, Jesus is eternal. As God made Man, He made David's dynasty everlasting. All this underlies the annunciation story in the Gospel today.

God had at heart not just the interest of David and His people but also that of the entire humankind. The birth of Jesus His Son made man fulfilled not just God's promise of an everlasting dynasty to David but also His promise of salvation to the entire fallen humankind. The promise was made when Adam and Eve, our first parents, had sinned against God in the Garden of Eden. Not contented with the image of God God had created them in, they strove to be their own gods (cf. Gen. 1-3). In His curse of the serpent who had tempted them to sin, God said, *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head and you will strike his heel"* (Gen. 3:16). Our faith interprets the *"woman and her offspring"* to refer to Mary and Jesus Christ her Son.

The story of Adam and Eve highlights God's unconditional love for humankind. It motivated God to promise them Jesus Christ to be their Saviour. Again, it is evident that God put humankind's interest over against the offence He had received from Adam and Eve. History shows His fidelity to His promise and therefore His seriousness about it. Salvation history flows from this fidelity of God. In other words, salvation history is the story of God fulfilling His promise of salvation in stages until it reached its culmination in the coming of Jesus the promised Saviour born of the virgin Mary. Salvation history bears evidence of God putting the interest and well-being of every human person as His top priority, for He had created everyone *"in His own image and likeness"* (Gen. 1:26,27).

Despite His unconditional love for us, we have often taken God for granted. We even take advantage of this love of His on the excuse that after all, He is always ready to forgive and take us back to His embrace. We exploit His love to go on our own way. We continue to pursue our own interest before His will. We want to be our own gods rather than live out His image in us.

Our turning point is often our sense of guilt, when we come to realise that God has been looking after us and taking care of our every need. Yet, we lose sight of this and ignore Him. This sense of guilt gives rise to remorse and leads us back to God. The saving grace is, God is loving and forgiving. He awaits our return to Him.

CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS

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

The year 2020 has gone down in history as one of gloom and doom. It saw the outbreak of the terrible pandemic of COVID-19 and its extensive devastation worldwide. The virus has infected millions of people throughout the world and claimed the lives of many of them. Social distancing was part of the way to check its spread but adversely affected human relationship. Given the situation, questions arise about Christmas. Does it have any more meaning at all? Must it be celebrated? Where is the joy that Christmas used to give?

In a way, Covid-19 brings the first Christmas to the fore and highlights its bare reality. For, the situation it has given rise to resonates with that in the Gospel story. The birth of Jesus Christ the Lord took place under circumstances created by an order issued by Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor. It did not have the merriment and decorations we have hoarded on to Christmas.

Caesar Augustus had issued a decree for everyone to return to their hometown to register themselves. Joseph had no choice but to bring Mary, in her advanced pregnancy, on a tedious journey to Bethlehem for registration. Joseph had moved to Nazareth where he met and betrothed Mary. Mary herself was a resident of Nazareth. It would have been incomparably comfortable for her to deliver Jesus at Nazareth for more reasons than the tedious journey to Bethlehem, far from her immediate family.

At Bethlehem, Mary's time was up. There was no place in the inn for Joseph and her, presumably because of the return of its townsfolk to register themselves. But the deeper reason the Gospel conveys is *"the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head"* (Lk. 9:58). It conveys the human mentality of giving no room to Jesus, the Saviour, Christ the Lord. As a result of having *"no room for them at the inn"*, Mary and Joseph had to have Jesus their Son born *"in a manger"*.

A manger is a feeding trough for cattle. It is filthy and smelly. But it had to be used for the newborn baby Jesus. The underpinning significance of this is Jesus finding no room at the inn, in the midst of the community of Joseph, was born

in the company of animals. That was His humility and humiliation. For love of us, He accepted all that, when He could have arranged otherwise.

His birth in a manger in very harsh circumstances pointed to the harsher reality awaiting Him: His humiliating death on the cross. While the manger was His birth bed, the cross was His death bed. Both realities resulted from a rejection of Jesus by society and decisions by the powers that be in His day. For Mary and Joseph, “social distancing” took the form of leaving the family in Nazareth and being given no room in the inn. For Jesus, it took the extreme form of total rejection by the community of His day from birth in a manger to death on the cross.

Despite their rejection of Him, Jesus still loved all humankind. In love, He accepted His humiliating birth in shabby circumstances and shaming death on the cross. In love, His sole concern was to restore to all fallen humankind their lost dignity and bring them life. In love, He was determined to share in the brokenness of fallen humankind in order to share His life with them. Jesus’ birth in the manger and death on the cross manifested His self-giving to us in love.

Self-giving is sharing to the utmost. Propelled by love, it is the heart and thus the core meaning of the first Christmas. Sharing in love must therefore mark our celebration of Christmas. Love urges us to reach out to everybody, especially the poor and needy in our midst. When all this happens, that is, when there is sharing in love, the joy of Christmas is experienced. That joy is one that only Jesus can give. It is His own joy which He had when He was born in a manger and put to death on the cross.

Christmas does not lose its meaning and can still be celebrated as we battle with Covid-19. Observing the SOP is a real form of sharing and self-giving as we seek to protect the safety of others. Not celebrating Christmas in the usual grand way is a sacrifice rooted in concern for the well-being of neighbour. Coming to the aid of the poor and the needy reflects the true spirit of Christmas. As we are brought back to the stark reality of the first Christmas, may we be filled with the love, peace and joy of Jesus born in a manger.

CHRISTMAS DAY

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

In the face of Covid-19 with the devastation it has caused, the same question arises as it has in the many serious disasters: “Where is God in all this? Does He not care?” The answer is constant: “He is among us. He does care.” His presence and care have seen us through catastrophes many times over in different ways.

Christmas explicitly proclaims God’s caring presence with us in all circumstances, especially harsh ones including Covid-19. The Gospel’s categorical affirmation, “*The Word was made flesh and lived among us,*” declares the divine presence throughout not just human history but also creation. For “*the Word was with God in the beginning*” because He was God. As God, He was eternal. He was not just present when God created the universe and the world, but it was “*through Him all things came to be*”. As a result, “*all that came to be had life in Him.*”

All this affirmation of the vital role of the Word of God in creation harks back to the story of creation in Gen. 1. This story presents every category of creation coming to being at God’s word. Thus, for example, when God said, “*Let there be light*”, “*light was made*”. Indeed, the word of God was not just a verbal utterance but the divine person of the Word of God whom today’s Gospel identifies as “*the only Son of God*” who became Man in Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ was the source of all life and “*that life was the light of men*”. He made His way into human history. For humans had chosen to live in darkness by sinning against God through their eating of the forbidden fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. In the light of the use of opposites as one Hebrew way of conveying totality, this knowledge of good and evil is total knowledge which is God’s prerogative. Not contented with God’s image and likeness they were created in, they wanted to be their own gods. As a result, they brought on their own destruction.

In His unconditionally loving mercy, God promised them a Saviour. God did this when He cursed the serpent which had tempted the man and woman to rival

with God. That promise was God's word. History then became a gradual fulfilment of this divine word of salvation. Today's second reading clarifies that in times past God *"spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our own time, the last days, He has spoken to us through His Son."* Jesus as the Word of God made flesh is the total fulfilment of God's promise of salvation. He is the culmination and personification of God's word through the prophets in human history.

The Word of God made flesh takes up His dwelling in our midst. He lives among us not so much to take away our sufferings as to accompany us to go through them. His intention is to give us the strength and confidence to bear our pains and sufferings. Over and above all this, He leads us through the darkness of sin to receive the life that shares in the eternal life of His Father. With this, we become children of the Father. What a gift this indeed is! It is the light that shines in the darkness of our sinful world. It is also the *"grace and truth that have come through Jesus Christ"*.

Christmas celebrates the Word of God made flesh to dwell among us to share in our broken lives. It also celebrates our birth as children of the Father. Some early Fathers of the Church like St. Irenaeus and St. Augustine affirm their faith that the Son of God became Man so that men would become sons of God, that is, all men and women would become children of God. From this viewpoint, Christmas also celebrates our birth as children of God. What a joy this is, for we do not deserve to become children of God. Our joy thus comes from God, from what He has done for us. He has sent His own Son into our world to share in our broken lives and bring His own life to us, thus making us His children. This joy transcends all the pains and sufferings that we face in life.

In the current pandemic of Covid-19, God does not abandon us, for He has made us His children. He still lives in our midst, in fact, within each one of us, as much as His Son was made flesh to dwell among us. He accompanies us as we face this great challenge. His presence with us gives us hope, the hope of victory over the pandemic, and more than that, the hope of eternal life. This hope sustains us as we face and live through Covid-19. It motivates us to live our whole life as faithful children of His. In this fidelity, we receive the joy that only Jesus the Son of God can give.

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY

Ecclesiasticus 3:2-6,12-14; Colossians 3:12-21; Luke 2:22-40

The birth of a baby brings great joy to his/her parents. But it also gives rise to concerns and even anxieties, from the baby's health to his/her upbringing. Proper upbringing constitutes a major part of the parents' responsibility.

Although Jesus was the Son of God made Man, His mother Mary and foster father Joseph were not spared the normal anxieties and responsibilities of a family. His infancy required special care from them. They took pains to bring Him up in a holistic manner. Essentially this upbringing had two main aspects: human and religious. The Gospel commends Jesus' holistic growth in a summary statement: *"The child grew to maturity, and He was filled with wisdom. God's favour was with Him."* Implied in this commendation was an acknowledgement of the responsible role Mary and Joseph played in Jesus' growth.

For sure, Mary and Joseph were good citizens. When the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, issued a decree for a census to be taken, Joseph took Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, his hometown, to register there. They made that trip though Mary was advanced in her pregnancy. The birth story in Luke's Gospel narrates her delivery of Jesus in harsh circumstances upon their arrival in Bethlehem. With no room for them in the inn, she and Joseph had nothing but a manger to lay their new-born Jesus in. Their obedience to the civil authority of the day was unquestionable.

As regards their religious fidelity, the fact that they obeyed the Law of Moses to bring their infant Jesus to the Temple of Jerusalem and present Him to the Lord furnished clear evidence. Further evidence came from earlier events. Luke's Gospel highlights Mary's total "yes" to God's choice of her to be Jesus' mother, while remaining a virgin. She gave her consent on the grounds that nothing was impossible for God. Matthew's Gospel focuses attention on Joseph. Learning that Mary was pregnant, though he and she had not come together yet, he was thinking of putting her away secretly to protect her name. But he made a U-turn to take her as his wife in obedience to God's word to him. He obeyed in his faith that she had conceived her baby by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Mary and Joseph took good care of Jesus in His very tough infancy. The story of the long and perilous flight to Egypt to escape the jealousy and fury of Herod,

the king of the Jews, sets in relief Joseph's care to ensure Jesus' safety. Later, their return to Nazareth was equally hard and harsh. They were prepared to go to any length to ensure the life and safety of Jesus. For sure, they did all they could to bring Him up to be a well-rounded personality. To this end, as good Roman citizens and as religious Jews, they made sure that they passed their civic and religious values on to Jesus. The Gospel's commendation of Jesus' growth in maturity is an acknowledgement of this.

The family of Nazareth was a holy family for two equally important reasons. The first is because Jesus the Son of God made Man was an integral part of it. The second has to do with the way of life of Mary and Joseph her spouse. They were good people and loyal citizens, as well as religious Jews faithful to God. They exercised their parental responsibility with meticulous care to make sure that Jesus *"grew to maturity... filled with wisdom"* and *"God's favour was with Him"*.

The holy family of Nazareth is a model for all Christian families to be holy. First of all, Jesus the Son of God is present in every family, though not in the same physical way as in the holy family. He is present through the Holy Spirit given at baptism. Secondly, like Mary and Joseph, every one is called to be a good person and citizen as well as a faithful believer. This means that all ought to be civic minded, observing the laws of the country. All are also called to love and obey God, especially by respecting and loving one another.

In this light, parents are called upon to bring their children up in a wholesome manner. Providing for the needs of children to ensure their health and growth is surely an essential part of parental responsibility. Passing on human and spiritual values to children is an equally important duty. This has to do with good education in all its different aspects: physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. All these aspects must be ensured, so that children will, like Jesus in the holy family of Nazareth, *"grow to maturity, filled with wisdom and God's favour"*.

All parents make it a point to send their children to school. But they must also ensure their spiritual growth through faith education both at home and in the parish. With faith brought into it, every family becomes a cell of the family of God, as we have been made children of His.

FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY

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

Judaism and Christianity are intrinsically linked. The Jewish Scriptures constitute the Christian Old Testament and serve as the precursor of the New Testament. Jesus, the central figure of the Scriptures, was born a Jew.

Epiphany celebrates Jesus' manifestation to the Gentile world. Its Gospel story revolves around the "*infant king of the Jews*" and the Magi from the east. These Magi were important figures from the Gentile world. They belonged to the Persian priestly class whose ministry was primarily to interpret dreams about the births and deaths of renowned persons. The person whose birth the Magi of today's Gospel came to know was the king of the Jews.

What business would Persian priests have with Jewish kingship? Very little or none whatsoever except for what the Gospel seeks to highlight: the salvation the infant king of the Jews was born to bring. That salvation was meant not only for the Jews but for the Gentiles as well. The Magi represented the entire Gentile world and they were keen to have the salvation that the newly born Jewish king was to bring.

To drive home this point, the Gospel story unravels an interplay between the Jewish faith and the Magi's search for the infant king of the Jews. A unique star played a role in this search. This narrative detail very likely indicates the Magi's interest in the study of stars and their movement. Could it be that they were engaged in astrology to gain further information about the births/deaths of renowned figures?

Whatever be the case, a biblical episode in the Old Testament may have an influence on the star in today's Gospel story. A gentile prophet, Balaam, was engaged by the Moabite king, Balak, to prophesy against the people of Israel who were on their way to the Promised Land. These people had already defeated the Edomites to move closer to the Promised Land. However, directed by God, Balaam uttered three oracles that blessed God's people. In his final oracle, the prophet declared: "*I see him – but not in the present; I behold him – but not close at hand: a star from Jacob takes the leadership, a sceptre arises from Israel*" (Num. 24:17). He foresaw a future leader from the tribe of Jacob bringing salvation.

The Magi were guided by a star in their search of Jesus, the star of Jacob. But their star disappeared when they reached Jerusalem, the centre of the Jewish world. They needed direction from the Jewish scriptures. So, they consulted Herod. This was an Idumean appointed in 40 B.C. to be King of the Jews. He had neither interest nor clue about the Jewish scriptures. But now, he was all out to protect his kingship in the face of a potential rival. So, he consulted *“the chief priests and scribes”* regarding the whereabouts of *“the infant king of the Jews”*. These were scholars of the Jewish scriptures. From their scriptures, the scholars received their answer: *“Bethlehem in the land of Judah”*.

In Jerusalem, the star followed by the Magi gave way to the Jewish scriptures to determine the birthplace of the *“infant king of the Jews”*. It was only after the Magi had received the answer from the Jewish scriptures that their star appeared again and led them to where the child and his mother were. There it halted. With the help of the Jewish scriptures, the Magi’s star led them to the star of Jacob, Jesus, the infant king of the Jews.

The Magi then *“fell to their knees to do the child homage and offered Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh”*. By their gesture and gifts, they acknowledged the full identity of the child: King, God and Man. He was the Son of God made Man, born King of the Jews but Saviour for the entire humankind.

After their visit and homage to the child, the Magi were *“warned in a dream not to go back to Herod and returned to their own country by a different way”*. The obvious reason was Herod’s intention to kill the infant king of the Jews in order to do away with a potential rival. Through the information passed on by the Magi and revelation given by his scripture scholars, Herod was offered the salvation Jesus came to bring. But he rejected it because of his determination to remain in power. On the contrary, the Magi had come all the way from the east to accept it. They could no longer go back to Herod to reject complicity with him.

The interplay between the Jewish faith and the Magi’s search for the infant king of the Jews underscores the working out of God’s universal plan of salvation through the Jews. Its benefit calls for a personal decision: Herod rejected it to protect his position while the Magi self-effacingly accepted it. How about me?

ASH WEDNESDAY

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

The Liturgical Season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday. This day takes its name from its unique liturgical act: the imposition of ashes on the faithful. This liturgical act indicates a penitential heart.

The use of ashes signals Lent as a time of intense preparation for and entering into the central event of salvation history celebrated in the sacred Easter Triduum: the Lord's salvific death followed by His resurrection. The salvation Jesus brought to the whole fallen world essentially consisted of the forgiveness of sin and the bestowal of eternal life. God created all humankind for life. But sin destroyed this life and brought on death. Jesus came to destroy sin and death in order to restore life. To this end, He emptied Himself of His divinity to become Man and take the place of sinners to pay the death penalty due to sin, thereby obtaining the forgiveness of sin. On the third day of His death, He rose to life and in this way brought life to all forgiven humankind.

There is no doubt that the salvation Jesus achieved for all humankind is a reality. But every person needs to accept it personally, for which repentance is called for. Every year, in the season of Lent, the Church extends this call to the faithful and provides them the opportunity to respond to it positively. This call and response underlie the significance of the reception of ashes on Ash Wednesday and the practice of penance throughout Lent. In this way, she gears the faithful up for the intense experience of Jesus' salvific death and resurrection.

The realities of sin and death are brought to the forefront on Ash Wednesday. Ashes are certainly a strong reminder of destruction and death. In their semblance with the dust of the earth, they remind the recipients of their humble origins: "Remember you are dust, and unto dust you will return." This formula articulates the significance of the imposition of ashes. It affirms the certainty of a return to one's origins in death due to sin. This means that sin blocks the relationship God willed when He created human beings.

God created man and woman in His own image and likeness (Gen. 1:27). By this, He intended them to be in relationship and solidarity with Himself. He also wanted them to be "one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). While this explicitly meant marriage, it also implied universal oneness among all humankind. Indeed, human

solidarity was rooted in the image and likeness of God in them. That was indeed God's will for all humankind at the time of creation.

But the sin of the first man and woman, representing all humankind, broke this solidarity with God and with one another. It exchanged the sublime bond of human solidarity in the divine image for worthless dust. Indeed, in death, every human person turns to dust, going back to where they come from. Their origins become their end as well. Sin destroyed the end God intended for His human creatures: life.

In His unconditional love, God did not allow His human creatures on whom He had bestowed His own image and likeness to perish to dust. He saved them through His Son and restored solidarity with them and in the process also among them. God's saving intervention makes it possible for them to live and grow in a positive relationship with Him and with one another, as He desires. This undergirds the "universal call to holiness".

The call to holiness is extended in the alternative formula for the imposition of ashes: *"Turn away from sin, and believe the gospel."* For sure, repentance is a necessary first step to holiness, as it marks an admission of sin, sorrow for it as well as a decision to avoid it. Conscious awareness of our origins from the dust of the earth will stir up our determination to grow in holiness. For it gives rise to a profound appreciation of what God created us for when He imprinted His own image and likeness in us: life with Him. For sure that sublime life is a precious treasure on which to set our hearts and for which to live.

In our striving to grow in holiness, the awareness of our humble origins fans the realisation that we cannot do it on our own efforts and our appreciation for God's intervention through Jesus Christ. The alternative formula for the imposition of ashes articulates this double experience: *"Believe in the gospel."* It is a call to accept Jesus Christ in our lives and allow Him to bring us to a growing relationship with His Father. Responding to it will inevitably lead to the love of neighbour. Such is the purpose and spirit of Ash Wednesday and Lent.

May our reception of ashes lead us to authentic practice of penance in response to the Church's call to "turn away from sin and believe the good news." May we, in this way, truly prepare ourselves for a powerful experience of Easter!

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Genesis 9:8-15; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:12-15

Floods are an annual occurrence in Malaysia, usually from November of one year to February of the next. Given such floods, one may call to question God's promise in today's first reading: *"The waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all things of flesh."*

To understand the meaning of God's promise, especially vis-à-vis floods, it is necessary to take into account the author's intention in composing the story. Here, the situation preceding the flood must be borne in mind. Sin was deep-seated and rampant then, as Gen. 6:5-6 asserts, *"YHWH saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth; and that the thoughts in his heart fashioned nothing but wickedness all day long. YHWH regretted having made man on the earth and His heart grieved."* But one man found favour with God; he was Noah, a man of integrity (Gen. 6:9).

The story attributes the worldwide flood to God as a punishment for the wickedness of the entire humankind, except for one man, Noah. In justice, God saved Noah and his family through an ark. In this light, the story was told to highlight God's justice which called for meting out what one deserved. But in actual fact, humankind was responsible for the consequence of their sin. For God had warned them that disobedience to Him would result in death. He gave this warning when He told the man whom He had created in His own image and put in the garden: *"You may eat indeed of all the trees in the garden. Nevertheless, of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you are not to eat, for on that day you eat of it you shall most surely die"* (Gen. 2:17). So, the flood symbolized humankind's self-destruction for sinning against God.

But it was followed by a covenant of which the rainbow was a sign. In that covenant, God promised not to destroy sinful humankind, but to save them. That promise was given in symbolic terms: no flood would destroy all flesh again.

How was God to save sinful humankind? The second reading gives us the answer: *"Christ Himself, innocent though He was, died once for sins, died for the guilty, to lead us to God."* It then explicitly brings in the story of Noah. It affirms that Noah built *"an ark which saved a small group of eight people by water"* as *"the spirits refused to believe"*. In this way, the second reading interprets the

story of Noah in the light of the salvation Jesus Christ brought to sinful humankind through His death and resurrection. It sees the floodwaters as a type of the water of baptism by which a person appropriates Christ's destruction of sin and death by His cross and bestowal of life through His resurrection. In the light of this Christian interpretation of the flood story, the ark that saved Noah and his family is a type of Christ's cross – the ark by which all sinful humankind is saved.

The cross of Jesus Christ by right should have been ours, for it was the death penalty for our sins. But in His mercy, God sent His Son to take our place to pay this penalty. To this end, the Son of God became a human person in total solidarity with us. The first part of today's Gospel drives home to us this solidarity of Jesus with us. Led by the Spirit, He went into the wilderness where He was tempted by Satan for forty days. He was like Noah battered by the floods for forty days. Yes, like us, He faced temptations, battered by the trials of life. But, unlike us, He did not sin but was totally faithful to God His Father and fully paid the death penalty on the cross, all on our behalf.

It would be utterly foolish for us to ignore Jesus and the love and mercy of His Father that He brought to all of us, sinful humankind. For, that would mean rejection of forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Its consequence is self-destruction. Saving sinful humankind from this consequence underpins the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness and His call in the Gospel: *"The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News."*

The kingdom of God symbolized by the calm and the life of Noah and his family after the flood is the reality of salvation marked by eternal peace and life. To enjoy it, we need to turn away from sin and turn to God. To this end, Jesus is calling us to repent. In responding to His call, we are moving away from self-destruction symbolized by the floods in Noah's time to sharing in God's life brought by Jesus Christ through His cross symbolized by Noah's ark. Let us sustain our response with determination throughout this Lent and beyond.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Genesis 22:1-2,9-13,15-18; Romans 8:31-34; Mark 9:2-10

An essential mark of Christianity is the assurance of God's total and unconditional love for humankind and His call for the same love from them.

The first reading taken from the Book of Genesis narrates the story of Abraham responding to God's demand of the sacrifice of his son, Isaac. Abraham's willingness to let go of such a precious son is moving. The story underscores the preciousness of the son by repeating that Isaac was not just Abraham's son, but "*his only son and the son whom he loved*".

Abraham's obedience was deeply rooted in his unqualified trust in God. God had promised to give him descendants as many as the stars in the sky. His one and only son, Isaac, could give him only a faint hope of the fulfillment of such an outlandish promise. Yet, God still asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

At this point, Abraham could have accused God of being totally unreasonable and self-contradictory. But he did not. On the contrary, he willingly carried out God's command. That was his total and unconditional offering to God. It was not just an offering of his son. It was an offering of himself: his own thinking and innate desire, his posterity and his future. Although at that moment, Abraham could not figure out how God's promise to him of countless descendants was going to work out, he left it all in His hands.

On God's side, there was also a total and unconditional willingness to accede to humankind's demand of His Son. Indeed, as the second reading tells us, "*God did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up to benefit us all... Christ died for us.*" Jesus Christ is God's Son, God's only Son, the Son whom He loved, as the Gospel reading asserts. God sacrificed His Son for us, fallen humankind. His Son in turn emptied Himself of His own divinity in order to take on human nature and become man, like every one of us. He was crucified. His death on the cross was His sacrifice of His human life for fallen humankind that all might have life.

The second reading assures us that Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus' transfiguration on the top of a mountain was a foretaste of His resurrection. Peter, James and John were privileged to be given a share of Jesus' experience. In that spectacular manifestation of glory, God the Father bore testimony to

Jesus through a voice from the cloud that proclaimed: *"This is My Son, the Beloved. Listen to Him."*

There is a parallelism between the two stories narrated in the first and the Gospel readings. Jesus' transfiguration was His Father's assurance of His resurrection. It was His foretaste of His resurrection. In the case of Isaac, when his father stretched out his hand with a knife to slaughter him, the angel of the Lord intervened. He stopped Abraham from going any further on these grounds: *"I know you fear God. You have not refused me your son, your only son."* In God's eyes, Isaac had already been sacrificed. Stopping Abraham from killing him amounted to God raising him from the dead.

For Abraham, Isaac was God's gift to him in his old age and so, he was ready to return him to God. His dramatic and traumatic experience of what happened at the sacrifice of his son Isaac was a reaffirmation that God was in control of life and death as well as of his future. God would indeed bring His promise to fulfillment. Thus, after Abraham had passed the test, God renewed His promise to him: *"I will make your descendants as many as the stars of heaven and the grains of sand on the seashore. Your descendants shall gain possession of the gates of their enemies."*

For us, life is God's precious gift of love. His sacrifice of His own and only Son Jesus and Jesus' self-emptying of His divinity to become Man, coupled with His self-sacrifice on the cross, reaffirm His unconditional love for us. His love assures us of our future. No doubt, we will die one day; but following that, we will rise to life, to eternal life in God's kingdom which is a sharing in God's own life.

Sharing in God's own life means becoming His children. We do not have to wait till after our death to become God's children. For God in His love made us His children by the power of the Holy Spirit at our baptism. There, God pronounced the words He uttered of Jesus at His transfiguration: *"You are My beloved son/daughter."* Thus, just as Jesus' transfiguration was His foretaste of His resurrection, our baptism was our foretaste of our future resurrection to eternal life. By offering us His Son Jesus, God gave us life. Are we prepared to live this life for God? By offering us His Son to give us life, God made us His top priority. Are we ready to make God our top priority in our lives?

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:22-25; John 2:13-25

God seemed to be foolish when He bothered to create humankind in His own image and relate with them. For they turned against Him.

Relationship with God leads to relationship with other human beings at every level of human existence. It underpins every form and level of community, from the family to the global village. Every human person needs this relationship to grow.

The first reading taken from the Book of Exodus affirms this link between the two types of relationship in the Decalogue – the Ten Commandments. God gave the people of Israel this Decalogue when He sealed a covenant with them on Mt. Sinai. In that covenant, He chose them to be His people and He bound Himself to them to be their God. By instituting them as a people, He made them into a community. This obliged them to live in relationship with one another. In His freedom God tied this community relationship to their relationship with Him.

The Decalogue opens with a very important declaration by God: *“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”* The declaration was of God’s identity in terms of His mission for the people of Israel. They had been slaves of the Egyptians for four hundred and thirty years. Through Moses God had liberated them from this slavery. His purpose was to bring them to the land He had promised Abraham their ancestor to give them. As He led them to the promised land, He sealed a covenant with them at Sinai.

God’s part in the covenant was to be present among the people to protect them and provide their needs. Eventually, He would lead them into the promised land. The people’s part was to be faithful to Him by keeping the Decalogue that He gave them. They were to take Him alone as their only God and worship Him on the Sabbath day. His name was so sacred that they must not take it in vain. This was their relationship with Him. But God wanted this relationship with Him to bear on their relationship with one another. In the second part of the Decalogue, He stipulated the people’s obligations towards one another. In this way, they would live as His people in good relationship with one another and with Him.

Unfortunately, in their history, the people had broken the covenant many times over. So, God promised them another covenant – the new covenant. He sealed this covenant with the blood of His Son Jesus Christ. In this covenant God offered salvation not just to the Jews but to all humankind. He wanted all peoples to be not just His people, but His children.

Today's Gospel episode touches on this covenant sealed by Christ with His blood on the cross. Here, Jesus talks about the covenant in symbolic terms: *"Destroy this sanctuary and in three days I will raise it up."* He is referring to His death and resurrection by which He will take away the sins of the world. For Him, the profanation of the Temple, His Father's house, through business transactions is a sign of the sinfulness of the Jews and all humankind. Instead of using the Temple only for the worship of the one true God, businessmen and money changers take opportunity of the people's need for animals to offer sacrifices to make money. In this way, they are defiling the Temple.

The defiled Temple needs to be purified. So, Jesus drives all the business people and money changers out of the Temple. His action has a symbolic significance tied to what His Father has sent Him into the world to do – to purify all humankind from sin. His challenge to the people to destroy the Temple and His claim to build it up in three days are a symbolic affirmation of His death and resurrection, the cleansing mission His Father has given Him.

Clearly, Jesus is talking about the temple of His body. Its destruction refers to His crucifixion during which He will shed litres of blood till His death. Three days after His death, He will rise from the dead. By this death and resurrection of His, Jesus will seal the new Covenant that God has promised. With this, humankind's broken relationship with God and with one another will be restored. Thus cleansed, they will have life again and the human community will become God's family.

Yes, the crucified Jesus sealed the new covenant and brought us back to God His Father. Those without faith see it as madness and judge God to be foolish. To the Jews the crucified Jesus is an obstacle to faith. But we believers see Jesus' crucifixion and death as a manifestation of His power and wisdom, as well as a reconciliation with God and with fellowmen. In this reconciliation, every human person becomes a child of God and enjoys a better life. For sure, *"God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom."*

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

2 Chronicles 36:14-16,19-23; Ephesians 2:4-10; John 3:14-21

Have we ever thought how valuable we are to God? If not, today's liturgy of the word invites us to do so. The second reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians portrays us as *"God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it."* Two important acts of God are affirmed in this portrait: creation and salvation.

"We are God's work of art." St. Paul drew on the creation story in the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis to make this pronouncement. Verse 26 of this chapter presents God's decision, *"Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves."* Its supplement of "image" with "likeness" serves to emphasise the value God intends to give to His human creatures. Verse 27 makes God's intention stronger in its portrayal of His execution of His decision: *"God created man in the image of Himself, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them."* The repetition of God's act of creating not just the male but also the female human persons in His image serves to emphasise the value God deliberately bestowed on them. The image of God makes *"God's work of art"* truly priceless.

Following that, Gen. 1 presents God entrusting to His human creatures the stewardship of the whole universe and the world which He had created. What does all this mean? In essence, it means that God shared His own life and faculties with His human creatures. They were to take care of the universe and the world. This was the position God accorded them over His entire creation. In this way, God shared with them His own authority over His creation. Indeed, this is how precious human beings are in God's eyes.

God created us to live a good life in the universe and the world. Fidelity to His intention would ensure this good life for us. Unfortunately, we were not satisfied with just sharing in God's life and faculties. We wanted to take total possession of it and become gods unto ourselves. That's the story of the eating of the forbidden fruit of the knowledge of good and evil – the total knowledge that belonged to God alone. By that act of disobedience or even rebellion against God, we automatically lost the image of God in us. We lost the share of God's life and faculties He bestowed on us.

What did God do when this happened? He immediately promised salvation through the seed of a woman – that is, through Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man and born of the Virgin Mary. In Jesus Christ God restored to us His image we had lost. That was our salvation. In the second reading, St. Paul affirms it through the second part of the statement quoted at the beginning of this homily: *“created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it.”*

The Son of God became Man in Jesus to be in solidarity with all of us fallen humankind so as to take our place in paying the death penalty due to our disobedience, our rebellion. He was crucified. He was put to violent death on the cross. With that death penalty paid, life – a participation in God’s life – was restored to all of us fallen humankind.

This is affirmed in the Gospel: *“The Son of Man must be lifted up... so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in Him.”* There is a necessity here – expressed by the word “must”. That was a divine necessity: God felt the need and did all that was required of Him to restore His image to all of us who had lost it through our disobedience. The sacrifice of His Son was what was required. God indeed offered Him wholeheartedly. Indeed, this shows how immensely valuable we are to God.

If we are of such value to God, it was because of His love for us, His work of art. Again, this is what the Gospel affirms: *“For God loved the world (that is, humankind who had sinned) so much that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not be lost but may have eternal life.”* With this loving act of God, we now have life once again and, as the second reading says, we have been *“given a place with Him in heaven, in Christ Jesus.”*

Given this reminder of how immensely valuable we are in God’s eyes, we each need to ask ourselves: Do I appreciate and treasure my value before God? If so, how have I been living my life – in close relationship with Him or not being bothered about Him?

Lent is a time to examine ourselves and to come back to God. We are already halfway through it. Let us not miss this time of grace and accept His salvation – the restoration of a share in His own life. What a privilege to be *“God’s work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it!”*

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:7-9; John 12:20-33

The prospect of an impending death naturally gives rise to anguish and fear. Many thoughts flash across the dying person's mind.

In today's Gospel, Jesus foresees the imminence of His death in the hands of influential and powerful leaders. For, these are implacably opposed to His claims and mission. They have been seeking His death and such a death will certainly be a violent one. A true human person that He is, Jesus experiences anguish. He very honestly voices it out, *"Now my soul is troubled."*

But in the same breath, Jesus reviews His own life. He has dedicated it totally to His Father's will to grant eternal life to all fallen humankind. In His faith, He sees His death as the *"hour for Him to be glorified"*, for He has fully accomplished His Father's will. Through the analogy of a *"wheat grain dying"* and *"yielding a rich harvest"*, He asserts His life-giving death. Through a voice from heaven, His Father endorses His fidelity to His will in these words: *"I have glorified it and will glorify it again."*

The Gospel passage begins with the Greeks requesting to see Jesus. They represent the non-Jewish peoples of the world. The Gospel ends with Jesus' assertion, *"When I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all men (all people) to Myself."* This is an assertion of universal salvation willed by the Father and accomplished by Jesus through His death on the cross. The coming of the Greeks points to its fulfilment. Indeed, the Father's plan of salvation is universal. Jesus' mission is therefore also universal. His accomplishment of His mission, therefore, has a universal impact.

With these thoughts in mind Jesus is ready to face His impending crucifixion. Thus, immediately after very honestly sharing His anxiety about His death, He confidently articulates His readiness in these words: *"What shall I say: 'Father, save Me from this hour?' But it was for this very reason that I have come to this hour."* A review of His life in obedience to His Father's will leads Him to freely accept His current impending death. The coming of the Greeks in search of Him and the Father's voice endorse His decision and assure Him of its universal consequence.

Jesus' discourse in response to the Greeks requesting to see Him offers us many significant lessons. Three are singled out here.

The first is the universality of God's will of salvation. God's salvation is universal because sin is universal. All peoples have sinned against God. Out of His unconditional love for them, God wills to save them all. No one is excluded. His plan involved His Son becoming a human person in Jesus to be able to pay the death penalty due to the sins of all human persons. As a real man, He was to be born to a concrete family and race: the family of Mary betrothed to Joseph with Jewish ethnicity. But the concrete individuality of Jesus was intended to have a universal extension, meaning that He was to die on behalf of all humankind. Everyone of us has therefore been saved by Jesus Christ through His death on the cross and stands to receive the eternal life He has brought by being *"lifted up from the earth"*.

This leads to the second point. The eternal life brought by Jesus calls for our personal decision to accept it. This means everyone must personally decide to *"follow"* Jesus, that is, to become His disciples. Following Jesus means taking on His attitude: to live in obedience to His Father's will. In today's Gospel, Jesus articulates this attitude thus: *"Anyone who loves his life loses it; anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for the eternal life."* This means living one's life on earth with eternal life as its goal.

The third point concerns how to face death. Living in accordance with His attitude must necessarily put one in the same frame of mind as that of Jesus when death comes one's way. With this frame of mind, one is led to review one entire life as a living out of God's will. From this perspective, death is seen as an accomplishment of God's will. This sense fills one with the confidence of receiving eternal life. Like Jesus then, one freely accepts death as a passage to it. Such confidence outweighs the anguish and worries an impending death gives rise to.

As Holy Week draws near, the Liturgy of the Word draws our attention to Jesus' universal saving mission to bring eternal life to all fallen humankind. His death is not an end of His mission but rather His total accomplishment of His Father's will. It yields eternal life. All of us follow Jesus because we want this life He won for us. Our desire demands us to live our earthly lives with eternal life as our goal. Our hope is that at the hour of our death we will be able to confidently make a firm decision to pass from our earthly life to the eternal life in God's kingdom.

PASSION SUNDAY

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

Palm Sunday commemorates the Lord's entry into Jerusalem on a donkey's back over a path covered with cloaks and tree branches. He was accompanied by a cheering crowd acclaiming Him as *"the Son of David who comes in the name of the Lord."* The Lord's entry into Jerusalem marked the start of His trial and condemnation to death on the cross. So Palm Sunday is also called Passion Sunday. It starts Holy Week in the Church's liturgical calendar. Our attention is thus focused on the Lord's suffering that ended with His death on the cross.

From the wealth today's readings, two attitudes manifested by the Lord are striking: His love for all of us and His humility. Both these attitudes are tied together. His love was such that He was prepared to embrace humility and humiliation to save us from the pangs of eternal death due to our sins.

The second reading affirms that the Lord Jesus is divine. He is divine because He is the Son of God. But *"He emptied Himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are, and being as all men are, He was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross."* Why did the Son of God choose to become Man and die on the cross? There is only one reason: He loved us too much to allow us to perish in our sins.

His love for us was unreserved and unconditional. He was prepared to come down to our level, the level of sinful men and women, to relate and interact with us, and to lead us home to His Father's house. Even when He met with objection and opposition from us, He did not give up. When eventually we decided to put Him to death on the cross, He still embraced us in love. That was His unconditional love for us. It motivated Him not to cling to His divine status but empty Himself of it in order to win us back for His Father. When arrested, tried and condemned to death, He did not abandon His mission in order to save His own human life. He accepted the pains and sorrows that came His way.

The long passion narrative that we heard in the reading from Mark's Gospel underscores this love and humility of the Lord. Judas, one of His closest friends, betrayed Him by leading a group of armed men to arrest Him. At this point, *"all His disciples deserted Him and ran away."* Peter whom He had appointed to be head of this circle of friends followed Him at a distance only to deny Him three times later. The chief priests and elders were for putting Him to death and

sought the approval of Pilate, the Roman governor. When he hesitated and offered Jesus' accusers a choice between Him and Barabbas for release, they chose the latter. They incited the crowd to demand that Jesus be crucified. The crowd was likely the same people who had acclaimed Him "Son of David" during His entry to Jerusalem. Pilate gave in to the crowd's demand. A great irony was enacted: Jesus the innocent one was condemned to death; Barabbas one of the *"rioters who had committed murder"* was freed.

It is good to find time throughout this week to read the passion narrative a few times over. As we do so, let us try to feel the Lord's sufferings and pain – physical for sure, but emotional and spiritual as well. He experienced betrayal, abandonment and denial by His close disciples, and was very conscious that He had been condemned to death for His innocence and good work. On the cross, He even felt the absence even of God His Father and *"He cried out in a loud voice, 'My God, my God, why have you deserted me?'"* What humiliation! What injustice! What pain and what sorrow! What loneliness! But He embraced all this because He loved you and me.

Let us enter and spend Holy Week with a profound experience and appreciation of the Lord's love for us personally. Let us come to grips with His humility rooted in this unconditional and unreserved love of His. May this experience lead us to respond positively and wholeheartedly to the Lord's call to us to *"keep awake and pray"* and *"get up and go"* to do the Father's will whatever it may cost us. In our experience of the Lord's unconditional love for us, let us bear witness to Him in line with the last line of today's responsorial psalm: *"I will tell of Your name to my brethren and praise You where they are assembled."*

HOLY THURSDAY

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

The world order intended by God at the beginning of creation was adversely impacted and distorted by human sins. Created *“in God’s image and likeness”*, the man and the woman were originally *“one flesh”*. Solidarity and unity were the order God created and rooted in His image He bestowed on His human creatures.

Through their sin of eating together *“the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”*, the man and woman broke their union and solidarity. As a consequence, the woman would *“yearn for the man”*, but he would *“lord it over”* her. Oppression and exploitation replaced the world order intended by God. God’s unconditional love undergirded the greatest paradox in history. Radically disobeyed and offended, God forgave and worked out a plan to save His human creatures from sin and its destructive order. Today’s readings illustrate this.

The first reading from the Book of Exodus narrates the institution of the Passover meal to be eaten annually by the Israelites. Its purpose was to commemorate the night of their liberation from Egyptian slavery. For too long they had been oppressed and enslaved by the Egyptian Pharaoh and people. Plague after plague failed to secure their liberation. As a final recourse, God sent an angel of death to slay the first-born of the oppressors’ families and cattle.

Every family of the people of Israel was asked to kill, roast and eat a male lamb a year old without blemish. Its blood smeared on the two doorposts and the lintel of their house served to mark it as an Israelite house. Seeing it the angel of death would pass by that house and spare the first-born of the family in it. The plague so frightened the Egyptian Pharaoh and his people that they let the Israelites go free. These then regained their dignity and rights to become a free nation. God’s salvation consisted in freeing the powerless from the powerful.

The annual celebration of the Passover serves as a memorial of the Israelites’ liberation not just in the sense of mentally recalling the manifestation of God’s power to bring it about, but also making it a present experience without repeating it. This is the very special meaning of *“memorial”* in the Bible.

The Gospel this evening sets Jesus’ washing of His disciples’ feet in the context of His last supper with them. It was their Passover meal. Jesus brought its

significance further: the liberation was not just from the world disorder but more from the sin that brought it about. It was a liberation from Satan's slavery.

Jesus overturned sinful world order by washing His disciples' feet. In the world order marked by sin, slaves were oppressed by their masters and inhumanely made to serve them. Jesus, Lord and Master, did the opposite: He washed His disciples' feet. In this way, He restored the dignity and rights of the slaves. For sure, His disciples were not His slaves, for He would never make them so. But still He was their "*Master and Lord*". By His paradoxical gesture, He crossed the message that they had God-given dignity, as they were created in God's image.

Of course, Satan the lord of sin was all out to stop Jesus toppling the sinful world order he had brought about. To this end, he exploited a close disciple. The Gospel notes this thus: "*The devil had already put it into the mind of Judas Iscariot son of Simon to betray Jesus.*" But Jesus did not give in. He proceeded with His washing of His disciples' feet, to restore the order intended by His Father.

Satan too did not give up. He drew Peter to turn down Jesus' gesture on the grounds of the prevailing world order. But Jesus answered Peter, "*If I do not wash you, you can have nothing in common with me.*" In the light of His overturning the distorted world order, Jesus' words to Peter challenged him to make a decision: be with Him to implement the order intended by God His Father or remain in the prevalent world order rooted in sin.

After washing His disciples' feet, Jesus gave them a very clear command: "*If I, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet.*" This is a command to live in the order intended by God. The order is built on respect for human dignity and equality translated into mutual love after the love of Jesus. Jesus has articulated this command to love thus: "*Love one another as I have loved you.*" He has also set this love as a mark of Christian discipleship: "*By this all men are to know you for My disciples: the love you have for one another.*"

As faithful disciples of Jesus, our Lord and Master, we are called to take on His attitude and imitate His example. We must love one another as He has loved us. In this way, we go against sinful world order to uphold the order from God by respecting the dignity given by God, lost by sin and restored by Jesus Christ.

GOOD FRIDAY

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

“Might is right.” This mentality is a consequence of the disruption of God’s created order by sin. The way to secure might consists in grabbing powers and wealth at the expense of many poor, helpless and innocent people.

The event we commemorate today is a classic incidence of this sinful mentality and order. For all the good that He had taught and done, Jesus was condemned to death and crucified. The full passion narrative from John’s Gospel underscores this tragedy. For Caiaphas, the high priest that year, *“it is better for one man to die for the people”*. He saw Jesus’ charismatic leadership as a threat to peace and social order. With a growing crowd of followers, He might start a costly rebellion that would draw the wrath of the Roman authority on the Jewish population.

Caiaphas had convinced the chief priests and guards to demand the crucifixion of Jesus. These made their demand when Pilate, finding Him innocent, sought to release Jesus. But they strongly backed up their demand at first on religious grounds: *“We have a law, and according to the law He ought to die, because He has claimed to be the Son of God.”* They then offered a political reason that threatened Pilate’s position: *“If you set him free you are no friend of Caesar’s; anyone whom makes himself king is defying Caesar.”* Pilate felt pressured to give in to the demands of the chief priests and guards to have the innocent Jesus crucified.

God appeared to be passive as His Son was subjected to such humiliation and undeserved penalty. But in reality, He was turning the tragedy into a way of restoring the world order He had created. The essence of the order He had created was *“one flesh”*. That oneness was not just about marriage, but the family that marriage was to bring forth. Ultimately it had to do with the entire human family. Love is the underpinning force of this oneness. Love respects and treats the other as equal in dignity to oneself.

This is one significance of Jesus on the cross giving His mother and beloved disciple to each other as mother and son: *“Woman, this is your son. This is your mother.”* Jesus’ words were a powerful declaration that His violent death on the cross brought about a new family – a family based on fidelity to God’s will and therefore love. This means, Jesus’ death on the cross restored the order

that God had intended for the man and the woman whom He created *“in His own image and likeness”* and on whom He had *“breathed His own breath”* (cf. Gen. 1 and 2).

All that restored order was an essential part of the *“truth”* Jesus talked to Pilate about in His trial: *“I was born for this; I came into the world for this; to bear witness to the truth.”* The truth was about His kingdom which *“was not of this world”* because its order is indelibly marked by love modelled on His own love: *“Love one another as I have loved you.”* That was why His men did not fight *“to prevent Him from being surrendered to the Jews”*. On the cross, He manifested the infinite depth of His love for all fallen humankind. In that love, He created a family in the order God intended for all humankind.

Jesus’ death on the cross accomplished His Father’s will. Thus, He claimed, *“It is accomplished.”* Then *“bowing His head He gave up the spirit”*. That was His own spirit. For sure, it referred to His last breath. But it also pointed to the Holy Spirit whom He had promised to send to His disciples. Indeed, at His death, Jesus breathed out His Holy Spirit on the new family He instituted, just like God breathed His own breath into the man He had created. The Holy Spirit would be the power to foster and sustain the new order God intended for His human creatures. In this way, the human family would live in love and be one. In reality the human family would be the family of God Himself.

World order based on the principle that *“might is right”* has made countless people poor, deprived them of their rights and left them powerless. It goes against the original order intended by God. God restored His original order through His own Son Jesus Christ suffering the sinful order in solidarity with its victims. Over and above that, in His unconditional love which underpins the restored order, Jesus secured His Father’s forgiveness for all fallen humankind, including perpetrators of oppression and injustice. As He hanged on the cross, Jesus showed His unconditional love and invited everyone to His Father’s family which He had accomplished through His death on the cross by breathing His Spirit on them.

Each one needs to respond to Jesus’ invitation personally. A positive response means acceptance of love modelled on His love as one’s way of life. Let each one ask himself/herself: *“What is my response?”*

EASTER VIGIL

Genesis 22:1-18; Exodus 14:15-15:1; Ezekiel 36:16-28; Romans 6:3-11;

Mark 16 :1-7

Yesterday, we remembered and contemplated the violent death of Jesus on the cross. Tonight we celebrate His glorious resurrection to life.

At His death on the cross, Jesus seemed to be helpless and powerless, totally defeated by His enemies. He was a victim of a wrong principle rooted in a sinful mentality: “might is right”. Jesus died a violent death in the hands of the powerful, despite His innocence. Yet, in reality, He made a free decision to accept His suffering and death in solidarity with the countless innocent people victimized by those who had might because they were in power.

Three days later, Jesus rose to life. By rising from the dead, Jesus brought about liberation from a sinful world order. He restored the order willed by God of which love is the unmistakable sign. Love yields respect and acceptance of one another. Love is ever ready to forgive and render service wholeheartedly.

Ever since its breach by sinful human beings, God had been working out the restoration of His created order step by step. The first step involved Abraham. Tonight’s story of Abraham’s call to sacrifice his son Isaac carries this aspect of God’s work. Child sacrifice to gods was the sinful order of the patriarch’s day. Parents could their power and authority over their children to sacrifice them to appease their gods. Abraham could have been influenced by this sinful custom to sacrifice Isaac as an act of obedience to God.

The story presents Abraham’s intention as God testing the patriarch. But in actual reality God ultimately sought to put a stop to this sinful practice. So, the moment Abraham was just about to slay Isaac, God sent an angel to stop him and gave a ram to replace the human victim. Through this event, God crossed the message: human life is precious for every person has been created in the image and likeness of God, as the reading from the creation story in Genesis affirms. The practice of child sacrifice in the patriarch’s time belonged to the sinful order. God was now stopping it to start to restore the order He intended and had created.

The exodus story is another step in God working out His plan. The Israelites, Abraham’s descendants, were slaves in Egypt for about 400 years. God raised

Moses to liberate them from this inhumane state rooted in the sinful order of the world. Scourged with the plague of the first-born of the Egyptian families and cattle, Pharaoh finally let the Israelites go free. The mighty parting of the waters of the sea to form a dry passage for these people to cross it to freedom was a powerful manifestation of God intervening in their favour. The return of these waters to drown and destroy the powerful Egyptians with their chariots signified God destroying oppressive powers that represent sinful world order. The Israelites' crossing to freedom to eventually enter and settle in the Promised Land as a free nation signified the restoration of the order willed by God.

God continued to work out the restoration of His intended order. To fully accomplish it, He sent His Son Jesus into our world. By humbly and selflessly submitting Himself to the violence inflicted on Him by powers acting in sinful world order, Jesus highlighted the injustice and horrific consequence of this sinful order. At the same time, He manifested the way of the order willed by God: non-violence and forgiveness, underpinned by love. By His death on the cross Jesus actually laid down His life for all sinners, thus manifesting His unconditional and unlimited love for all humankind. By His resurrection, Jesus gained victory over sin and death; He showed the power of love and thus the order willed by God over sinful order. He restored the image of God human beings were created in and lost through their sin. He assured there was life in God's order.

Tonight's Gospel presents a young man in a white robe announcing to the women who had gone to the tomb to anoint Jesus: *"You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified; He has risen; He is not here."* In terms of world order, this announcement amounts to setting an irreconcilable opposition between that willed by God and that caused by sin: the former cannot be found in the latter. Love leads to life; oppression brings death. The order willed by God is bubbling with love and life; sinful world order is filled with selfishness and leads to destruction.

The Lord's generosity to us is clearly manifested in the gift of His own and only Son Jesus Christ in order to bring life to us. Christ's generosity to us is clearly manifested in His death on the cross for us. His resurrection trumpets His victory over sin and death. Let us choose the order of love and rise to life with Christ.

EASTER SUNDAY

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

Today we celebrate the great feast of the Lord's resurrection. The Gospel does not give us a powerful description of this glorious resurrection of the Lord, but rather presents His empty tomb. The empty tomb meant different things to different disciples of Jesus who saw it.

Mary saw the empty tomb and thought, *"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb."* Her concern was, *"Where have they put Him?"* She had expected to see the dead body of the Lord in the tomb. That expectation of hers closed her mind to any other experience or any explanation of the empty tomb other than a natural one – the body had been removed. Her spontaneous response was to run to Simon Peter, the head of the apostles, to report the matter to him.

Upon hearing Mary's story, Simon Peter ran to the tomb with the disciple whom Jesus loved. Their running indicated the urgency and importance of the matter. Removal or theft of the Lord's body was a big issue. The two disciples wanted to see and assess the situation for themselves. When they entered the tomb, they found the situation exactly as Mary had reported. But what did they make of it?

The Gospel does not say anything about Simon Peter's reaction. This leaves us to wonder what he made out of the situation. Was Mary right in thinking that the body had been removed? Or was there something else? Of the disciple Jesus loved, the Gospel says, *"He saw and he believed."* What did he see? The tomb was empty. What did he believe? The concluding verse of the Gospel drops a strong hint: *"Till this moment they had failed to understand the teaching of the scripture, that He must rise from the dead."* Jesus' beloved disciple believed that the Lord had risen from the dead. Going back to the scripture was an important exercise. It highlighted the scripture as the word of God and His fidelity to it. Indeed, Jesus' paschal mystery, that is, His death and resurrection, was no accident. It happened in fulfilment of God's determined intention to save all fallen humankind through it. God was absolutely faithful to His word.

In the light of these different reactions of the Lord's disciples when they saw His tomb empty, we can trace their journey of faith in Christ. From Mary's natural view that the Lord's body had been removed the journey moved towards

further speculation or perhaps even puzzled mind. Recalling the Scriptures led to faith that the Lord had risen.

With this faith, Mary, Peter and the beloved disciple could no longer remain at the site of the empty tomb. For the tomb was the place of the dead, while the Lord had now risen and left it. They must move on and now live a new life charged with faith in the presence of the risen Lord. They must rise from their old thinking and way of life. The old was marked with a lot of misunderstanding; a good example of it was Peter's refusal of Jesus' gesture of washing his feet. It was also marked with fear; Peter manifested it in his triple denial of the Lord.

The new life consisted in proclaiming the good news of the Lord's resurrection. After all her wrong opinion, the risen Lord appeared to Mary and called her by name. Recognising the Lord, she was asked to share with the disciples that she had seen Him. The new life was a life of love. Thus, the risen Lord articulated in His triple question to Peter: *"Do you love Me?"* Each answer given by Peter led to the Lord's command to him: *"Feed my lambs/sheep"* (cf. Jn. 21:15-17).

Proclamation of the Lord's resurrection and love constitute the new way of life of Christ's disciples. In fact, they are inseparably linked. Love identifies Christ's disciples: *"By this all people will know that you are My disciples, the love you have for one another"* (Jn. 13:35). It necessarily points to Christ and is a proclamation of His good news.

The disciples' mutual love is to be modeled on Christ's own love, as He commands: *"Love one another as I have loved you"* (Jn. 15:12). It must translate into selfless service expressed in metaphorical terms: *"wash one another's feet"* (Jn. 13:14) and *"feed my lambs"*.

Love shown in concrete forms of service to neighbour is love for God. It is an inevitable consequence of faith. Faith is empty without love. Just as the risen Lord left the tomb, the place of the dead, in order to live His new life, so we ought also to leave the tomb of empty faith in order to live the full life Christ has brought us by His resurrection. Love translates faith into concrete actions and identifies us as Christians. In this way, it is a proclamation of the risen Lord.

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 4:32-35; 1 John 5:1-6; John 20:19-31

"You believe because you can see." The risen Jesus declared this of Thomas. But the declaration articulates a common human tendency.

The Gospel reading for Easter Sunday presents the struggle Mary of Magdala, Peter and the beloved disciple went through to come to terms with the significance of the empty tomb as a sign that the Lord Jesus had risen. Today's Gospel narrates Thomas' struggle. He refused to believe without visible and tangible proof: *"Unless I see the holes that the nails made in His hands and can put my finger into the hole they made, and unless I can put my hand into His side, I refuse to believe."*

For sure, many listeners to the story today will readily empathize with Thomas. For, rising from real death to real life is humanly deemed impossible: therefore, the demand for physical proof of the Lord's resurrection. The risen Lord met Thomas' demand, point by point, and said, *"Doubt no longer but believe."* The doubting Thomas made his profession of faith: *"My Lord and my God."*

The Gospel narrates the risen Lord's earlier apparition to His disciples in the absence of Thomas. He showed them His wounds as well. For He knew they too needed physical proof that He had risen. In the light of this, what He declared to Thomas was also meant for the other disciples. By the same token, the mission He entrusted these disciples to forgive sins was also meant for Thomas.

The mission to forgive sins was an extension of the Lord's mission. For He was sent in love to bring life to all fallen humankind (cf. Jn. 3:16-17). He accomplished His mission through His death and resurrection. It was on behalf of sinful humankind that He died on the cross to pay the death penalty due to sin. In this way, He obtained forgiveness of sins for all sinful humanity. With their sins forgiven, humankind was now in a proper disposition to receive eternal life. Through His resurrection to life, Jesus made eternal life available to all. His greeting of peace, *"Peace be with you"*, repeated three times in today's Gospel, asserts this double reality: forgiveness of sins and bestowal of eternal life. For, peace in the Bible means total well-being. In the context of salvation, total well-being amounts to eternal life. The mission the risen Lord entrusted to His disciples was to offer forgiveness of sins so as to make them disposed for

eternal life. Eternal life is thus available to all now. A personal decision to accept it is called for: repentance.

Empowered with the Holy Spirit, the disciples went to different towns and even countries to proclaim the good news. More than that, they passed the same mission to their successors. Thus, the good news was handed down from generation to generation. It has now reached our generation as well as the ends of the earth. Today Christians in different nations throughout the world number two billion or more.

The fact that such a huge population has come to believe in the risen Lord without the benefit of physical proof is itself a sign of the reality of the Easter event. But the sign goes deeper than just numbers. It is found in the wounds on the body of the risen Lord. Christians constitute the mystical body of the risen Lord. This mystical body bears wounds; they have been inflicted by persecutions of Christians in some parts of the world.

But what is amazing and bears powerful testimony to the faith that Christ died and rose from the dead is the unshaken fidelity of countless Christians to the risen Lord. Despite the internal sins and scandals many members of the mystical body of Christ remain in the Church, though admittedly some have left. Many of those who suffer persecution remain steadfast to Christ. Their fidelity for sure comes from the Holy Spirit, the Spirit whom the risen Christ breathed on His disciples as He sent them out to offer forgiveness of sins.

The risen Lord contrasted the faith of later disciples of His with those He appeared to in these words: *"Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe."* Today's Christians do not physically see the risen Christ with His bodily wounds. They experience the wounds on His mystical body. Instead of allowing these wounds to block or obstruct their faith, they remain steadfast in it. They thus deserve the beatitude pronounced by the risen Lord. Their joy is as real as that of the disciples who saw the risen Lord with their physical eyes.

We have not physically seen the risen Lord. Nevertheless, let us believe that He truly rose from the dead. Let us accept His forgiveness of sins and bestow of life. In this way, we will have true peace and profound joy as He guaranteed.

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 3:13-15,17-19; 1 John 2:1-5; Luke 25:35-48

While the wounds on the body of the risen Lord served to prove His resurrection, they could also raise questions as to why the glorious and powerful event had not removed them after fulfilling their purpose. Surely, the Lord had a larger picture in mind.

Before attempting to catch a glimpse of this larger picture, let us briefly consider what we are sure of. The Lord meant to allay His disciples' doubt about His resurrection. In this state of doubt, when He appeared to them, so the Gospel says, *"they thought they were seeing a ghost."* The Lord took them to task: *"Why are you so agitated, and why are these doubts rising in your hearts?"* He then showed them His wounds as proof that He really was Jesus their Lord.

But the wounds of the risen Lord may be seen to extend beyond the circle and time of these disciples. They are relevantly applicable to the wounds inflicted on the Church, the mystical body of Christ, from within and from without. These wounds are the damages the sins committed by members, especially leaders, cause to the Church, as well as the injuries persecutors of Christians inflict on the Church.

This extended significance of the Lord's wounds is somewhat affirmed by the call for repentance in all three readings. For repentance is needed where there is sin. Repentance involves turning away from sin to turn to God. Its purpose is to secure forgiveness from God. This is asserted in today's Gospel through its expression *"repentance for the forgiveness of sins"*.

The Gospel also goes on to explain how repentance can achieve forgiveness of sins. It highlights Christ's death and resurrection as the operative mystery to make all this possible. In fact, the scriptures have already proclaimed it. In effect, this means God has so designed it. Why would God bother at all? Sinful humankind could not save themselves from the eternal death they had landed themselves in. So, God sent Christ His Son to save them by His death and resurrection.

Indeed, salvation is now a reality accessible to all. But every person would need to personally accept it. Repentance is the first step toward acceptance. Since

everyone is foreseen to sin, the Gospel announces: *“repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all the nations.”* The call to accept Christ’s salvation needs to be extended to every person in every country and in every generation.

It is for the same reason that in the first reading Peter made the same call for repentance. The context for Peter’s call is the story of the cure of a paralytic beggar by him and John. The miracle drew great excitement and curiosity from the people. Peter sought to explain and assert that it was Jesus whom they had crucified and who rose from the dead who had effected the cure. He excused them for their violent act on grounds that they were ignorant and God had turned their violence into His way of *“carrying out what He had foretold”*. What was called for now was repentance. So, Peter made a strong call: *“Now you must repent and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out.”*

Peter’s miracle of the cure and call to repentance highlight the availability of the salvation and the need to make a personal acceptance of it. The cure of the paralytic by the risen Jesus pointed to the reality and availability of salvation. Everyone now stands to benefit from it provided they personally decide to accept it. The first step of the decision is to repent of their sins.

The second reading from John’s first letter takes the decision further. Its author first asserts the importance of the first step by stating: *“I am writing this, my children, to stop you sinning.”* For sure, John is very concerned about the tendency to sin. He undertakes to do his best to stop it. But he is also realistic enough to see that he may not totally succeed. In his realism, he then offers a very consoling assurance of Christ’s role. He is *“our advocate with the Father”*, meaning to say, He intercedes with His Father for forgiveness of our sins. John is sure of Christ’s advocacy because of His past record: He has proven to be *“the sacrifice that takes our sins away, and not only ours, but the whole world’s”*.

John moves on to the next step of the decision. He affirms, *“Anyone who says, ‘I know Him (= God) and does not keep His commandments is a liar.’”* Christ condenses God’s commandments into one: *“Love one another as I have loved you”* (Jn. 15:12). Love is the way of life of those who repent and receive God’s forgiveness of sins. To this end, everyone is called to do their part by repenting to secure forgiveness and loving to have life.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 4:8-12; 1 John 3:1-2; John 10:11-18

The fear of rejection often prevents standing up for truth and practice of honesty. Yet, truth and honesty are prerequisites for good leadership and good leadership is necessary for the welfare of a family, a community, a nation.

Today's Liturgy of the Word uses two metaphors to portray Jesus' good leadership: "*the Good Shepherd*" (in the Gospel) and "*the stone rejected by the builders*" (in the first reading). Evidently, the first metaphor asserts Him as a good leader, while the second relates to important marks of His leadership.

Indeed, Jesus is a good leader selflessly committed not just to the Jews but to all peoples in the world. In His discourse on the good shepherd, He affirms, "*I lay down My life for My sheep. And there are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and these I have to lead as well.*" The underlined terms point to the inclusive scope of Jesus' leadership.

In the first reading, Peter takes this inclusive scope of Jesus' leadership to a universal level. His proclamation about Jesus vis-à-vis "*all the names of the world given to men*" asserts His leadership for the salvation of all humankind. Peter sees this universal leadership of Jesus Christ the Nazarene manifested in His crucifixion and resurrection. In this paschal mystery of His, He was "*the stone rejected by the builders, but which has become the keystone*".

Who rejected Jesus and why? Clearly, the Jewish powers-that-be, comprising the scribes and Pharisees, the chief priests and elders, rejected Him. They found His leadership a threat to their own positions and power. The threat came from the mounting crowd that Jesus drew. He was appealing to them because He taught the truth and also identified Himself with it: "*I am the truth*" (Jn. 14:6). In His ministry, He honestly pointed out the truth about the leaders of the day. Thus, for example, He told His audience: "*The scribes and Pharisees... preach, but do not practise... lay them (heavy burdens) on men's shoulders but will not move them with their finger.*" (Mt. 23:2-4). He told the scribes and Pharisees straight to their face: "*Alas for you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over sea and land to make a single proselyte, and anyone who becomes one you make twice as fit for hell as you are*" (Mt. 23:15).

The truth is liberating, especially for the masses of the oppressed. Jesus articulated it: *"the truth will set you free"* (Jn. 8:32). The truth yields an inner freedom. That freedom could spell a civil disobedience to the oppressive leaders or even rebellion against the oppression carved into the entire system of leadership. To pre-empt the rebellion, Caiaphas the high priest made an urgent call: *"It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish"* (Jn. 11:50). In response to it, the council of Jewish leaders *"took counsel how to put Him to death"* (Jn. 11:53).

The Jewish leaders succeeded in getting Jesus crucified. But Jesus Himself possessed the inner freedom rooted in the truth that He preached and identified Himself with. He freely accepted His violent death on the cross for the salvation of the world. But on the third day He rose from the dead. With His resurrection, His name became *"the only one by which we can be saved"*. A concrete evidence was the crippled whom Peter cured by His name. Indeed Jesus *"is the stone rejected but has become the keystone"*. He is truly *"the Good Shepherd"* who laid down His life for His sheep.

Jesus the Good Shepherd shares His responsibilities with parents. Parents are shepherds for their children. Like Jesus, they lay down their lives for their children. The sacrifices they make for their children are countless and at times enormous. They freely make these sacrifices for the well-being of their children.

Yet, it is not seldom that parents face rejection from their children, especially when they refuse to meet the latter's wrong demands. For the good of their children, they remain steadfast in their decision. In this way, they firmly pass the right values to their children. Because of their steadfastness, parents become the cornerstone for their children. For the values they inculcate in their children put them in good stead to succeed in life. Also, later when children become parents themselves, they will have their parents as models for their own parenting and pass on to their own children the values they have received from them.

Parents are called to be shepherds to their children. They have Jesus the Good Shepherd for their model. They need to embrace His honesty and truth to be good shepherds. Even if they face rejection, they are to cling on to these qualities of leadership for in doing so, they will turn out to be the keystone for their children.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 9:26-31; 1 John 3:18-24; John 15:1-8

Hate culture has taken root in the world and reared its ugly head in numerous attacks against Afros and Asians which include physical assaults and even murders. “Black lives matter” protests were a strong response against it.

A growing hate culture is a big obstacle to peace, even at its very basic level of absence of conflicts. A hate speech, not to mention a hate action, is bound to give rise to ill feelings and even likely to result in violent retaliation. For, in a society where hate festers, violence begets violence. If, at its basic level, peace cannot work, there is no way its sublime sense of *shalom*, which is the total well-being of every person, can materialize in the world.

Any attempt to foster peace calls for the right mindset. In a climate of hate culture, this requires a change of heart. The change envisages a few steps. The first is a move from hatred to tolerance. Tolerance is the attitude of bearing with a neighbour one does not like for whatever reason. The next move is to shed off this dislike and adopt an attitude of respect for the neighbour on grounds of his/her dignity and rights which the law protects and one must not breach. The final step is to fully accept the neighbour and relate with him/her because he/she is a fellow human person. That relationship opens up to love.

Hate that gives rise to racial and religious discriminations and yields violence and physical killing existed in the time of the apostles. Today’s first reading smacks of such hate mentality. If Saul was feared by the disciples, that is, Christians, in Jerusalem it was because he had been their fierce persecutor. He oversaw the martyrdom of Stephen and secured authority to arrest Christians. All those violent gestures of his came from his radical belief that Christians many of whom were Jews were apostates. They had abandoned Judaism to embrace a heretical faith in Jesus Christ. They had therefore to be arrested, tried and put to death.

But a radical change came about. On his way to Damascus to arrest Christians, Jesus encountered Saul and took him to task. Following this encounter, he had a certain Ananias to lay hands and invoke the Holy Spirit on him. A radical transformation took place and Saul became a fervent Christian evangelist. Barnabas had to explain all this to the Christians in Jerusalem to assure them of Saul’s genuine conversion to Christianity. With this radical change in Saul,

persecution stopped and the churches throughout Judaea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace and growth, as the first reading records.

In that peace, these churches were able to *“build themselves up”* as they were *“filled with the consolation of the Holy Spirit”*. This means they grew in their relationship with one another. That relationship was obviously one of love as asserted in the second reading. That relationship was possible because they knew that God was living in them. It was the Holy Spirit who empowered them to live in a love relationship with God and with one another.

For sure, love yields unity. The unity of the disciples filled with the Holy Spirit is what Christ highlights in the Gospel through His allegory of the vine and the branches. He claims, *“I am the vine, you are the branches.”* Branches are to remain united to the vine to live and *“bear fruit in plenty”*. The fruit is love which Jesus later asserts as identity mark of His disciples. It is borne in plenty the disciples allow Jesus’ *“Father, the vinedresser”* *“to prune”* them with His words.

The metaphor of pruning with Christ’s words conveys the idea of change. Change comes from the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is realised through the words of Jesus which the disciples are to keep precisely because they are disciples. In essence, the words of Jesus boil down to love as it is their identity mark.

Love is the antidote of hate. It transcends tolerance and respect. It opens up to full acceptance and relationship. To achieve genuine love, pruning is necessary. Pruning entails cutting or shedding off: of unwanted traits, especially hatred, dislike, bias, superiority and suspicion. In the first reading, Barnabas played the vital role of helping the disciples in Jerusalem to shed off suspicion and avoidance to accept Saul. Saul himself had all his former traits shed off when he encountered Jesus on his way to Damascus.

In our quest for peace, we need to allow ourselves to be pruned by the Father. We need to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to be faithful to the words of Christ so as to be united with Him. We need to get rid of all forms of discrimination and superiority complex to embrace everyone in love, even those who are determined to go against us or adamantly hate us. This is in response to Christ’s call of love: *“Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you”* (Mt. 5:44).

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 10:25-26,34-35,44-48; 1 John 4:7-10; John 15:9-17

If we are asked to put in a nutshell what our Christian faith is, our minds will very likely be drawn to the many doctrinal points we have learned in Catechism and the different rites and devotions practised in the Church. Today's Liturgy of the Word sees it as a love relationship founded in Jesus Christ.

That relationship is initiated by Jesus Christ. His words in today's Gospel assert it: *"You did not choose me; no, I chose you."* In the four Gospels that we have, His disciples were those He had personally chosen to follow Him. His standard call was: *"Come, follow Me."* Following Christ entailed being in His company to share in His life and of course His ministry. For this, He had to explain to them the *what* and the *why* of His ministry. He had come to do His Father's will which was to give eternal life to the entire humankind.

Today's Gospel elaborates on the implications of Jesus' choice of His disciples. A very strong implication is friendship. He articulates it very clearly: *"I call you friends."* He then clarifies that in treating them as friends, He has made known to them everything He has learnt from the Father. In essence, that revelation has to do with His Father's will. It touches on the *what* and *why* of His ministry. He reveals all this to His disciples as He seeks to involve them in His ministry. This is part of friendship. From this viewpoint, in Jesus' mind discipleship is friendship.

What undergirds friendship? Love. This is another implication of Jesus' choice of His disciples. He has chosen them because He loves them. He makes them His friends because He loves them. He shares His life and ministry with them because He loves them. In fact, Jesus' coming into the world, being sent by the Father to do His will, flowed from love. His entire life and mission on earth were rooted in love.

Jesus' life and mission on earth ended with His crucifixion. His death on the cross marked the depth of His love for His friends. He made an oblique affirmation of it in these words of His: *"A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends."* In the context of Jesus' discourse to His disciples in today's Gospel, this statement by Jesus may be misconstrued to be very restrictive and exclusive in scope. For His friends were the restricted group of disciples He had chosen. Everyone else seemed to be excluded.

Exclusivity of choice comes from a selfish tendency. Jesus' choice was inclusive. For His love was inclusive. Out of His unconditional love, He came, sent by His Father, to save all humankind, to bring life to all, through His death and His resurrection. The second reading from 1 John affirms this mission of Jesus': *"God's love for us was revealed when God sent into the world His only Son so that we could have life through Him."* Jesus' mission was one of love for the entire world.

Jesus' choice of His disciples was geared towards continuing His mission after His departure from the world. He had secured eternal life for all. He would send His disciples out to announce it and draw people to accept it. In today's Gospel, He made known His intention in these words: *"I commissioned you to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last."*

For sure, in the light of Jesus' command of love, *"the fruit that will last"* has to do with love. In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul includes love with faith and hope as *"things that last"* with *"love as the greatest"* (1 Cor. 13:13). These three virtues have to do with another sense of the lasting fruit: eternal life in God's kingdom. This obviously was the goal of Jesus' mission on earth. It was meant for the whole of fallen humankind and therefore universal in scope. To this end, He sent His friends, the disciples, out in love to offer this eternal life.

The offer of eternal life calls for acceptance. Love is the unmistakable expression of acceptance. For Jesus has commanded: *"Love one another as I have loved you."* In love one is also drawn by Jesus to His friendship to share in His Father's life, which is eternal life. Indeed, Jesus' choice of His disciples and making them His friends were not exclusive; on the contrary He wanted them to extend it to the whole humankind. The baptism of Cornelius and his household in the first reading is a clear case of how Peter, a chosen disciple and friend of Jesus, brought eternal life to a gentile family. It is testimony of the inclusivity of Jesus' love undergirding His choice of disciples.

Jesus is calling every person to be His disciple and friend to share in His life. But sharing His life is also sharing in His ministry. Thus, all those who have responded to His call and choice are also sent out to bear fruit that will last. They are also sent out to share in Christ's mission to draw people to the life He came to bring to the world. As Christians, we are Christ's friends sharing in His life and His mission.

FEAST OF THE ASCENSION

Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 4:1-11; Mark 16:15-20

A fascinating event has the power to captivate people to the point that they may forget or choose to postpone their duties.

That might have been the case with the apostles as they watched Jesus' glorious ascension into heaven. The first reading records, as *"they were still staring into the sky, two men in white"* asked them, *"Why are you men from Galilee standing here looking into the sky?"* The disciples were so mesmerized that they kept gazing into the sky. The two men then assured them that Jesus would return *"in the same way"* He had been taken up. Of course, that would be His second coming at the end of time. No one knows when that would be. But till then, the disciples must now carry out the mission He had given them: *"to be His witnesses not only in Jerusalem, but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth"*.

How were they to be witnesses? The Gospel specifies it: *"Go out to the whole world; proclaim the good news to all creation."* The *"good news"* is that Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead, whereby He saved *"the whole world"* and even *"creation"*. The world refers to the entire humankind. They had sinned and their sins had adversely affected creation. Thus, as St. Paul says, *"creation was unable to attain its purpose"* (Rom. 8:20)

The *"good news"* must be preached to draw people to believe and be baptized so as to be saved, for Jesus asserted: *"He who believes and is baptized will be saved."* Their salvation would also fulfil creation's *"hope of being freed, like us, from its slavery to decadence, to enjoy the same freedom and glory as the children of God"* (Rom. 8:21).

The Gospel presents *"the Eleven"* (that is, the apostles) *"going out, preaching everywhere"* following Jesus' ascension. As they carried out their mission, they experienced the risen Lord *"working with them and confirming the word by the signs that accompanied it"*. What were these signs? Those listed by the Lord: *"casting out devils, gift of tongues"*, being unharmed by *"snakes"* and *"poison"*, *"healing the sick through the laying on of hands"*.

These were charismatic signs, that is, wonders happening through the gifts endowed by the Holy Spirit called “charisms”. Upon His ascension to His Father’s right hand, the risen Lord sent the Holy Spirit to His apostles to empower them to carry out the mission He had entrusted to them. Signs were manifestations of the risen Lord’s working presence with His apostles through the Holy Spirit.

In the second reading, St. Paul illustrates the charisms Christians receive from the Holy Spirit in terms of ministries: *“apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers”*. Ministry is service and charisms are given for service. Service aims *“to build up the body of Christ”*, which is the Church, so that all will *“come to unity in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God, until we become the perfect Man, fully mature with the fullness of Christ Himself.”*

The Church must have unity because it is the mystical body of Christ empowered by His Spirit. For, *“there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all, over all, through all and within all.”* Unity is achieved through growth. The more mature the body of Christ, the greater its unity. This growth is to continue until it reaches its *“fullness in Christ”*.

Mission and ministry are tied. Mission entails *“preaching the good news”* to draw people into the body of Christ. Ministry consists in *“building up the body of Christ”* by helping its members to grow in faith and unity. Every baptized believer receives the Holy Spirit. Following that, the Holy Spirit endows each one with particular charisms. These charisms are to be exercised for both the mission and growth of the Church. The Church is duty-bound to preach the good news and nourish those who have come to accept it by being baptized. Hopefully, at Christ’s coming at the end of time, the Church, *“the body of Christ”*, will have achieved full maturity.

Christ’s ascension was His return to His Father because He had come from the Father and completed the mission the Father had given Him. The mission was to bring salvation to all humankind and restore wholeness to creation damaged by the sins of humankind. Acceptance of that salvation was called for from all humankind. For this Christ sent His apostles out to the whole world to *“preach the good news”*. Today, we have received *“the good news”* and accepted it. As we wait for Jesus’ return, let us play our role to *“preach the good news”* to others and *“build up the body of Christ”* of which we are members.

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 1:15-17,20-26; 1 John 4:11-6; John 17:11-19

“Search and rescue” and “Lost and found” are two tags that bear testimony to a commitment to looking for lost objects and especially lost persons. Unrecovered loss is compensated for through replacement or in cash.

This human endeavour is taken up in today’s liturgy of the word to convey Jesus’ effort to prevent the loss of Judas and the early Christian community’s step to replace him. Underpinning both efforts was God’s will to save all humankind lost in sin and its consequential death.

The Gospel presents part of Jesus’ priestly prayer to His Father. Jesus turned to His Father in prayer for His disciples after He had addressed them in a long farewell discourse at the end of His Last Supper with them. He did this on the eve of His death on the cross. By His death and resurrection, Jesus accomplished His Father’s will to “search and rescue” lost humankind and bring them back to life. With that, He could make this claim on all redeemed humankind: “lost and found”.

Within the context of salvation in general, Jesus attempted a specific “search and rescue” mission. His prayer to His Father expressed His deepest concern for His disciples. For sure, He shared with His Father that He wanted them to be “*one like us*”, that is, like Him and the Father. He had very carefully “*watched over them*” to ensure that “*not one was lost*”. He prayed to the Father to “*keep them true to His name*”, that is, to keep them faithful to Him (Father) because He (Jesus) had “*passed His Father’s word on to them.*” Now, they did not belong to the world any longer and “*the world hated them*”. The evil one was at work to instigate the world to destroy them; so, Jesus asked His Father “*to protect them from the evil one.*”

Despite His diligent effort to pre-empt the loss of His disciples, He saw one succumbing to it. That disciple was Judas. He had yielded to Satan’s effort to betray Jesus. Prior to Judas’ fall, Jesus made a double attempt to stop him. All this played out in the scene of the Last Supper in John 13. There Jesus “*was troubled in spirit and declared*” to His disciples: *One of you will betray Me.*” For “*the devil had already put it into the mind of Judas to betray Him*” (v. 1).

Jesus was all out to save Judas. His first attempt was to include Judas in His washing of the feet of all His disciples. This symbolic gesture had a very profound meaning. Jesus explained it in His response to Peter's initial refusal of His gesture: *"If I do not wash your feet, you can have nothing in common with Me"* (v. 8). To have *"nothing in common with"* Jesus meant to be totally cut off from His company and friendship. That would deprive a disciple of sharing in His life and ultimately enjoying the salvation He was to bring through His death and resurrection. By washing Judas' feet, Jesus was offering this lifeline to him.

Next, after the foot-washing, Jesus dipped a piece of bread and gave it to Judas. This was a gesture of friendship and thus of communion. By it, Jesus was extending another strong invitation to Judas to remain in His friendship and continue to be in His company in the circle of disciples. In this way, he would stand to benefit from Jesus' salvation and possess the life to come with it. Yes, Judas took the bread, apparently manifesting his acceptance of the invitation. But unfortunately, at that point *"Satan entered him"* (Jn. 13:27). And so, *"he went out. Night had fallen"* (v. 30). Judas had given in to Satan's lure and walked into the darkness of Satan's grip.

But in God's plan of salvation, that decision of Judas served to launch Jesus' paschal mystery, the mystery of His death and resurrection. From then on, the Twelve apostles chosen by Jesus would have to play their role. For, the salvation achieved by Jesus needed to be proclaimed to all humankind of every generation. Now that Judas was gone and lost, a replacement for him had to be found. The early Christian community saw this. As the first reading narrates, when they gathered, under Peter's guidance and with prayer for God's help, they elected Matthias for the post.

Through what we call *"apostolic succession"*, the good news of God's *"search and rescue"* of all fallen and lost humankind has reached us. We who were *"lost"* in sin have now been *"found"*. We have been saved. We have been brought into friendship and communion with Jesus and His Father in the Spirit. In that communion we are *"one like"* Jesus and the Father. That is God's love for us, as the second reading proclaims.

It is vital that we should not be like Judas allowing ourselves to be lost also. We need therefore to be *"true to the Father's name"*, to be faithful to Him. For this, just as Jesus did, we too need to pray to the Father for His intervention.

PENTECOST SUNDAY

Acts 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12:3-7,12-13; John 20:19-23

The devil divides and tears humankind apart through sin. He drives fear into people. The Holy Spirit on the contrary dispels fear. He unites and brings people to peace.

Pentecost celebrates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Church and thus His entry into the world. The first and Gospel readings proclaim this great mystery in different ways, but the underlying reality is the same. This reality has to do with salvation – the salvation God the Father sent His Son Jesus into our world to bring to all humankind. Salvation in essence consists of reconciliation and restoration of the right relationship with God. Reconciliation calls for forgiveness of sins. Right relationship with God amounts to peace.

The first reading narrates the Holy Spirit dramatically breaking into the assembly of Jesus' apostles in one room. His intervention was accompanied by *"a powerful wind from heaven, the noise of which filled the entire house"*. It was then manifested through *"something like tongues of fire, separating and coming to rest on the head of each"* person in the room. As a result, the disciples *"were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak foreign languages."*

This account has a background story: the building of the Tower of Babel in Gen. 11:1-9. That Babel story portrays humankind attempting to build a city with a tower whose top would reach the heavens, God's dwelling place. Underpinning this attempt was humankind's desire and determination to be gods unto themselves. Such a project, for sure, was doomed to failure because creatures could never be their own creator. That failure is depicted as a result of God dividing the ambitious builders' language and scattering them over the face of the earth. Under such circumstances, they were no longer able to understand, communicate and work with one another. Their solidarity was broken. Sin indeed divides.

The Pentecost event reverses this situation brought about by sin. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples of Christ restores unity. The first reading underscores it by noting the gathering of people from different ethnic groups and nations in Jerusalem on Pentecost Day. They were able to

understand in their own respective languages the Galilean apostles as they spoke. Following that, Peter proclaimed and explained the good news of the salvation Jesus brought through His death and resurrection. Three thousand of those gathered in Jerusalem were converted that day (cf. Acts 2). The outpouring of the Holy Spirit brought about mutual understanding and reconciliation to the Lord, thus peace and unity.

The Gospel story also has the Lord's disciples gathered in a room with all its doors shut. They were fearful of the Jews who had crucified their Lord. Jesus broke into their midst and "*showed them His hands and side*" to assure them it was He their crucified Lord. He brought them peace to allay their fear. In a sense, shutting themselves in a room out of fear was a form of division: away from the public.

Peace, on the other hand, signalled unity. First of all, it did away with fear. After giving them peace, Jesus sent the disciples out to bring it to others. They were to courageously break out of their seclusion to encounter people including Jesus' enemies. Secondly, peace would naturally entail reconciling factions. Reconciliation in turn called for forgiveness of hurts, offences and sins. With this forgiveness and reconciliation, right relationship with God and among human beings was restored. That right relationship undergirded unity.

All this was Jesus' mission and now Jesus entrusted it to His disciples to continue it. To empower them to carry out that mission, Jesus "*breathed on them*" and gave them the Holy Spirit. He then spelt out the mission in terms of forgiving sins, which included removing the causes of division, so as to bring about reconciliation and total well-being throughout the world. Indeed, only with the courage from the Holy Spirit could the disciples go out and face people, especially Jesus' enemies. It was also only by the power of the Holy Spirit that they could forgive sins and reconcile fallen humankind with God and with one another. The outcome of this mission was right relationship with God and among humankind. With this, peace and unity would have a chance to be realized.

As Christ's disciples, we are sent out to bring peace and unity among ourselves and in the world. Jesus has given us His Holy Spirit to empower us to carry out our mission. Our mission field is our immediate family, our neighbourhood, our workplace, our community, our State and our country. It comprises courage to face our offenders, forgive offences, and seek reconciliation with them.

FEAST OF THE HOLY TRINITY

Deuteronomy 4:32-34,39-40; Romans 8:14-17; Matthew 28:16-20

The tenet about God as Trinity gives rise to opposite responses. It is rejected by those professing faith in a unitarian God; for them “three yet one” defies human logic and mathematical calculation. But it is a core component of the Christian faith. This is because the mystery is revealed by Christ and the New Testament records and reflects on it.

It is not a surprise that the triune God defies all human logic and mathematics, for God is infinite while human comprehension is finite. The triune God is also transcendent for He is above and beyond all creation. Yet it is equally true that He is immanent. He is present in all His creation and in a special way among His human creatures. For Jesus Christ is the Son of God made man to dwell among humankind in the world. He is the Immanuel where the transcendent Creator God and His human creatures encounter and relate with each other through the Holy Spirit.

God is triune, three persons in one God, because He is love. Love is always directed to the other and so calls for the other. Jesus reveals the Trinity when He talks about His Father. A few texts from John’s Gospel suffice for illustration: *“The Father and I are one”* (10:30); *“The Father is in Me and I am in the Father”* (10:38); *“To have seen Me is to have seen the Father”* (14:9). He also reveals the Holy Spirit as one who *“issues from the Father”* whom He *“will send from the Father”* (Jn. 15:36). The Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and the Son.

As love, the triune God also calls for the other from outside Himself. This underpins His creation of human beings in His own image (cf. Gen. 1:26,27). His love urged Him to share His life with His human creatures. But unfortunately, the first man and woman failed Him. Yet, He promised them a Saviour because He loved them. Jesus His Son was that promised Saviour: *“God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not be lost but may have eternal life”* (Jn. 3:16).

Jesus was sent to bring back to fallen humankind the share of God’s life which they had lost through their sin. This was a clear gesture of His love for them, the same love He enjoyed from His Father in the Trinity. He told His disciples and therefore all of us: *“As the Father has loved Me, so I have loved you”* (Jn. 15:9). When He returned to His Father after accomplishing His mission, Jesus

sent the Holy Spirit to be His new presence among His disciples – again out of love. He assured His disciples of this: *“I am going to the Father... I shall ask the Father and He will give you another Advocate to be with you for ever”* (Jn. 14:12,16).

More than just everlasting presence, the Holy Spirit brings about divine childhood. Today’s second reading asserts: *“Everyone moved by the Spirit is a child of God”* and enables us to call God *“Abba, Father!”* Out of love, God restored to humankind their lost share of His life. With this share in His life restored to them, the Holy Spirit transforms human creatures into God’s children. This happens at baptism which is administered *“in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”*

To this end, today’s Gospel presents the risen Christ giving this great commission to His apostles: *“Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”* Baptism in the name of the Trinity endorses a believer as a disciple of Christ and brings him/her into the life of the Trinity. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Christ’s disciples become children of His Father.

Baptism involves not just its candidates but the Trinity as well. The total involvement of the Trinity was clearly manifested in Christ’s own baptism by John. When Jesus emerged from the waters of the Jordan, the Holy Spirit descended on Him like a dove and the Father bore Him clear testimony: *“This is My Son, the Beloved; My favour rests on Him”* (Mt. 3:17). Jesus’ baptism marked His anointing by the Father with the Holy Spirit. That anointing was for mission: to bring forgiveness of sins and eternal life to sinful humankind. The title “Christ” is derived from a Greek word which translates the Hebrew Messiah, meaning “the anointed one”. Christ’s baptism indicated that God the Father and the Holy Spirit were involved in His saving mission. That’s the love and unity of the triune God, the Trinity.

As baptised believers, we have become disciples of Christ and children of the Father anointed by the Holy Spirit. We have inherited Christ’s mission to His apostles to make disciples of others. As we carry out this mission, the transcendent Trinity immanent in us draws people to share in their life.

FEAST OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

Exodus 24:3-8; Hebrews 9:11-15; Mark 14:12-16,22-26

Non-Christians may find it strange that we should celebrate the body and blood of Christ. Their basic problem is the split we make between the two vital components of a person that must function inseparably for life: body and blood.

For us, the term “Body and Blood of Christ” expresses one aspect of Christ’s saving mission. He saved us through His death on the cross. On the cross He had “His body broken” and “blood shed” for the forgiveness of our sins. Following that, He rose from the dead on the third day and brought us eternal life. This aspect of salvation has a very special context: the covenant. Today’s liturgy of the word presents and explains this context. In the process, it unfolds the significance of the feast we celebrate today.

The first reading from the Book of Exodus narrates the sealing of the covenant whereby God and the people of Israel entered into a God-people relationship on Mt. Sinai. The second reading presents Christ the High Priest sealing a new covenant to replace the Sinai covenant. The Gospel reading gives us an account of Christ celebrating the Passover meal with His disciples and transforming it into the meal of the new covenant. In both the old and new covenant, blood plays an important role, because it gives life.

The sealing of the Sinai covenant consisted in the immolation of bullocks as communion sacrifices and the sprinkling of their blood – half on the altar representing God and half on the people. The Sinai covenant bound God and the people of Israel to each other in a relationship, expressed in the well-known covenant formula: “*You will be my people; I will be your God.*” The binding was made effective by God and people sharing in the communion sacrifices symbolized by the consumption of the immolated bullocks. Following that, both parties were sprinkled with the blood of these bullocks. Bonded in that covenantal relationship, they were to live for each other.

However solemn its rite of sealing was, it turned out that over time, the people repeatedly broke the covenant through infidelity to God. On His part, however, God renewed it as often as they broke it. There eventually came a time when God decided to give His people a new covenant rather than renew the old one. He announced His decision through the prophet Jeremiah (cf. Jer. 31:31-34). Its

law was to be written in the hearts of the people; it was the law of love. In love, God pledged to forgive all the sins of the people.

Again, blood would be involved to fulfil the promise of the new covenant. The second reading asserts that it was no longer *“the blood of goats and bull calves”* but Christ’s blood that was shed to seal this new covenant. That happened at His death on the cross, whereby His body was immolated. On the cross He took away all sins through His body broken and blood poured out. Christ’s crucifixion was indeed an unmistakable act of total love, enacting the law of the new covenant written in the hearts.

Jesus the High Priest wanted His communion sacrifice, offered once and for all on the cross, to be celebrated by His disciples of all generations and in all places. So, at the Last Supper, He instituted the Eucharist to enable His disciples to celebrate it in memory of Him crucified and risen. To this end, He changed bread and wine into His own body and blood and offered them to eat and drink as a communion sacrifice. He qualified His blood as *“the blood of the new covenant”*, that is, His blood which He shed on the cross for the forgiveness of sins.

We are people of the new covenant whom God had made His children. The Eucharist is given to us as a way to experience anew Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross and resurrection. It leads us into communion with God our Father through Jesus Christ. Of course, all this happens by the power of the Holy Spirit. The way of life in this communion is love – the law of the new covenant. We are called to love one another as Christ has loved us, to the extent of having our bodies broken and blood shed for one another.

The Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ celebrates our salvation by Christ and calls us to translate memory of Him into love for one another.

FEAST OF THE ASSUMPTION

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

Mary's assumption into heaven was declared an article of faith by Pope Pius XII on 1 November, 1950. A question might arise therefrom: this was all great for Mary, but what value does it have for me?

The significance and value of the glorious event derive from Jesus: His person and mission. In essence, Jesus is the Son of God made flesh and sent to bring salvation, that is, eternal life, to all fallen humankind. Mary was the virgin from Nazareth God chose to give flesh to Jesus. This divine choice underpins the significance and value of Mary's assumption. The readings selected for her feast unfold some aspects of this great mystery about Mary.

Since salvation lies at the heart of Jesus' mission, it is expedient to take up the second reading as the starter for our reflection. The fall of one man, Adam, led to the death of all humankind, his descendants. There was no way for humankind to save themselves. The loving and merciful God the Father came to their rescue. He made a very costly sacrifice: His only Son. He sent Him to bring life to humankind doomed to death. The Son of God also made a very costly sacrifice: He emptied Himself of His divinity to become Man; and following that, He emptied Himself of His humanity to die on the cross. All these sacrifices were geared towards Jesus taking the place of fallen humankind to pay the death penalty due to their sin.

But paying this death penalty was only a part of salvation. It brought about forgiveness of sins. It had to be completed with the bestowal of life. Jesus accomplished it by His resurrection to life. Indeed, by His resurrection, Jesus brought life to humankind forgiven of their sins, and made it possible for all to rise to life. The second reading affirms this great mystery of salvation thus: *"Just as all men die in Adam, so all men will be brought to life in Christ."*

In the light of the second reading, Mary's place and role had clearly to do with God's plan of salvation for all fallen humankind. God's plan was for His Son to become Man and pay the death penalty due to sin on behalf of all fallen humankind. To this end, God chose Mary to give flesh to His Son to become Man. This divine choice was disclosed to Mary at the annunciation scene. Immediately following this disclosure, Mary set out to visit Elizabeth. Today's Gospel narrates this visit.

When Angel Gabriel told Mary that God had chosen her to be the mother of His Son Jesus, he also announced that Elizabeth her relative was six months pregnant. Mary's hasty visit to Elizabeth was in response to the angel's announcement. Both pregnancies were God's doing, for Mary was a virgin and Elizabeth an old barren woman. Mary's son Jesus was to be the Saviour of the world while Elizabeth's son John was to be Jesus' forerunner – to prepare the hearts of people for Him.

The encounter of the two great women was also the encounter of their sons in their wombs. The Gospel story depicts this in Elizabeth's words and experience. She recognized Mary as *"the mother of my Lord"* and declared her *"blessed"*. The child in her womb *"leapt for joy"* because he too recognized the Lord in Mary's womb. All this was the work of the Holy Spirit: He made it possible for Mary to conceive Jesus in her virginity; He now filled Elizabeth as well as the child in her womb. All this took place in initial fulfilment of *"the promise made by the Lord"* as Elizabeth declared. The promise was of salvation.

Mary's song of praise, the *Magnificat*, articulated the salvation that the Lord was now involving her to bring it about. It was the Lord *"coming to the help of Israel His servant"* in fulfilment of *"the promise He made to our ancestors – of His mercy to Abraham and his descendants for ever."* *"Abraham's descendants"* for sure were the people of Israel; but *"for ever"* indicates that they included all humankind saved by Jesus Christ her Son.

Mary praised the Lord for the *"great things"* He had done for her. Here, she acknowledged she was a recipient of the Lord's salvation as much as an instrument to bring it about. As her choice by God to be the mother of His Son Jesus was unique, so also her assumption body and soul to heaven was God's special grace for her. It was her resurrection to life ahead of her Son's second coming at the end of time. It was her salvation. As such, it is an assurance that the salvation Jesus achieved is for real. Every person stands to benefit from it.

Just as she brought Jesus to Elizabeth and her son during her visit to them, so too Mary in heaven leads people on earth to her Son Jesus to receive life from Him. Those who allow her to do it are sure to receive life from Jesus and possess it forever.

FEAST OF ALL SAINTS

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

Saints are commonly thought of as those who have “reached the shores” of heaven. They are sinners purified by Jesus’ blood.

Affirmation of this saving grace of God through Christ is found in the first reading taken from the Book of Revelation. There, its author describes his vision of the *“huge number, impossible to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe and language... dressed in white robes... They have washed their robes white again in the blood of the Lamb.”* The Lamb refers to Jesus Christ who shed His blood on the cross. In this way, He made all humankind children of His heavenly Father. The second reading from 1 John affirms that we are God’s children. In this status of ours, we *“must try to be as pure as Christ.”*

How are we to do this? By following Christ on the path to the kingdom of heaven. Christ has charted and walked this path to the kingdom of heaven. This is an eightfold path embracing eight attitudes. As they yield happiness, they are called “Beatitudes”.

The *“poor in spirit”* are those who count on God totally rather than on what the world offers – wealth, power and authority. They live their lives in constant fidelity to God. They are happy because they are confident that God will always look after them and provide their needs. Living in this total confidence in God is living in His kingdom. Thus, *“theirs is the kingdom of heaven”*.

The *“gentle”* are people who treat others with great respect because they see in them the image of God. In return, they win the respect of others and become their friends. In friendship one is assured of home wherever one goes. In this sense, they *“will have the earth for their heritage”*.

Those who *“mourn”* are those who lament over the plight of suffering people. Their hearts of sympathy will reach out to them and even stand for their rights. In this way, they practise the next two beatitudes as well, *“hungering and thirsting for what is right”* and being *“merciful”*. Their happiness lies in the *“comfort”* and *“satisfaction”* that the Lord will use their efforts to lift the victims up in His own ways. At the end of their lives on earth, they will find comfort in the Lord’s mercy.

The *“pure in heart”* are those who are honest and transparent, truthful and filled with integrity. Their one desire is to do God’s will and please Him. Their external acts flow from it. *“They shall see God”* because they are in profound relationship with Him and experience His presence in life.

The *“peacemakers”* are those who work for reconciliation in the world as they see it as the indispensable way to peace. They understand peace as the total well-being of every person on earth. This total well-being consists in good relationship with God and with fellowmen. Its foundation is divine sonship, possible because Christ has come to make all sons and daughters of His Father in heaven. Thus, peacemakers are called *“sons and daughters of God”*.

Those who speak up for the truth and stand up for justice on behalf of victims of oppression and injustice are likely to encounter opposition and even persecution from perpetrators of injustice and oppression. Foreseeing this, Jesus declares the final beatitude for them: *“Happy those who are persecuted in the cause of right; theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* They will possess the kingdom of God because they are convinced of kingdom values and courageously proclaim them. Following that, Jesus applies the beatitude to His disciples. They will suffer persecution because they are disciples of His and He will Himself be persecuted.

Jesus is persecuted to death because He has come to set us free from Satan’s hold. Throughout His ministry, He speaks up for the truth and proclaims justice, calling on Satan’s agents to convert: to turn away from Satan’s ways and embrace the beatitudes so as to possess the kingdom of God. Jesus lives out His own proclamation, that is, He lives out all the beatitudes He declares. His persecution unto death on the cross is a result of His carrying out the beatitudes. It is precisely by His death that He defeats Satan and opens the doors of the kingdom to all who embrace the beatitudes.

Indeed, we are sinners enslaved by Satan. Jesus has come to set us free from Satan’s hold by His death on the cross. Washed clean by His blood, we become saints. We are called to a new way of life: the beatitudes.

BAPTISM OF THE LORD

Isaiah 42:1-4,6-7; Acts 10:34-38; Mark 1:7-11

Identity and mission are inseparably tied. The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord touches on the identity and mission of Jesus Christ.

Jesus' identity was revealed in terms of His relationship to His Father: *"You are my Son, the Beloved, my favour rests on you."* That was not all. For there was also the Holy Spirit. Before the Father's revelation, the *"heavens were torn apart and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove on Jesus."* What did all this mean? Jesus could not be identified except with and within the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Spirit. He was anointed with the Holy Spirit and sent to carry out a mission. The mission was to reconcile the heavens with earth, that is, with all fallen humankind.

To bring about that reconciliation, He went to John the Baptist to be baptised by him. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. But Jesus had no sin. Why then did He go to John? It was to show His solidarity with fallen humankind. It was to show He was a real human person in order to be able to do the needful to obtain forgiveness from God. Indeed, Jesus' full identity comprises His divine Sonship and His human nature. He is the Son of God who became man in Jesus of Nazareth. At His baptism by John, the Father confirmed this identity of His.

The mission of Jesus that flowed from this God-Man identity of His was to reconcile earth with heaven, humankind with God. It was a mission of peace. In the second reading drawn from the Acts of the Apostles, at the baptism of Cornelius, a Roman officer, Peter gave a homily that reiterated this mission of Jesus. He asserted that God the Father had sent Jesus to *"bring good news of peace"* not just *"to the people of Israel"* but also to *"all humankind"*. On this score, Cornelius, a Gentile, had a right to be baptised so as to receive the peace, that is, the salvation brought by Jesus.

Following that, Peter declared: *"God had anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and because God was with Him, Jesus went about doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the devil."* Here, Peter went back to the scene of Jesus' baptism and saw it as His anointing with the Holy Spirit and with power. Once anointed, Jesus started His public ministry which was to do good and to liberate people from the devil's captivity. He came with the power of God to set people free from the power of the devil. That was His mission.

Jesus' mission was one that God had fixed for Him and announced through the prophets of the Old Testament. Without naming Him, the first reading from Isaiah prophesied Jesus' mission thus: *"I have endowed him with my spirit that he may bring true justice to the nations... I have appointed you (him) as covenant of the people and light of the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to free captives from prison, and those who live in darkness from the dungeon."* His mission was one of justice and liberation; and it was to be universal.

The four Gospels give us extensive accounts of Jesus' mission – proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of heaven, preaching justice and love, pronouncing forgiveness of sins on sinners, showing love to the sick by curing them and even raising the dead to life. The ultimate work of liberation was to save all sinners from the hold of Satan and his forces and reconcile them with God. That reconciliation gave humankind the privilege of sharing in God's eternal life.

As a result of Jesus' mission, we now have life. At our baptism we received this life personally. The Holy Spirit also came down upon us and made us children of God the Father in Jesus Christ. In this way, we were given a new identity: we were not just children of our parents; we became God's children and shared in His life.

Identity defines mission. With the new identity we received at our baptism, we were given a mission. We were called to do good, like Jesus, especially to the poor and the needy. Liberated from sin and eternal death, from Satan and his forces, we are called to liberate people from oppression. This means first of all that we are not to oppress others. Next, we must refrain from injustice and corruption. Then, when required, we ought to speak out against injustice, corruption and oppression. Like Christ, we are called to bring peace to society. This call requires of us to forgive our offenders and be reconciled with them. It also obliges us to reconcile factions in our community.

These are just some of the areas of our Christian mission rooted in the new identity we received at our baptism. As God's children we ought to respond to this call as well as we can. To this end, God gave us His Holy Spirit at our baptism. He is still and will always be with us to empower us to carry out the mission as children of God.

SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

1 Samuel 3:3-10,19; 1 Corinthians 6:13-15,17-20; John 1:35-42

Faith formation is a very frequently heard term as it is commonly carried out in parishes. It is an important part of the Church's ministry. What is the essence of faith formation? Today's first and Gospel readings present it.

The first reading narrates the story of Samuel being offered to God and growing up in His sanctuary under the guidance of Eli the priest. Samuel was a son God gave to his childless parents in response to the mother's persistent prayer. In gratitude Hannah, his mother, offered him back to God to serve in the sanctuary under Eli. When he entered the sanctuary, *"Samuel had as yet no knowledge of the Lord and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him."* So, when he heard the call "Samuel, Samuel", he thought it was Eli calling him and went to him. It was only when the call had been repeated that Eli knew the call came from God and taught Samuel to answer: *"Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."* When the call came again, Samuel answered as Eli had instructed him. This was Samuel's faith formation and it consisted primarily in listening to God speaking to him.

Listening to God is necessary to know what God wants of us. God is not a silent God. He talks to us every day in many ways, through situations, events, experiences, and relationships. But above all, He speaks to us through His word in the Scriptures. If we do not hear Him, it is because we have been attuned not to His voice. We need to be formed to discern His call and listen to His word.

The Gospel story today presents John the Baptist pointing Jesus out to his disciples: *"There is the lamb of God"*. Two of his disciples then followed Jesus. When confronted by Jesus with the question, *"What do you want?"*, they answered, *"Where do you live?"* To know where Jesus lived meant to experience His life. Jesus threw this invitation: *"Come and see."* Responding to the invitation, these disciples saw Jesus and came to believe that He was the Messiah.

Seeing is an essential part of faith formation. Seeing amounts to experiencing – experiencing God's presence and intervention in the concrete situations of life. This is a faith experience of the Immanuel, God-with-us. Indeed, God is always there with us, in the ups and downs of life, in our joys and pains. Jesus, the Immanuel, is *"the lamb of God"*. He came to be with us to take away our sins by

paying the death penalty for them. He bore the pains of the cross for us. Now He is present with us not to take away our pains but to bear them with us and accompany us towards the goal of life on earth: the life He brought through His resurrection.

Faith formation, therefore, aims to lead us to a faith experience of the Immanuel, God-with-us, through the discipline of listening to God and seeing Him in our lives. This faith experience in turn leads us to our mission. The first and Gospel readings highlight this end result of faith formation.

The first reading affirms, *“Samuel grew up and the Lord was with him and let no word of His fall to the ground.”* Samuel was always attentive to the Lord’s word and acted on it. He became a great prophet for the people of Israel and anointed Saul the first King and David his successor. In the Gospel, after “seeing” Jesus, Andrew went immediately to his brother Simon Peter to tell him, *“We have found the Messiah,”* and took him to Jesus. He became an apostle for Jesus.

It is noteworthy that at his encounter with Him, Jesus changed the name of Peter to Cephas – meaning “Rock”. Through this change of name, Jesus was actually indicating to Peter what He would appoint him to do after His resurrection. He would entrust His whole flock to Peter to look after: *“Feed my lambs; feed my sheep”* (cf. Jn. 21). Peter would be the Vicar of Christ to nourish the community of disciples and keep them strong.

Whatever form it takes, faith formation must focus on God’s word in the Scriptures and seek to cultivate an attentive listening to it. For Jesus’ saving mission on earth is proclaimed in them – announced in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New Testament. Following that, faith formation must then take the Scriptures into the concrete realities of life and highlight the relevance of God’s word. It is then that one has a chance to see Him present in the daily circumstances of life. In this way, faith formation has the potential to transform the person. His/her faith in the Immanuel, the Lamb of God, the Messiah will direct him/her to live his/her daily life in faithful relationship with God and bear witness to Him.

THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jonah 3:1-5,10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

“Those who have wives should live as though they had none.” These words from St. Paul in the second reading might be disturbing or even shocking. What does Paul mean? To grasp it, it is important to bear in mind his belief that *“the world as we know it is passing away.”*

The passing of the world leads to the final coming of the kingdom of God. Today’s Gospel presents Jesus starting His public ministry by proclaiming the imminence of the kingdom and calling for repentance: *“The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News.”* Jesus has come to inaugurate the kingdom of God and point out the way to enter it.

Volumes have been written about the kingdom of God. In essence it has to do with the reign of God, meaning His will for the world. God’s will is to share His eternal life with all human beings whom He created in His own image. Sharing in God’s life calls for faithful relationship with God, that is, living one’s life in accordance with God’s will. Jesus’ coming into the world is in fidelity to God’s will to open the way for all human beings to enter His kingdom to share in His life.

Nothing on earth, not even its best life, can match God’s life. Jesus’ coming into the world to offer a share in God’s life is most truly *“good news”*. His call to repentance is immediately followed by His call to *“believe in the good news.”* Repentance, in Jesus’ call, means changing one’s mind about life; it means moving from clinging to earthly life to desiring God’s life. This change of mind will channel the direction of one’s will towards the will of God. In other words, one will submit one’s will to God’s will in order to share in His eternal life.

The story of the call of the first four disciples in today’s Gospel illustrates such a change of mind in response to Jesus’ proclamation. These first four disciples were Peter and his brother Andrew; James and his brother John. They were all fishermen. The first set of brothers *“were casting a net in the lake”*, while the other *“were mending their nets”*. They were totally engrossed in their work as fishermen to earn their living and live a decent life on earth.

It was from this livelihood of theirs that Jesus called them, *“Follow Me and I will make you into fishers of men.”* The change was from fishing fish to fishing

people. Fishing fish was for their earthly life. Fishing people was for God's life, that is, for the kingdom of God. This latter was what Jesus had come for. Jesus called the two pairs of brothers to participate in His mission.

Jesus' call had a double aspect. *"Follow Me"* means discipleship: becoming a disciple of Jesus. *"I will make you into fishers of men"* conveys apostleship: being sent out to do Jesus' work. In this light, the immediate and total response of these first four disciples to Jesus' call reflects their conviction of the incomparable value of the kingdom of God, that is, of sharing in His eternal life. It means, they have changed their minds about their lives. They are determined to forego life on earth for the life of God in the kingdom. To this end, they now want to be in the company of Jesus and be like Him. They want to learn from Him how to live for the kingdom. This is discipleship. They are also willing to share in His mission to get people into the kingdom. This is apostleship.

This incomparable value of the kingdom throws light on the meaning of St. Paul's words in the second reading. He is not advocating divorce at all. For marriage is indeed holy. It is the common way of living out Christ's command of love concretely and fully: *"Love one another as I have loved you."* In marriage spouses live out this command totally. In this way, they are true disciples of the Lord.

But all disciples are called to share in Christ's work. Spouses are called to extend their love to others and lead them to experience God's love. When, therefore, they encounter people in need, they must be ready to live *"as though they were not married"*. This means, if need be, they must be ready to leave their spouses to help people they know to be in need wholeheartedly. The same goes with their material possessions: to part with them to help others *"as if they had nothing of their own"*.

Marriage is a vocation. It is a way of Christ's discipleship. But it leads to apostleship, for discipleship means imitating Christ and thus doing what He has come to do. In marriage, spouses are truly and fully disciples of Jesus when they are ready to be His apostles by reaching out to those who are suffering with their aid. Faithful response to Christ's call to repentance is motivated by belief in the kingdom of God. One then submits one's will to God's will and lives one's life for the life of God.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-28

Order in any community or country requires authority. One who wields it can be authoritative or authoritarian.

An authoritarian ruler acting on his/her own authority, often with self-interest, lords it over others. On the other hand, an authoritative leader is aware that he/she has been put in his/her position by the community. His/her role is to ensure the rights of members are protected and duties are fulfilled. The goal is to enable members to live in peace and harmony.

Today's first and Gospel readings present God as the supreme source of authority. He authorizes earthly rulers and leaders to be His representatives for their respective communities and nations. So, they are answerable to the people but, in the final analysis, to Him.

The first reading today narrates an instance of God listening and responding to His people's request for a prophet to speak on His behalf. There, Moses recalled the people's request: *"Do not let me hear again the voice of the Lord my God... or I shall die."* In response, the Lord said to Moses: *"I will raise up a prophet like yourself for them from their own brothers. I will put My words into his mouth and he shall tell them all I command him."*

As God's spokesman the prophet derived his authority from Him. This divine authority behind the prophet was serious and bore two serious consequences. God spelled them out in no uncertain terms. The first concerned the people; on this God said, *"The man who does not listen to My words that he speaks in My name, shall be held answerable to Me for it."* Listening to God's words spoken by His appointed prophet was a serious obligation. Breach of it would be handled by God Himself.

The second consequence had to do with the prophet himself. In this regard, God said, *"The prophet who presumes to say in My name a thing I have not commanded him to say, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die."* In God's eyes, false or idolatrous prophecies were so serious that those who uttered them would be given the death penalty.

The Gospel presents Jesus making a deep impression on His listeners in the synagogue during a sabbath day service. This was because *“unlike the scribes, He taught them with authority”*. The comparison with the scribes implies that they did not have the authority of Jesus which was the authority of God His Father. Even though they taught the law, their teaching tended to be marked by traditions and practices not from God but from human authority. Jesus picked up an example of this in His condemnation of the scribes and the Pharisees regarding the commandment to do one’s duty to one’s father and mother. To be dispensed from this commandment, the human traditions stipulated the pronouncement of *“Corban”* (that is, dedicated to God) on one’s property (see Mk. 7:8-13). Jesus’ teaching was different from that of the scribes for it was marked with authority – the authority of His heavenly Father.

It was not just the attendees of the sabbath day service in the synagogue who were impressed by Jesus’ authority. The unclean spirit(s) who had possessed a man attending that service felt the force of Jesus’ authority. They recognized Him as *“the Holy One of God”* and acknowledged His authority over them: *“Have you come to destroy us?”* Bearing the authority of God, Jesus was concerned for the well-being of the possessed man. He had no qualms exorcising him on a sabbath day, even if externally He was seen as breaking the sabbath law. He exercised His authority to free the man from the hold of the unclean spirit(s).

After its exercise, Jesus’ authority was acknowledged by those who had seen it: *“Here is a teaching that is new and with authority behind it: He gave orders even to unclean spirits and they obey Him.”* This acknowledgment said a lot about what the people were generally going through in Jesus’ time. Led by the scribes and the Pharisees, they found themselves under the oppression of misguided interpretations of the law as well as the unbending traditions that grew around them. Thus, they experienced Jesus’ teaching as new and liberating.

Indeed, Jesus was authoritative in that He taught and acted on the authority of God His Father. He always had the well-being of people at heart. On this score, His authority was always liberating. Its experience was always fresh. Every leader in the Church must take after Jesus and serve the community with the authority of God. This authority is marked by one unmistakable quality: love. It is exercised in one indispensable way: service. It serves one indisputable purpose: the well-being of every member of the community.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Job 7:1-4,6-7; 1 Corinthians 9:16-19,22-23; Mark 1:26-39

There are two opposite experiences of time: it flies swiftly by and we feel we do not have enough of it, like when we are very busy; or it passes too slowly and we feel its pain, like when we are anxious or roll on our beds unable to sleep.

In the first reading, Job, afflicted with terrible sufferings, honestly shares his experience of time. He touches on the fragility and frailty of life: *"life is but a breath"* and *"vanishes leaving no hope behind."* He sees life as a *"hired drudgery"*, an oppressive alternation between day and night. Job's experience easily resonates with a common person's daily life. During the day, hard work weighs the person down so much that he/she yearns for the evening so that he/she can rest. In this yearning, he/she finds time slow moving, for the burden of work is too heavy to endure and yet he/she has to endure it as he/she needs his/her daily wages. So, he/she laments, *"How slowly evening comes."* When evening comes, his/her burden worries him/her and turns his/her night into grief. As a result, he/she is unable to sleep and he/she *"lies in bed wondering, 'When will be day?'"* Sleepless nights are hard to pass. So, there is a yearning for the break of day. Yet, when day comes, there is a dread for the hard work that awaits him. The oppressive routine continues in a vicious cycle.

On the other hand, there is the scene in the Gospel in which Jesus, after curing Simon Peter's mother-in-law, found Himself swarmed by people who brought to Him their sick and those possessed by the devils. Needless to say, these people wanted Him to cure all their afflicted loved ones. Jesus was indeed busy all day long, rendering *"pressed service"* (to borrow an expression from Job's words).

But Jesus had a sense of purpose. (To be fair, it must be stated that Job too had a sense of purpose in life. He went through a process of coming to grips with his situation of affliction. In the end he matured in faith.) Jesus was well aware He was doing His Father's will and found His ministry meaningful, fruitful and fulfilling.

How did Jesus sustain that sense of purpose? Today's Gospel tells us very explicitly: *"In the morning, long before dawn, He got up and left the house and went off to a lonely place and prayed there."* However busy He was, Jesus found time for prayer. Foreseeing a busy day ahead, He woke up early in the

morning to pray. In prayer, He kept up His intimate relationship with His Father and in this way, He never lost sight of His Father's will. He sustained His sense of purpose in His ministry. So, He occupied His time with a purpose-driven ministry.

With that sense of purpose, Jesus was very focused. So, when He was told many people were still looking for Him, He was not distracted. He could have entertained two attitudes: wallow in publicity or continue to attend to the needs of the crowd. But He told His disciples, *"Let us go elsewhere, to the neighbouring country towns, so that I can preach there too, because that is why I came."* But He had already ministered to the crowd who wanted more and His Father wanted Him to minister to the people in the neighbouring towns as well. Indeed, He kept His Father's will in focus and continued to carry it out.

The two readings we have considered offer us relevant lessons. Job's experience is also our experience. We live from day to day, keeping ourselves very busy. The routine goes on week after week and month after month. For sure, most of the things we do are necessary. We never seem to have enough time in our hands. Sometimes we feel burdened or even overburdened by them, to the point that we fall sick or suffer insomnia.

Jesus' attitude teaches us how we are to manage our time meaningfully and purposefully. However busy we are, we must find time for God; we must pray as Jesus did. For in prayer, we enter into an intimate relationship with God and bring this relationship to bear on our daily life. We acquire a sense of purpose and become focused as we pass the day. God's will as we have discerned it in prayer undergirds our purpose.

This sense of purpose enables us to set our priorities according to God's will. In other words, we are able to discern the order of the things we need to do during the day and set our minds on following it. The result is that our day becomes meaningful and purposeful, fruitful and fulfilling. The day builds up our relationship with God and achieves its purpose.

A meaningful and purposeful life is one anchored on faith in God and good relationship with Him. For this, prayer is necessary. It is important to make time for prayer every day so as to set priorities right. In this regard, it is imperative to bear in mind that time is given to us by God and we are called to make time for Him!

SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Leviticus 13:1-2,45-46; 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1; Mark 1:40-45

Up until almost the end of the twentieth century, leprosy was considered contagious and lepers were isolated.

Leprosy in the time of Christ was for sure considered unclean not just physically but at times spiritually as well. There were people who saw it as a punishment for sin. Lepers were expelled from the community to prevent contamination; but in the minds of many, their spiritual impurity disqualified them from community living.

Such a negative mentality had been handed down from OT times. Today's first reading from the Book of Leviticus prescribes how to handle leprosy. Certified as such by a priest (here Aaron, Moses' elder brother), a leper was declared unclean and had to *"live apart, outside the camp"*. He/she had also to *"cry 'Unclean, unclean.'"* Such measures were humiliating.

The leper who approached Jesus in today's Gospel had been burdened with all these sufferings. He sought total liberation from Jesus as he pleaded on his knees with great faith and respect. He did not demand a cure but expressed his faith very respectfully saying: *"If You want to, You can cure me."* He believed Jesus had the power and left it entirely to Him to exercise it. Deep down in his heart, he wanted a cure badly but felt that he did not deserve it.

How did Jesus respond? First of all, He exhibited a totally opposite attitude to that of others in the community. He *"felt sorry for"* the leper. That sympathy was what lepers needed from the community. Jesus felt for the leper in his situation of physical suffering and emotional humiliation. He totally understood how much he wanted to be liberated from them. Thus, He said, *"Of course I want to."* To show His total acceptance of him, He *"stretched out His hand and touched"* the leper. That touch was reassuring.

Jesus' decision came from His heart of sympathy and empathy for the leper. He saw behind him a human being equal in dignity to everyone else. His physical ostracization was more than met the eye; it conveyed a total rejection of the person. The leper was considered unworthy of any place in the community. So, Jesus firmly declared, *"Be cured."* The leper was cured. It was deeper than a

physical cure. By it, Jesus endorsed the God-given human dignity in him, for God had created him in His own image.

Jesus ordered him to go straightaway to the priest to get a certification that he had been cured. Of course, the Law of Moses required it and Jesus wanted to comply with this legal stipulation. But Jesus had something more in mind: this leper was a member of God's people and there was no reason to exclude him from them. That was why He had no hesitation to touch him physically. His cure of him was a way of getting him back to the community without obstruction. The priest's declaration would be an official endorsement of the leper's place in the community.

That official endorsement was more important than Jesus' own reputation and thus, Jesus warned him *"to say nothing to anyone."* But this warning by Jesus was intended to address a possible issue with regard to His messiahship. He was the Messiah announced by prophets of old – a suffering Messiah. Such a Messiah did not go down well with the people whose expectation had been of a powerful and even political liberator. Jesus saw that the people were not ready for what awaited Him as the promised Messiah. In fact, His cure of the leper would enhance their expectation even more.

Yet another significance emerges from the leper's free and public sharing of his story. It had an adverse impact of Jesus' movement: *"Jesus could no longer go openly into any town, but had to stay outside in places where nobody lived."* Here, Jesus had now to self-isolate, like the leper before his cure. It means that by curing the leper Jesus had made Himself a leper. This touches the core of His mission: He came to give life by laying down His own life for all fallen humankind.

That's the good news proclaimed to us; it was the good news proclaimed by the cured leper. Not only was he restored to his community, but he had also become an evangelist. The good news is that Jesus has come to restore to us the image of God we have lost through our sins. The loss of this divine image was our leprosy. With its restoration, everyone has their proper place in the community/family of God. Rejection and expulsion of anyone for any reason go against Jesus' attitude and life within God's family. Now that Jesus has healed us of our leprosy, it is our mission to reach out to those we have marginalized and bring them healing. This is part of evangelization.

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 43:18-19,21-22,24-25; 2 Corinthians 1:18-22; Mark 2:1-12

Scandals arise from deeds perceived to be bad or wrong committed by unexpected people. To be expected, they draw criticisms.

In today's Gospel episode, Jesus scandalizes the scribes in the scene when He pronounced forgiveness of sins on the paralytic brought to Him by four men. They criticize Him sharply: *"He is blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God?"* They have not come to grips with who Jesus really is. As "teachers of the law", they belong to the magisterial authority of the religious hierarchy of Judaism. It is their responsibility to protect doctrinal truth and its orthodoxy.

Turning the spotlight away from the scribes to shine on the people and especially the four friends who have brought the paralytic to Jesus will surely bring to light another set of reactions: puzzlement and disappointment. These people are determined to seek a cure from Jesus for the paralytic. Their determination has moved them to go the extra mile to get the paralytic to Jesus. Since the place where Jesus is preaching the word is packed with people, they climb to the roof, make an opening in it and lower the paralytic in a stretcher to right where Jesus is. For they are sure that Jesus has the power to cure.

Now having done whatever it takes to secure a cure for the paralytic from Jesus, how do they feel on hearing His words, *"My child, your sins are forgiven"*? If that is all that the paralytic gets, it is truly disappointing. Since forgiveness of sins comes from God, they could have directly sought it from Him.

But from the common thinking of the day, there is still some hope for them. For sickness is associated with or even believed to be caused by sins. Forgiving the sins of the paralytic could be the necessary first step toward healing. But then, the question remains: can Jesus forgive sins? The sharp criticism from the scribes may have adversely affected these friends. They may be torn between the hope of a cure and disappointment with no cure. But the story has a happy ending: Jesus says to the paralytic: *"I order you, get up; pick up your bed and go off home."* Indeed, the paralytic is cured.

If Jesus had not said anything before this physical cure, the common thinking of the day would have prevailed: sickness is associated with sins; forgiveness of sins is a pre-requisite for a cure. But Jesus clarifies that He is going to cure the paralytic *“to prove that the Son of Man [= Jesus Himself] has authority on earth to forgive sins.”* His point is straightforward: physical cure is harder to claim than forgiveness of sins, simply because it is visible while the latter is invisible.

Jesus steers away from the common thinking of the day. He does not associate sickness or physical disabilities with sins. His physical cure of the paralytic is not a consequence of the forgiveness He has pronounced of his sins, but a proof of His power to forgive sins. He is confident of His power both to forgive sins and to cure a physical disability.

The cure of the paralytic draws a very different response from those who witness it. Of course, they are astounded. They praise God saying: *“We have never seen anything like this.”* They have seen Jesus’ divine power in His miracle. By praising God, they are expressing their faith that Jesus is God.

Jesus’ manifestation of His divine power has addressed the scandal and negative criticism of the scribes. He was not blaspheming when He pronounced forgiveness of sins on the paralytic. He has also met the friends’ expectation of a cure for the paralytic. Above all, though unsaid, He has fulfilled the paralytic’s deep desire to be cured and his need for a more profound cure: forgiveness of his sins. At the bottom of it all, Jesus has brought salvation to the paralytic and shown Himself to be *“the Christ, the Son of God.”* In the opening verse of his Gospel, Mark declares this identity of Jesus (Mk. 1:1) and dedicates his work to proclaiming the saving works of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God.

Against this backdrop of Mark’s purpose in writing the Gospel, the paralytic represents all of us, readers of the Gospel. Incapacitated by our sins, we need Jesus to forgive and heal us. For this reason, God the Father sent Him into our world. Jesus is the Son of God made man. He was anointed with the Spirit to bring forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all of us. What we need to do is to accept this salvation by believing in the Gospel of Jesus *“the Christ, the Son of God”* and responding to His call *“to repent for the kingdom of God is near at hand”* (Mk. 1:14). In addition, we are called to bring others to Jesus for His salvation.

EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Hosea 2:16-17,21-22; 2 Corinthians 3:1-6; Mark 2:18-22

Feasting and fasting are two opposite activities useful for life. The former celebrates; the latter is cutting down on food intake or depriving oneself of it.

Today's Gospel deals explicitly with fasting and implicitly with feasting. It immediately follows the story of Jesus "*eating and drinking*", that is, feasting with "*sinners and tax collectors*". This perceived self-indulgence by Jesus and His disciples scandalized the scribes of the Pharisees' party. In today's Gospel, it led some people to question why Jesus and His disciples did not fast when John's disciples and the Pharisees were doing it.

In His response to the scandalized scribes, Jesus justified His conduct on grounds that He had come to "*call sinners*" as they were like the "*sick in need of the doctor*". Their conversion amounted to their healing. Among the sick was Levi the tax collector. He had responded to Jesus' call. His conversion called for a celebration and he hosted a meal to which he invited Jesus and His disciples.

In His response to the people's question in today's Gospel, Jesus appealed to common sense: "*Surely the bridegroom's attendants would never think of fasting while the bridegroom is still with them.*" Jesus made this appeal not just to justify His conduct, but also to reveal His divine identity. For by bridegroom, He meant Himself. His disciples were His attendants. He gave a new meaning to fasting.

The first reading from Hosea provides considerations for a better understanding of Jesus' response. From his bad experience of his marriage to Gomer who had become a prostitute, the prophet drew inspiration to point out to the people their infidelity to God. In the first reading, he saw God deciding to "*lure*" His people "*out into the wilderness and speak to her heart*" and "*bettoth her (you) to Himself (Myself) forever.*" Offering neither security nor attractions, the wilderness made a suitable place for an exclusive relationship between God and His people, like a honeymoon for a newly married couple: God was the bridegroom and the people His bride. Referring to Himself as the bridegroom, Jesus was asserting His divine identity. He undertook a forty-day and forty-night experience of prayer and fasting in the wilderness to identify with His people to focus on His relationship with God.

All these considerations help to unfold the meaning of Jesus' response to His questioners in today's Gospel. He was the bridegroom insofar as He was the Son of God. That indeed was His divine identity. He had undertaken His fasting to be in union with His Father and be conscious of His Son to Father relationship. This consciousness would sustain His fidelity to the mission received from His Father.

His mission was to save the fallen people of God and, beyond them, the entire fallen humankind. He was the Messiah, the anointed One, sent on this mission. To carry it out, He had become Man. He accomplished His mission through His death and resurrection. With His resurrection, He ascended to His Father's right hand. Jesus' response to His questioners referred to this departure of His: *"But the time will come for the bridegroom to be taken away from them, and then, on that day they will fast."* At the end of time, Jesus will return as the Lord.

Fasting started as a penitential act to obviate God's punishment on His people for their sins. But it became an expression of sadness as the people of God waited long for the coming of Jesus the Messiah and as His disciples lost Him when He departed from them at His ascension. His return at the end of time gives fasting a further significance: it looks forward to Jesus' return as Lord and takes on the element of hope. In this hope and anticipation, the disciples fast to focus on Jesus the Lord and seek an intimate union with Him. This is with a view to being led by Him into His eternal presence and union with Him in His kingdom.

But there is a criterion for admission into the kingdom. Jesus spells it out in terms of serving the poor and the needy and identifies Himself with them (cf. Mt. 25:31-46). On this basis, fasting is geared towards saving for the poor and the needy. Such care and concern build up a relationship with the Lord with a view to entering the kingdom of heaven. There, for sure, those admitted will feast at the Lord's eternal banquet.

NINTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Deuteronomy 5:12-15; 2 Corinthians 4:6-11; Mark 2:23 – 3:6

Rest is important for everybody's well-being. For this reason, employers are expected to give their employees an off day every week. The sabbath day rest in the Scriptures upholds this right but also offers more considerations.

The Old Testament stipulates rest on the sabbath day and treats it with great seriousness. Though its origins are not clear, in the first reading, the stipulation is tied to God liberating the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, offering it as the reason for the observance of the sabbath day. This connection sheds light on one aspect of the sabbath day rest.

In Egypt, the Israelites were enslaved by the Pharaoh to work for him and the Egyptians, very likely seven days a week. So, they cried to the Lord for deliverance. He saw their hardship and heard their cries (cf. Ex. 3:7-10; 6:5). He appointed Moses to be His instrument to liberate them totally so that they could live with dignity: in freedom and autonomy, as well as in good health and joy. From this viewpoint, the stipulation on the sabbath day rest aimed to foster the health and well-being of the worker.

The sabbath day rest takes on a further significance from what happened after the people's liberation from Egyptian slavery. They left Egypt for the Promised Land to become a free nation. On their way, God sealed a covenant with them and made them His people. He gave them the ten commandments as their part of the covenant (Ex. 20:1-17). The first three commandments stipulated their obligations to God; the third was to keep holy the sabbath day. These three commandments served to remind the people of God's relationship with them and intervention for their good. The observance of the sabbath day aimed to get them to unfailingly remember God for the good He had worked to ensure their well-being. It was part of their response to God's love for them and their part in the covenant.

A later story written in the exilic times highlighted the power of God: the story of creation in Gen. 1. God created the entire universe, the world and all living creatures in six days. He created man and woman in His own image on the sixth day. On the seventh day, He rested. He blessed the day (Gen. 2:3).

The story aimed primarily to affirm God as the all-powerful Creator. It served to assure the people in exile that He had the power and will to liberate them from the Babylonian domination. As in the story of their liberation from Egyptian slavery, He would bring them back to the Promised Land. While in exile, the people of God were scattered among the Babylonians. They felt they were losing their identity as God's people and needed an anchor to keep it. The observance of the sabbath day and circumcision served to provide this anchor.

Apart from highlighting God's power, the creation story in Gen. 1 presents God resting on the seventh day. With God observing it, the sabbath day was important. In the context of the exile, its observance would keep the people's identity as the people of the covenant while assuring them of their liberation.

From the creation story itself, a further point of significance of the sabbath day could be inferred. Created in His own image, the man and the woman were very special to God. He involved them in the care of His entire creation: "*Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all living animals on the earth*" (Gen. 1:28). Given this status of the man and woman, God's rest on the seventh day could be taken as God wanting to focus on them, to spend time with them to enjoy relating with them. An appropriate response from the man and the woman would be to also take off on the sabbath day to focus attention on Him. By application, His people, the Israelites, were to observe the sabbath day to sustain their covenantal relationship with God: He was their God and they were His people.

From both the first reading and the story in Gen. 1, it seems clear that "*the sabbath was made for man and not man for the sabbath*". In today's Gospel, Jesus affirmed it in His defence of His disciples who were seen to be breaking the sabbath law by plucking ears of corn to satisfy their hunger. By the same token, Jesus proceeded to heal a man with a withered hand on a sabbath day. For sure, He reiterated the primary purpose of the sabbath observance intended by His Father: the well-being of the human person.

The sabbath in the Christian dispensation takes on a new dimension. It is not observed on Saturday but on Sunday, because the Lord Jesus rose on a Sunday. The Catholic Church marks it by celebrating the Eucharist in memory of Jesus crucified and risen. Our observance of the Lord's Day should be marked by this saving act of God our Father and lead us to focus on Him.

TENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Genesis 3:9-15; 2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1; Mark 3:20-35

The family is the fabric of every community. This was God's design right at the very beginning of creation.

The story in the first reading keeps God's design in view. It narrates God dealing with the disobedient man and woman as well as the destructive serpent-tempter. When God brought the woman to him to be his fitting companion, the man responded, *"bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh"* (Gen. 2:23), and the two then *"became one flesh"* (Gen. 2:24) to beget children and form a family as God had intended. However, when after their disobedience to Him God took them to task, the man's response was arrogant: *"It was the woman you put with me; she gave me the fruit, and I ate it."* He totally set aside his personal responsibility for his sin and alienated his fitting companion. He blamed his sin on her and more seriously, on God.

The couple had of course to suffer the consequences of their sin: for the man, it was hard work to earn his keep and for the woman, labour pain in child-bearing (Gen. 3:16-19). Before announcing these consequences, God first took the serpent to task. He announced its destruction: *"I will make you enemies of each other: you and the woman, your offspring and her offspring. It will crush your head and you strike its heel."* In these words of His to the serpent, God promised a Saviour to come from a woman.

Jesus Christ was the promised Saviour. The woman was of course His mother. Today's Gospel reading presents Jesus in His role as Saviour as well as His natural family. His family figures in the first and third scenes. In between, the second scene shifts attention to Jesus' response to the scribes' claim about Him: *"Beelzebul is in Him. It is through the prince of devils that He casts devils out."*

These three scenes of the Gospel form a unit, though at the surface level their contents appear to be different. Very likely, Jesus' mother, brothers and sisters came looking for Him in the third scene because His relatives were unable to take charge of Him in the first scene. When told of His natural family's visit, Jesus in the second scene pointed to a new family He was forming on the basis of *"doing the will of God"*.

Jesus' natural family was concerned about Him because they *"were convinced He was out of His mind"*, as He attended to the large crowd at the expense of His own meal. His encounter with the scribes in the second scene was even more concerning for they accused Him of casting out devils through Beelzebul, the prince of devils. This accusation was expected to give rise to serious consequences. It was therefore a more urgent reason for His mother, brothers and sisters to ask for Him. When told of this step taken by His natural family, Jesus announced the new family He had come to found: *"Anyone who does the will of God, that person is My brother, and sister and mother."*

Since Jesus was sent to found the new family, obedience to God's will permeated His entire ministry. His obedience drew antagonism and hostility from the religious authorities of His day. The scribes' accusation against Him in today's Gospel was just one instance of such opposition. It had to do with His exorcisms. While He carried them out through the power of the Holy Spirit in Him, the scribes attributed them to Beelzebul. Attributing the works of the Holy Spirit through Jesus to the prince of devils was blaspheming against the Holy Spirit; it was an unforgivable sin.

Jesus' works of exorcism had only one purpose: to liberate possessed people from Satan's hold. From this viewpoint, they undid what the serpent representing Satan had brought on the first man and woman God had created: alienation from God and from each other. By His own obedience, Jesus undid their disobedience. Jesus persevered in His obedience right to His death on the cross. At His agony in the garden, realizing the imminence of His painful death on the cross. He expressed His obedience to His Father thus: *"But let it be as You, not I, would have it"* (Mk. 14:36). Thus, at His crucifixion, Jesus totally accomplished His Father's will.

A new family was established on the cross. John's Gospel (Jn. 19:25-27) affirms it through Jesus' act of giving His mother and beloved disciple to each other as mother and son. What the serpent in the Genesis story achieved, Jesus the Saviour undid; what the first man and woman undid – breaking up the family God intended, Jesus restored by establishing a new family. The new family constituted on obedience to God's will gives every natural family its value, meaning and strength. Every natural family obedient to God's will is a cell of God's family on earth. It points to *"an everlasting home not made by human hands, but in the heaven"*, a description of God's eternal family from the second reading.

ELEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ezekiel 17:22-24; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10; Mark 4:26-34

Stories are a powerful means to explain or teach a value. For they resonate with life experiences and are therefore easily understood. For this reason, today's Gospel asserts this of Jesus: *"Using many parables like these, He spoke the word to them."*

While engaging life experiences, parables can also point to realities beyond them. This underpins Jesus *"explaining to His disciples when they were alone"*. In today's Gospel, the reality concerns the kingdom of God. Jesus gives two parables drawn from agricultural life to teach about it. These parables serve to illustrate certain aspects of the kingdom.

The first parable focuses on a sown seed *"sprouting and growing"*, *"producing first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear"* and being *"ready for harvesting"*. A significant point the parable brings in is that the sower goes about his daily routine indicated by his sleeping at night and being awake during the day. Without his realizing it the seed grows to maturity and is ready for harvest. The seed has an inner energy and dynamism propelling its life and growth. When ripe, it is harvested for food to give life, thus fulfilling its purpose.

The second parable switches attention to growth, from being the smallest to the biggest. For illustration, *"the mustard seed which at the time of its sowing in the soil is the smallest of all the seeds on earth"* is selected. In the light of the first parable, this smallest seed has an inner energy and dynamism propelling it to grow into the *"biggest shrub"*. At this final stage of growth, it *"puts out big branches so that the birds of the air can shelter in its shade"*. It provides shelter and safety to *"birds of the air"*, thereby fulfilling its purpose.

Since these two parables are intended to present the kingdom of God, the inner dynamism of the seed portrays the inner dynamism of the kingdom. It propels the life and growth of the kingdom. The affirmation that Jesus uses many parables to speak the word to them unfolds the symbolic meaning of the seed in both parables. The seed is the word of God. Jesus is its sower; He teaches it.

The word of God sprouts and grows into the kingdom of God which serves two important purposes. The first one is indicated by the harvest in the first parable. One sense of the harvest is conveyed by maturity. The word of God transforms

its recipient into a mature disciple of Christ who lives it out faithfully. At this stage of maturity, that disciple becomes an inspiration for others to accept the word and be fed by it. A mature disciple is necessarily a missionary for Christ.

The second parable touches on another purpose served by the kingdom of God. As the biggest shrub, it puts out big branches for birds of the air to take shelter in its shade. The kingdom of God provides a safe and secure shelter for people to nestle in. For sure, the source of this security is God Himself. The community of those nurtured by God's word draws people to the safety and security God provides in it.

The seed symbolizing the word of God in the two parables recalls the heart of the Christian faith: Jesus is the Word of God made flesh to bring life to all fallen humankind (Jn. 1:14; 3:16-17). He fulfilled His mission through His death and resurrection. Jesus affirmed this in a parable that also used the imagery of a "wheat grain": *"Unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest"* (Jn. 12:24). Jesus the Word of God made flesh is the *"wheat grain that dies and yields a rich harvest"* to make the kingdom of God a reality on earth. He draws a lot of people into it and there they receive the life that He offers. As the word of God, Jesus ties both parables together and gives them the meaning they are meant to convey.

The kingdom of God, for sure, is a reality in heaven where there is eternal life. But it is also a reality on earth, as it is made up of people who have become Christ's disciples and received life. They form a community called "Church". The Church is missionary: to proclaim to the world the Word of God made flesh, crucified and risen. Its individual members must therefore also be missionaries. Like Christ the wheat grain, they are called to yield a rich harvest by living their lives in love for one another. In love, they will provide a secure shelter for those who need and seek it. The parables highlight the inner dynamism of the seed to grow to full maturity. That inner dynamism of the Church is of course Christ Himself who is present through His Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowers the Church to grow and fulfil its mission. He will also lead Christ's disciples into the heavenly sphere of the kingdom of God.

TWELFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Job 38:1,8-11; 2 Corinthians 5:14-17; Mark 4:35-41

An impressive person is likely to draw people's eagerness to know his/her identity and seek more information about him/her as a person.

That was the case with Jesus when He calmed the storm that had broken out in the sea when He and His disciples were sailing in a boat. After seeing the wonder, the disciples asked, "*Who can this be? Even the wind and the sea obey Him.*" They had been with Him for quite some time already and they still asked about His identity.

In Mark's Gospel, this episode of Jesus calming the storm is an immediate sequel to His two parables about the kingdom of God in last Sunday's Gospel: the seed that, once sown, grows by itself, and the mustard seed that grows from being the smallest seed to the biggest shrub. One point conveyed by these two parables is the growth of the kingdom from humble beginnings into a big community that provides safe shelter to its members and others as well.

Jesus and His disciples in the boat in this sequel story constitute the community in its humble beginnings. That community is the inauguration of the kingdom of God on earth. At this inauguration stage, it faces a lot of challenges. The storm that pounds on the boat and rocks it depicts the very rough situation of this emerging community. The storm is formed by multiple factors: a strong wind whips up the waters of the sea to form high waves pounding on the boat. It depicts the huge challenge of multiple factors working together and threatening to break up the community, the kingdom of God at its beginning stage.

Mark the evangelist wrote his Gospel to help the early Christian community to face the challenges that came their way. Among them was the persecution Jesus' disciples faced because of the radical rejection of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. Mark reasserted the identity of Jesus. Thus, his Gospel opens thus: "*The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God*" (1:1). It then proceeds to elaborate on each of the components of this identity. The first part revolves around Jesus as the Son of God with stories acclaiming His divine power. The second part turns towards His identity as Christ, the suffering Messiah. Much attention is paid to His sufferings and eventually to His crucifixion.

The evangelist asserts Jesus' identity and seeks to present His teachings and deeds as "good news" to His disciples so as to motivate them to count on Him as they face challenges. As Son of God, He possesses divine power. As Christ, He is anointed and sent to save. Jesus is always with the community of His disciples, the Church as He was with His disciples in the boat. As the storm pounded on the boat, He was sound asleep in the stern. To the disciples, He seemed not to care at all: "*Master, do you not care?*" They expected Him to help.

Jesus' response to their panic was: "*Why are you so frightened? How is it that you have no faith?*" Their fear and panic betrayed their lack of faith in Jesus' power. Jesus Himself had faith because He had power, but also because He was sure of His Father's presence in the boat. That was why He could sleep despite the storm. His faith undergirding His calm sleep should have inspired His disciples to trust that with Him in their midst they were safe.

In narrating this story, Mark the evangelist aims to illustrate how Jesus Christ, Son of God, is "good news". He has come to save. His salvation is from the devil who seeks to destroy every human person. The calming of the storm manifests Jesus overpowering the devil.

In biblical understanding, one aspect of the sea is associated with the devil. This is why Jesus' command to calm the storm uses the same word as that to exorcise the man with an unclean spirit (Mk. 2:25): "*Be still*" (in Greek: *pephimōso*). Jesus overpowers the devil because He is the Son of God. He has come to exercise this power in order to save all fallen humankind from Satan's hold. He is indeed the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

The kingdom, as the two parables of the seed illustrate, has an inner energy and dynamism to grow into full maturity to provide a secure shelter for those who seek it. Today's episode of the calming of the storm drives home the point that the kingdom has the power to overcome the challenges it faces especially its current persecution. The power at work is the power of Jesus.

In any challenge, the Church, the community of Christ's disciples, must not lose sight of and lose faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. For, He is always there with them. His power has made the small community grow to be the Church that we are today: universal and influential, providing safe shelter for those who seek it.

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 1:13-15; 2:23-24; 1 Corinthians 8:7,9,13-15; Mark 5:21-43

Birth gives life. Death ends life. Since death is certain to happen to everyone, it seems that everyone is born to die. What's the point of being born then? Is life worth living? Is there any value to life? What's the purpose of life?

Answers to these questions or at least pointers to answers are given in today's Liturgy of the Word. The first reading from the Book of Wisdom asserts: *"Death was not God's doing... it was the devil's envy that brought death into the world."* On the contrary, *"God did make man imperishable. He made him in the image of His own nature."*

This wisdom teaching certainly reflects the creation story in the first three chapters of the Book of Genesis. They present God creating the man and the woman in His own image and putting them in the Garden of Eden. God's intention was clear: He created the man and the woman to share in His eternal life in His paradise. This means God created human beings imperishable.

But the devil, represented by the serpent in the garden, lured the man and the woman into desiring to be *"like God"*. He tempted them to eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil – that is, total knowledge. Such knowledge belonged to God and God alone. Coveting that fruit meant competing with God. The man and the woman wanted to be their own gods, knowing good and evil. So, they took the serpent's word seriously and obeyed him.

Their obedience to the devil's word rather than God's in their ambition to be their own gods brought their downfall. That meant, as God had forewarned them, death. So, God made this pronouncement on them: *"from dust you were made and unto dust you shall return"* (Gen. 3:19). By this act of theirs, the man and the woman brought an end to their own lives.

Despite His pronouncement of their self-inflicted death, God still offered the man and the woman salvation. He promised this salvation in His curse of the serpent: *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you shall strike his heel"* (Gen. 3:15). The woman and her offspring, in our Catholic belief, referred to the virgin Mary and Jesus her Son.

Jesus came to restore life to all of us, sinful men and women. No doubt, our lives on earth will end in death. But it will continue in the eternal life God created us for, for Jesus has restored it to us. Today's Gospel narrates two instances which affirm this reality.

Jesus raised the deceased daughter of Jairus, a synagogue official, to life. Before doing that, He told the mourners gathered in the official's house: "*The child is not dead, but asleep.*" To Jesus, the little girl's physical death was only a sleep. He then said to her: "*Little girl, I tell you to get up.*" In its translation of Jesus' command given in Aramaic, the Gospel uses the Greek word *egeire* for "*get up*". The same word is used for Jesus' resurrection (cf. Mk. 16:6; Lk. 24:5). This indicates that the girl's rising to life, though still earthly in our Gospel story, points to the resurrection to eternal life.

On His way to Jairus' house, Jesus cured a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhage for twelve years. Jesus' words to her were significant: "*My daughter, your faith has restored you to health.*" The Greek text reads, "*your faith has saved (sesōken) you.*" It conveys the idea of salvation. Salvation has to do with eternal life in the kingdom of God.

Indeed, Jesus came into the world for a mission. It was to bring salvation to all fallen humankind. Salvation entails bestowing eternal life. Eternal life is life in the kingdom of God. Its definitive possession takes place upon entry into the kingdom of God, that is, at death which is a passage from our earthly world to the heavenly kingdom. Both the woman's cure here and the new life given to Jairus' daughter proclaimed the reality of eternal life as well as Jesus' power to grant it.

Were we born to die? Yes, insofar as earthly realities are concerned. The creation story affirmed by the first reading tells us that this is the devil's making but we have accepted his offer. For sure, it was never God's intention, for He created us "*imperishable*", that is, for eternal life. That was why despite our obedience to the devil's word rather than His, He still sent His Son Jesus to rescue us from the consequence of our choice and offer us eternal life in His kingdom. On this score, death has thus become a transition from earthly life to eternal life. Eternal life in the kingdom of God is now the purpose of our lives on earth and gives them meaning and value. How then do we want to live our lives – with or without Christ?

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ezekiel 2:2-5; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Mark 6:1-6

Sex and finance scandals in the Church have rocked or even shattered public opinion about her. Many have been led to reject or at least question her position as a moral authority in today's world. What should the Church do then?

Giving up is not an option. For the Church is the people of God. She has her roots in the people of God in the Old Testament, a people chosen by God in His covenant with them at Sinai. God declared the essence of that covenant thus: *"You will be My people and I will be your God."* While choosing the people of Israel to be His people, God had His mind set on the Gentiles as well. He willed the chosen people of Israel to be a light to the nations. Prophet Isaiah affirmed this divine intention in these words, *"I have appointed you as covenant of the people and light of the nations... My name is YHWH"* (Is. 42:6,8).

Unfortunately, however, God's chosen people had broken the covenant countless times over. Renewal after renewal did not seem to secure stable fidelity from them. In today's first reading, Prophet Ezekiel articulates this painful reality as YHWH has told him: *"Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to the rebels who have turned against Me... Whether they listen or not, this set of rebels shall know there is a prophet among them."* By sending Ezekiel to them, YHWH showed that He did not give up on His people.

YHWH did not give up on His people because of His love for them as well as for the nations and His plan to save them. He continued to work out His plan of salvation through His people despite their sins and scandals. For, in the final analysis, it was His intervention that would bring about salvation. In today's second reading, St. Paul very honestly shares with the Christians in Corinth his experience of God's grace at work through his weakness. From his words, *"a thorn in the flesh"* he received from *"an angel of Satan"*, this weakness was in all likelihood a spiritual one. But the apostle to the Gentiles did not give up, for during his earnest prayer for removal of this weakness, God told him: *"My grace is enough for you; my power is at its best in weakness."* Not only was St. Paul's spiritual weakness not an obstacle but it was also the platform for God to show His power, to work out His plans.

God's definitive intervention came when He sent His own Son into our world of many nations to save every single person and offer them life. Jesus, the Son of

God become Man, was born to the Jewish race but for all nations, as the old prophet Simeon declared when Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the Temple: *“My eyes have seen the salvation which You (God) have prepared for all the nations to see, a light to enlighten the Gentiles and the glory of Your people Israel”* (Lk. 2:30-33). Unfortunately, Jesus was rejected by the people of His own home town, because they knew His humble family background too well. His remark, *“A prophet is only despised in his own country, among his own relations and in his own house”*, resonated with the rejection God forewarned prophet Ezekiel that he would receive.

Just as God did not withhold Ezekiel’s prophetic ministry because of rejection, so too Jesus did not withdraw from His mission in the face of rejection. He made many disciples and formed them into a community – the new People of God, the Church. To them He entrusted the mission of preaching His Gospel (Mk. 16:16) and making disciples of all nations (Mt. 28:19). In His conclusion to the Beatitudes, He forewarned them that they would face persecution (Mt. 5:11). But they would have to carry out their mission.

For sure, then, God wants the Church to continue her mission to the world. Though riddled with scandals from within and encountering rejection from without, the Church is to carry out this mission. In the words of St. Paul, she has a *“thorn in the flesh”* from *“an angel of Satan”* drawing some ordained and consecrated leaders to betray Christ and their own vocation. Just as his *“thorn in the flesh”* kept St. Paul from being proud, the Church’s weakness has also steered her away from her former inclination towards clericalism and triumphalism. She feels urgently called to transparency and accountability to the People of God, the larger segment of her members.

Her humble response to this call is a pre-requisite for fidelity to the mission Christ has entrusted her to proclaim His Gospel to all nations with authenticity. Authentic proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in practical terms, amounts to *“practise what you preach.”* God loves all nations and wants His Church to be their light and bring them His salvation. His power will be at work through her, but she must strive to be authentic.

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Amos 7:12-15; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:7-15

“Isn’t it enough for me to be a Christian and live my life accordingly? Why should I be involved in the Church’s ministry and mission?”

The second reading from the Letter to the Ephesians unfolds God’s grand plan for every human person. He chose us to be His adopted children in Christ. By this, He wanted us to share in His own life and enjoy an intimate relationship with Him, as parents do with their children. For Him to do this before the world was made means that He had had this grand plan from all eternity. It also means He created the world for us. All this constitutes God’s glory.

St. Irenaeus echoes what the second reading affirms when he points out that God’s glory is man/woman fully alive. God created the human person in His own image. By virtue of this divine image in them, every human person was invited to enter into relationship not just with God but with others as well. To be fully alive is to relate fully with God and with others. It is God’s glory.

Unfortunately, as history would have it, the first man and woman failed to live out this divinely willed relationship. They broke this relationship. They sinned and fell from divine grace. But the all-loving Father God refused to let His plan flop. He sent His Son Jesus Christ to redeem us with His blood and stamped us with the seal of the Holy Spirit to restore to us the divine childhood which we had lost. The second reading sees this as God’s “*greater glory*”. Our salvation becomes a part of God’s grand scheme of things, His “*hidden and predetermined plan*” for us.

Surely the second reading unwraps our Christian faith and thus articulates what it means to be a Christian. A point of great significance is God’s adoption of us as His children in Christ. Our adoption into God’s family has an important bearing on us as well as our families. Just as in any earthly family children have a responsibility to love and care for one another, so also in God’s family all His children are to relate in love with one another. The family of every child of God becomes a cell in the family of God. God’s family on earth is the Church. All cells of God’s family are held in unity in a network of relationship bonded by Christ. This underpins every Christian’s responsibility to love and care for others.

In a sense, the first reading provides an instance of a refusal to exercise love and care. The refusal came from Jeroboam, the king of Israel, through Amaziah his priest. When Amos rebuked the king for the rampant injustice, corruption and hypocritical worship in his kingdom, Amaziah commanded the prophet to go back to his own country, the kingdom of Judah. The reason given was: “*We want no more prophesying in Bethel.*” It amounted to a rejection of God’s word and a shirking of the responsibility God wanted the king to exercise. In response, Amos affirmed his call by God from being a shepherd and farmer to a prophet. That call from God imposed on him the responsibility of proclaiming His word to the king and his people in Israel. He was carrying out his responsibility in the prophetic mission God had called him to.

In the Gospel, Jesus sent the Twelve whom He had called on a mission “*to preach repentance, cast out devils and cure the sick*”. Two points emerge from this mission. The first is that this mission reflects Jesus’ own mission. The salvation He has come to bring to sinful humankind consists in liberating them from the devils’ hold and restoring their relationship with God and with one another. His cure of the sick serves to prove that He has the power to achieve this liberation. His offer of liberation calls for a personal acceptance by every individual. Repentance signals acceptance.

Jesus’ choice and call of the Twelve were not a privilege for their own benefit. In His all-inclusive plan, Jesus wanted them to bring His mission to others. So, He sent them out. Being sent out has clearly to do with the responsibility of reaching out to others. That was their first exposure to the great mission Jesus would entrust to them just before His ascension to heaven: to “*make disciples of all nations*” (cf. Mt. 28:16-20).

This mission, passed down from generation to generation, has reached us, today’s children of God. It is a great privilege to be chosen and called to belong to God’s family. But with privilege there comes responsibility. We are now to shoulder our responsibility to reach out to others in love. We are being sent out like Amos and the Twelve to bring Jesus’ salvation to others: forgiveness of sins and eternal life. In the final analysis, our mission is to draw people to God’s family and be His children.

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Ephesians 2:13-18; Mark 6:30-34

Good leadership is badly needed in our world today. It was also often lacking in biblical times.

In the Bible, bad leadership was practised by those out to enrich themselves at the expense of their subjects, to which end they had no qualms about protecting their positions of power regardless of cost. God unfailingly sent prophets to speak up against such selfish and self-centred leaders.

Jeremiah was the prophet God sent to His people in a really disastrous time in their history. Today's first reading touches on it. The disaster was the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah in the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king. It resulted from poor discernment by its king, Jehoiachin, who was looking after his own interests. To protect his own royal position, he sought alliance with the Egyptian king to ward off threat from the rising Babylonian Empire. But he was badly defeated and died. His son Zedekiah succeeded him only for three years and was taken captive by the Babylonians. Following that, all able-bodied citizens of Judah were brought into exile in Babylon.

God sent Jeremiah to advise Jehoiachin and Zedekiah. But they refused to heed the prophet and persisted in their own plan to protect their self-interest. In the face of such a powerful Empire as the Babylonians, the good of the people would have dictated submission to minimise bloodshed and destruction. But the father and son ignored it and were defeated. Even in this defeat, God would have His way of upholding the welfare of the nation. For sure, His ways are not human's ways.

In the wake of the destruction and exile carried out by the Babylonians, Jeremiah pronounced God's judgement on the kings and their advisors: *"Doom for the shepherds who allow the flock of my pasture to be destroyed and scattered!"* At the same time, however, he offered a message of hope for the people in the proximate and remote future. In the proximate future, God Himself would *"gather (His people) from all the countries where (they were dispersed) and bring them back to their pastures (= homeland)."* In the remote future, God would *"raise up shepherds to look after them and pasture them... a virtuous Branch for David who will reign as true king and be wise, practising honesty and integrity in the land."*

The ultimate shepherd from David's dynasty was Jesus Christ. Today's Gospel narrates an instance in which He took the initiative to be the shepherd for the large crowd for they *"were like sheep without a shepherd."* Jesus is here depicted as *"taking pity"* on these people. The Greek word for "take pity" is *σπλαγγνα* (pronounced *splangna*) and conveys the idea of "being moved in one's inward parts". It is utter compassion consisting of empathy and sympathy to the extent of feeling for and suffering with the people.

Jesus' utter compassion led Him to *"set Himself to teach them at some length"*. In this, He set aside what He had taken His apostles to the *"lonely place"* for: *"to rest for a while"*. They had all worked hard *"preaching repentance, casting out devils and anointing sick people with oil to cure them"* (last Sunday's Gospel). Jesus put aside His personal need and interest to minister to the people. Their welfare superseded His and that of the apostles.

To wander *"like sheep without a shepherd"* which Jesus saw the crowd doing was to move around aimlessly, without any destination or goal, without any purpose and meaning in life. He therefore undertook to *"teach them at some length"*. For sure, His teaching would have included a proclamation of the kingdom of God which previous chapters of the Gospel of Mark present. He would also have extended a call to repentance, for it was a prerequisite for entry into the kingdom.

Jesus in today's Gospel reflects important qualities of good leadership. His heart reaches out in compassion to the people. Their welfare is His central concern. A good leader is one who sees the needs of his/her charge and readily sets aside all personal interest to attend to them, regardless of time and extent of involvement. He/she accompanies his/her reaching out with a "teaching", that is, a word offering hope and providing direction in life. In the context of faith, such direction is undoubtedly towards the kingdom of God as it is goal of life.

A final point clearly highlighted is that Jesus leads by example. He puts into practice what He teaches: a leader is one who serves. In today's episode, He serves. This is good leadership. It is the leadership our world badly needs. We can play our little part to ensure good leadership by firstly adopting Jesus' attitude in our way of life and secondly by holding our leaders to account.

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

2 Kings 4:42-44; Ephesians 4:1-6; John 6:1-15

The switch from Mark's to John's Gospel today may be surprising. But it is not without reason.

Last Sunday's Gospel (from Mark) focused on Jesus taking the initiative to look after the crowd that He saw was "*like sheep without a shepherd*". He took pains to teach them "*at some length*" (Mk. 6:30-34). Immediately following this account, Mark narrates Jesus' miracle of feeding five thousand men with five loaves and two fish (Mk. 6:35-44). This miracle is so important to all the Gospels record it and also mention it six times!

In John's Gospel, the importance of the miracle is such that it is followed by a long discourse from Jesus on its significance: it points to Jesus as the bread of life come down from heaven to give life to people (Jn. 6). The Church too takes the significance of the miracle seriously and replaces its narration in Mark's Gospel with John's account today in order to pursue Jesus' discourse over the next four Sundays.

John's account offers important elements to prepare for what is to come. These elements concern the Israelites' exodus and wilderness experience in the Old Testament. There, Moses played a very important role. Today's Gospel presents Jesus in parallelism with Moses in a couple of ways. His crossing "*to the other side of the Sea of Galilee*" recalls Moses parting the waters of the sea and leading the Israelites through the dry passage to its other shore. Next, Jesus "*climbed the hillside*" just as Moses used to go up the mountain to instruct the people.

A further connection is made between today's Gospel and the OT. The mention of the "*Jewish feast of the Passover*" ties the episode of the multiplication of the loaves to the central event of Israel's history. The feast commemorates the people's liberation from Egyptian slavery that started with the Lord's "pass over" their houses followed by their crossing of the sea to "pass over" to freedom.

After crossing the sea, the people landed in the wilderness where God fed them with manna. Jesus in today's Gospel feeds the crowd with five loaves of bread and two fish. Mark's Gospel sets the miracle in a "*lonely place*".

What do all these parallelisms and points of contact indicate? Moses was leading the people of Israel to the Promised Land where they would become a free kingdom. The events that made all this possible were the Passover and the Exodus. On their journey God fed them with manna. Jesus is now leading the crowd representing the entire humanity to the kingdom of heaven. He will accomplish this through the new Exodus and through the new Passover in which He is the Lamb. He is offering Himself as the bread of life to the people who follow Him.

Jesus' paschal mystery – His death and resurrection – lies at the heart of today's episode. It is the central event of salvation history. It underpins His long discourse on the bread of life. Details of the multiplication story and discourse take their meaning from Jesus' paschal event.

One striking detail is the mention of a *“small boy with five barley loaves and two fish”* in response to Jesus' question to Philip, *“Where can we buy some bread for these people to eat?”* Emphasis is on smallness and little amount for greatness vis-à-vis the kingdom of God. This is in line with Jesus' teaching: *“Anyone who does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it”* (Mk. 10:15). *“The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed which at the time of its sowing in the soil is the smallest of all the seeds of the earth; yet once it is sown it grows into the biggest shrub of them all”* (Mk. 4:31). Flowing from this is total generosity: the little boy gives all he has. It points to Jesus laying down His life totally so as to offer fulness of life to others (Jn. 10:10).

Jesus' actions over the bread are significant details. For *“taking”*, *“giving thanks”* and *“giving”* correspond to His gestures in the Eucharist which He instituted to serve as a memory of Him crucified and risen. These actions tie the episode of feeding the five thousand with Jesus' paschal mystery. The miracle is narrated to set the stage for Jesus' discourse on the bread of life. By offering His own body and blood to give life, He is the true bread of life.

The little boy's total sacrifice signals Jesus' total self-sacrifice in His crucifixion. He represents Christ's faithful disciples destined for the kingdom of God. In the Eucharist, these disciples celebrate the *“memory”* of Christ crucified and risen and therefore of His self-sacrifice on the cross. No authentic memory of Christ crucified and risen could take place without readiness for self-sacrifice for others. For it is only when there is a sacrifice that there will be the resurrection!

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Exodus 16:2-4,12-15; Ephesians 4:17,20-24; John 6:24-35

After narrating the story of Jesus feeding five thousand people with five loaves (last Sunday's Gospel), John's Gospel presents the Lord's discourse on the bread of life. Today's Gospel starts off this discourse.

After awesomely benefitting from Jesus' spectacular and generous provision of food, the crowd went looking for Him. He bluntly pointed out that they were missing the point in this search of theirs. Instead of being led by their experience to believe in His person and follow Him, they merely wanted an easy and endless supply of material bread. They had failed to see in the multiplication of five loaves of bread to feed five thousand people a sign of Jesus' identity.

Jesus, therefore, told them: *"Do not work for food that cannot last; but work for food that endures to eternal life."* He then claimed in no uncertain terms that He had been authorized by His heavenly Father to offer this food for eternal life. In the ensuing conversation about the manna that their ancestors were given in the wilderness, Jesus called for belief in Him as the *"bread of life"*, the one sent by the Father to offer eternal life.

Jesus has indeed come to *"give life to the world"*. Those who believe and follow Him will receive it. Though His feeding of the five thousand was out of compassion for the hungry crowd, it was intended to serve as a sign of His identity as the *"one sent by His Father"* to be the *"true bread of life"*.

In Moses' time, the ancestors of the Jews were given *"manna"* as food, but also as a sign of divine providence. This divine providence in the wilderness prefigured the *"true bread of life"* in Jesus. As the Son of His Father and therefore as God, Jesus is the source of eternal life. Believing and following Him constitute what the second reading calls *"God's way"* to *"eternal life"*. Jesus identifies this faith and discipleship as *"working for food that endures to eternal life"* and thus *"working for God"*.

Eternal life takes food in Jesus' discourse beyond its material sense to a spiritual level. That explains why faith is called for. It is here that the temptation to fall back to old ways is likely to arise. The first reading today illustrates the point. Through Moses God had liberated the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt to

bring them to the Promised Land, the land of freedom and independence. But they had to journey through the wilderness to reach the Promised Land.

The wilderness was of course a place of harsh conditions in terms of weather, terrain, food and water. The people's experience of these harsh conditions made them lose faith in God and forget His marvels for them: their liberation from slavery and crossing of the Sea of Reeds. As a result, they called to question the motive of Moses and Aaron: *"You have brought us to this wilderness to starve this whole company to death!"* They justified their questioning by bringing God into it: *"Why did we not die at the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, when we were able to sit down to pans of meat and could eat bread to our heart's content!"* Yet, in reality, they had lost faith in God. Invoking Him was to justify their desire to return to what they were sure of.

Whether in Egypt or in the wilderness, the people would have a hard life. But there were marked differences. In Egypt, the harshness was a daily routine where the people would rot in a rut. In the wilderness, the harshness allowed for new experiences and therefore for progress: moving towards the Promised Land. In Egypt, food came from the Egyptian masters. In the wilderness, the Lord provided meat and bread. In the final analysis, it was the Lord who mattered. The entire experience of the people was in His hands. If they *"followed His law"*, they would come to *"learn that I, the Lord, am your God"*, as He told Moses. They were to *"give up their old way of life"* and *"put on the new self"*.

In the Old Testament, the Promised Land was a geographical territory, and fidelity to the Lord's way ensured long life in it. Jesus came to offer a new Promised Land: the kingdom of heaven where life is eternal. He is *"God's way"* to receive the *"new self"* in the kingdom. But of course, Jesus teaches that this way given by God is the way of the cross, just as His crucifixion was His way of securing eternal life for all fallen humankind. At the cross, He was *"the true bread of life"* broken *"to give life to the world"*.

Jesus, *"the bread of life"*, is drawing us to Himself for eternal life. Our genuine response is to carry our cross to follow Him. It is hard but like the wilderness journey, it is the way to the Promised Land – the Kingdom of God.

NINETEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

1 Kings 19:4-8; Ephesians 4:10-5:2; John 6:41-51

Life experiences can easily hinder faith, a gift of God transcending life. Yet, however, life experiences can become faith experiences as well when there is an openness to faith. In faith, life on earth is lived with eternal life as its goal.

Today's Gospel proclaims Jesus as the source of eternal life because of His heavenly provenance. For the Jews, life experiences hindered belief in Jesus' affirmation about Himself. Indeed, they knew too well His father, Joseph, and His mother. His was an earthly family in Nazareth, no different from other families. They could not move beyond their earthly experiences of Jesus to reach His heavenly identity.

Of course, Jesus saw that. For that reason, He declared: *"No one can come to Me unless he is drawn by the Father Who sent Me."* The Father's intervention was necessary and Jesus identified it as *"the teaching of the Father"*. Teaching involves the use of words and here it refers to the word of God. For the Jews, the word of God meant their Scriptures which constitute the Old Testament for the Christians. The Old Testament found its fulfilment in Jesus. Thus, the claim by Jesus: *"to hear the teaching of the Father and learn from it is to come to Me."*

In giving His word, the Father left no one out. Thus, Jesus asserts: *"They will all be taught by God."* Where the Jews were concerned, all of them had *"heard"* the word of God. But not all were ready to *"learn from it"*, that is, believe it. As regards Jesus as *"the bread of life, the living bread which has come down from heaven"*, their hesitation came from their familiarity with His family background. Jesus was calling on them to step out of their life experiences to move into faith in His identity as *"one sent by the Father"*.

If the Jews heeded Jesus' call, they were sure to receive the *"food that endures to eternal life"*. Their faith in Him would amount to *"working for God"*. Last Sunday's Gospel offered these assurances. Jesus reiterates them in today's Gospel in these words: *"Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever."*

Indeed, eternal life is life in the divine realm: life in the kingdom of heaven. Its value is such that the Father willingly sent His Son Jesus into our world to offer it to us. Before that, the Father had appointed prophets to announce the coming of Jesus and prepare the people of Israel for it. In this way, He was

drawing them to Jesus. The prophets faithfully proclaimed God's word to the people. When finally, the time came, the Son of God emptied Himself of His divinity to enter the world. He took on human flesh in order to sacrifice it at His death on the cross. He asserts it in the concluding words of today's Gospel: *"The bread that I shall give is My flesh, for the life of the world."*

Jesus is truly the Word of God made flesh (Jn. 1:14). He fulfils the revelatory and life-giving word of God in the Scriptures. He became Man to be the full revelation of His Father and fulfil His purpose of making us His children (Jn. 1:12-13) by sharing His life with us. By sending His Son, God the Father is reaching out to us, for He knows that by our own efforts we cannot reach Him. This is His initiative and intervention to draw us to Jesus.

All too often, however, we stumble in our faith because of challenges or problems we face in life. In these experiences, we may feel God is abandoning us. Elijah's experience in the first reading resonates with ours. His fight against social injustice and religious corruption perpetrated by King Ahab under his wife Jezebel's thumb led to the royal couple going after his life. He fled to escape execution. His words to God betrayed his despair and desire to give up his prophetic ministry: *"Lord, I have had enough. Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors."* Very likely, he felt abandoned by God. But God was there. As signs of His presence and providence, twice He provided the prophet with scone and water to eat and drink.

With that intervention by God, Elijah's life experience became a faith experience. In that faith, he could travel forty days and forty nights to reach Horeb, the mountain of God, to encounter Him. As with Elijah, God is also present with us, but in a way greater than the signs He gave the prophet. God is present with us through His Son Jesus Christ the *"true bread of life from heaven"*. He draws us to Him by sending Him to us. Let us open our hearts to accept Jesus in faith and allow Him to transform our life experience into faith experience. In this way, we seek Jesus for who He is and for the eternal life He offer us.

With Jesus present with us, we will live our earthly lives with eternal life for our goal and confidently journey towards the kingdom of God.

TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Proverbs 9:1-6; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

Despite the Jews' unbelief in Him as "*the bread of life come down from heaven*", presented in last Sunday's Gospel, Jesus in today's Gospel takes His claim further. For sure, the claim is even more unacceptable to these Jews.

Jesus elaborated on His identity as the bread of life and claimed to offer His "*flesh for the life of the world*". When the Jews reacted negatively, He reiterated His claim by affirming the necessity of "*eating the flesh of the Son of Man and drinking His blood*" to have eternal life. Bread is for eating, to satisfy hunger and give life. Jesus offered His flesh and blood as food and drink for life.

Obviously, the real purpose of eating and drinking is to have life. Life, as Jesus taught, is a "mutual indwelling" between Him and His disciples. By eating His flesh and drinking His blood, the disciple "*lives in*" Jesus, and Jesus "*lives in him/her*". "Mutual indwelling", humanly speaking, may sound absurd and Jesus' assertion of it served only to bring about further rejection by the Jews.

Yet, an illustration from life cushions off its absurdity to a certain extent. Food and drink consumed become a part of the consumer by being "absorbed" into his/her body. But at the same time, they also affect the consumer with their qualities. For example, taking sweet food or drink is likely to turn a person into a diabetic. From this viewpoint, there is undoubtedly an interaction between consumed food and drink and the consumer.

Though helpful, this illustration comes from human experiences and does not answer questions beyond them. The most fundamental issue here is how Jesus could offer His flesh and blood as food and drink and dwell in a disciple. Its answer is one of faith: through the Eucharist. Jesus instituted the Eucharist at His last supper with His disciples. There, He transformed the bread and wine of the supper into His own body and blood. He gave them to His participating disciples in these words (as given in the Eucharistic Prayer): "*Take this and eat of it; for this is My Body*" and "*Take this and drink from it, for this is the cup of My blood*". Following that, He instructed them: "*Do this in memory of Me.*"

The "memory" is of Jesus crucified and risen. On the cross, Jesus' body was broken and His blood was shed for the forgiveness of sins. His death was followed by His resurrection to life on the third day. By it He brought life. Jesus

instituted the Eucharist to enable disciples of all generations to experience His sacrificial and redemptive death and resurrection to life. That experience takes place in the eating of His flesh and drinking of His blood in the form of bread and wine.

By eating His flesh and drinking His blood, the disciple receives Jesus crucified and risen into himself/herself. In this way, Jesus takes up His dwelling in the disciple. A transformation then takes place. Jesus transforms the disciple and makes him/her more like Himself, without Himself being affected or changed. The transformation in the disciple is possible through the life that He shares with him/her.

Jesus in today's Gospel clarifies what that life is: *"As I, who am sent by the living Father, Myself draw life from the Father, so whoever eats Me will draw life from Me."* By these words, Jesus makes it clear that the life that He shares with His disciple is the life of His Father. This life can only be *"eternal life"*. This mystery underpins His strong declaration: *"Anyone who does eat My flesh and drink My blood has eternal life."*

How does eternal life apply to human beings whose life on earth must come to an end in death? Jesus addresses this important and real issue thus: *"I shall raise him (her) up on the last day."* Resurrection from the dead is a reality. Jesus has power to bring it about. Evidence of it comes from His own resurrection to life. The risen Lord will come again *"on the last day"*, to raise the dead to life and bring them to His eternal kingdom. There, one will share in the eternal life of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit.

The Eucharist is a foretaste of eternal life and a pledge of the resurrection. Receiving the body and blood of Jesus at communion leads the communicants to enjoy His indwelling with them and share in the life He draws from the Father. On the last day, He will raise all to life – to eternal life in His Father's kingdom. This is the significance, importance and value of the Eucharist for all of us, disciples of Jesus, the bread broken for the life of the world.

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Joshua 24:1-2,15-18; Ephesians 5:21-32; John 6:60-69

“This is intolerable language. How could anyone accept it?” Many of Jesus’ disciples reacted with these words to His teaching on the bread of life and offering of His flesh and blood as food and drink. For sure, many today will echo these words too. Faith is needed to accept both Jesus’ teaching and offer.

Jesus’ long discourse on the bread of life concludes with responses of unbelief from many disciples and belief from the Twelve. Today’s Gospel carries these responses and challenges us to give our personal response to Jesus’ entire discourse spread over the four previous Sundays. The discourse, following the story of the feeding of five thousand men with five loaves and two fish, followed a steady progression. Jesus initially checked the crowd’s wrong purpose in looking for Him: they wanted an easy and endless supply of material food. Jesus instructed them to work for food that endured to eternal life.

Jesus took on from there to talk about *“the bread which comes heaven and gives life to the world”* and claim: *“I am the bread of life.”* The significance of this claim was that the crowd should look for Him not for the material food He offered them but for who He was: *“the Son of Man”* and *“the Son of God”*. Following Him would lead them to eternal life. Against all the negative reactions and unbelief of His audience, rooted in their familiarity with His humble family background, He took His claim further and offered His own flesh and blood as food and drink with the assurance that consuming them would bring about eternal life.

The progression continues to its logical conclusion in today’s Gospel. Enough had been said. Now, every listener must make a personal decision. The decision was between faith and unfaith. Jesus knew what was going on in the minds and hearts of His listeners. In that knowledge, He declared, *“It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh has nothing to offer.”*

Jesus here pointed out that the decision not to believe was rooted in “the flesh”, that is, in what human experience and understanding could reach. A clear case was the Jews’ doubt about the validity of Jesus’ claim as the bread from heaven based on His family background (cf. Gospel of 19th Sunday). Faith response is from “the spirit”; it goes beyond human experience and understanding. It has essentially to do with the Father’s intervention: *“No one*

could come to Me unless the Father allows him." The Father is not exclusive, "allowing" only some to "come" to Jesus. He allows all, but everyone must positively respond to His intervention by accepting Jesus' words which *"are spirit and life"*.

Thus Jesus categorically asked the Twelve, *"What about you, do you want to go away too?"* Indeed, they had to make their own free decision. Simon Peter articulated their decision in equally categorical terms: *"Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life."* "Message" here translates the Greek word *"rēmata"* (= "words") and refers back to *"the words"* Jesus had spoken and were *"spirit and life"*.

For sure, the Twelve transcended their human experience of Jesus with whom they had been moving around for quite some time. They allowed the Father to draw them to Him and came to *"believe"* in Him as *"the Holy One of God"*. In the light of Jesus' earlier instruction to work for food that endured to eternal life, the decision of the Twelve was to follow Jesus for who He was rather than for what He offered. For sure, that following of theirs would lead to eternal life.

Jesus' entire discourse on the bread of life focuses on Himself as the *"Son of Man"* (from the Nazareth family) and *"Son of God"* (from His claim of God as His Father). He indeed is *"the Holy One of God"*. It asserts both the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery. He is the Son of God made flesh to become the Son of Man – this is the Incarnation. He became Man to take our place to pay the death penalty due to our sin. In this way, He obtained forgiveness of sin for us. But He rose to life and secured eternal life for us. This is His Paschal Mystery.

Jesus instituted the Eucharist to enable us to experience His Paschal Mystery in which His body (flesh) was broken and His blood shed as well as to *"eat His flesh and drink His blood"*. In this way, we enter into a communion with Him, for He *"lives in us"* and we *"live in Him"*. In this mutual indwelling, we share in His life which is also His Father's life – this is eternal life. He is now asking each one of us: *"What about you? Do you want to go away too?"* What is my response?

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-8; James 1:17-18,21-22,27; Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

“Is this a sin or not?” is a common question. It reflects a mentality of reducing religion to “do’s” and “don’t’s”. Underpinning this mentality is the fear of God and His punishment. He is seen as a legalistic God.

The liturgy of the word today points out that such a mentality is totally wrong. In truth, God is not at all legalistic. It is human beings who have painted a distorted picture of Him through the traditions they have created, for different reasons. In Israel, over time, many of these traditions were pushed to the level where they clouded or even distorted God’s will articulated in the commandments He gave.

The first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy presents an all-loving God. He kept near to His people through the “*laws and customs*” He gave them. These were His commandments to them. They were intended not to curb their freedom but rather to guide them to keep their relationship with Him. For He had sealed a covenant with them whereby He made them His own people and chose to be their God. That relationship was of the essence for them. Left on their own, the people would be lost. So, in His love and care for them, God carved out the way for them to keep their covenant relationship with Him.

In their history, the people of Israel had breached God’s commandments many times over. For sure, they were lost as they had strayed from God. In their “lostness”, they went after other gods. All this led to their greatest national catastrophe: their fall as a nation and the destruction of their city (Jerusalem) and Temple. They were led into exile in Babylonia and scattered among foreigners.

It was during this exile that the passage for our first reading was written. Its purpose was to remind the people of Israel that the law was sacred. God had given it to them to guide them in their covenant relationship with Him. The Scriptural passage highlights three things about the law. Firstly, its observance guarantees life in the Promised Land. Secondly, its observance reflects “*wisdom and understanding*”. Thus, the proud declaration: “*No other people is as wise and prudent as this great nation.*” Thirdly, it shows that “*the Lord their God is near to*” them.

For the people of Israel in the Old Testament, religion was a right relationship with God in the covenant. God's part was to be "*near*" to them – to be present to them, protect them and provide them with their needs. Their part was to observe His law so as to be faithful to Him. Most unfortunately, however, their leaders had given their own interpretations of the law. In the process, they even distorted the law. Worse still, they had even created traditions to circumvent the law.

One such tradition figures in today's Gospel: the washing of hands before eating. This external cleansing had to do not so much with physical hygiene as with ritual purity. The Mosaic Law had prescribed it for the priest before eating the meat of sacrificial animals. But that was extended as a requirement for every Jew before taking a meal. On seeing Jesus' disciples not observing the requirement, the Pharisees and some of the scribes present took Jesus to the task.

In His response, Jesus pointed out: "*You put aside the commandment of God to cling to human traditions.*" That error made "*the worship they offered to God worthless.*" Indeed, Jesus went right to the heart of the matter: purity is from within a person and not from without. True worship of God lies in an authentic relationship with Him, not in external observances of human traditions.

The second reading translates Jesus' response into concrete terms: "*Pure, unspoilt religions, in the eyes of God our Father is this: coming to the help of orphans and widows when they need it, and keeping oneself uncontaminated by the word.*" Clearly, its author James echoes Jesus' commandment of love. James refers to this commandment as "*word*" – the word from God the Father taught by Jesus Christ.

For sure, love is relationship: the relationship with God expressed through that with neighbour. It qualifies as pure religion because God figures in it. The entire Decalogue (Ten Commandments) is built on this double love relationship. It is observed because God commands it, and God commands it because it lies at the heart of every worthy worship of God.

Religion, and more so, Christianity is not to be reduced to or even identified with a way of life based on "*sin*" or "*no sin*". Rather, it is founded on God's love and care for us. It thus consists of our response of love to God's love. This response must necessarily include our love for one another.

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 35:4-7; James 2:1-5; Mark 7:31-37

Rituals of healing, especially among bomohs and faith healers, are often shrouded in meticulous actions or gestures. To the layperson, these gestures are strange; to the patient seeking healing, they are mysterious; to the faith healer, they are necessary for a spiritual intervention.

Today's Gospel narrates Jesus acting in "strange" ways to heal "a deaf man who had an impediment in speech". Mark's Gospel sees a significance in each of these gestures carried out by Jesus.

In the first place, the physical deafness and speech impairment in the story point to a more serious deafness and speech impediment: deafness to the word of God and inability to proclaim it with any credibility. Just as the inability to hear and communicate create a situation of isolation for the person suffering from it, so closing one's ears to the word of God is shutting off from those who have heard it. From this viewpoint, by taking the person apart in private Jesus may intend to signal isolation from the believing community.

Jesus' next gesture of putting His fingers into the man's ears is intended to open them. His application of spittle on the man's tongue, however repulsive it may be, recalls the common view of the day that saliva embodies the breath of a person. By that gesture, Jesus meant to communicate His own breath, that is, His Spirit. Through both these gestures of His, Jesus meant to highlight the need for God's "finger and Spirit" to bring about the healing sought after. By "looking up to heaven", Jesus was turning to His Father to enter into a union with Him. In that union, He sighed and declared, "Ephphatha", that is, "Be opened."

To be sure, Jesus did physically heal the deaf and speech-impaired man in a physical way. But the Gospel records the miracle to drive home a more important and much-needed deeper healing: healing from deafness to the word of God and inability to proclaim it. That healing amounted to salvation for which Jesus was "anointed and sent to our world. He came truly as the Messiah.

One way in which the great prophet Isaiah presented the Messiah's saving mission was in terms of making the blind see, the deaf and dumb hear and speak, and the lame walk. Such figurative terms are used in today's first reading, together with another familiar scene of a saved world: barren lands being made

fertile through springs and running streams. It proclaims God “*coming to save*” His people in exile in Babylon. Why were they in exile? Because they had been unfaithful to God: they had been deaf to His word and failed to live up to it in their lives. Failure to live up to God’s word amounted to failure to proclaim it. They had been blinded by their own desires and agendas. In such a situation, they were unable to move forward in the prosperity and progress God had in store for them. In that sense, they were lame.

Indeed, in their situation of blindness, deafness, dumbness and lameness, the people of God needed God’s “finger and Spirit” to save them. God promised them that He would intervene to heal them, that is, save them. He fulfilled His promise through Jesus His Son made man whom He anointed and sent not just to His people but to the whole fallen humankind.

The healing in today’s Gospel reflects Jesus’ saving mission. Through His union with His Father, symbolised by His “*looking up to heaven*”, Jesus healed the deaf and speech-impaired man when He uttered, “*Ephphatha.*” That healing was a sign of His Messiahship and therefore pointed to the salvation He had come to bring to all humankind. It signalled the opening of the union between heaven and earth, that is, between the divine and the human realms. Indeed, in Jesus, God and man were bound in a profound union. In that union, God shared His life with fallen humankind. Their acceptance was called for to benefit from it.

The significance of the miracle worked by Jesus in today’s Gospel underpins the Church’s inclusion of the “*Ephphatha*” rite in the third scrutiny before baptism. The touching the elect’s ears and mouth is accompanied by the utterance of “*Ephphatha*”. The rite seeks God’s intervention to open the elect’s disposition to listen to God’s word and willingness to live it out in his/her life. Following that, the elect is anointed with the oil of the catechumen to officially be accepted to journey towards baptism. In that sacrament, he/she is received into the family of God to share in His life and thus become a child of God. Membership in God’s family is sustained by a faithful listening to His word and living it out daily.

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 50:5-9; James 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-35

Theology is seen as “faith seeking understanding”. It is important because faith directs life. Understanding clarifies the content of faith from which it draws the direction to live out faith in life.

Among the many lessons today’s Gospel offers, one has certainly to do with faith and understanding. The object of faith concerns the identity of Jesus, articulated by His question to His disciples: *“Who do you say I am?”* With his inclination to take the lead, Peter spontaneously responded, *“You are the Christ.”* In narrating the same event, the Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus giving top marks to Peter’s answer: *“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”* (Mt. 16:17). Peter’s answer came from a revelation from God the Father.

But Peter failed in his understanding of *“the Christ”*. He strongly remonstrated Jesus for His prediction about His suffering, rejection and death. Why? Because that was not the kind of Christ he envisaged. In Peter’s mind, the Messiah was one with power to set the Jews free from foreign domination. For, with his companions, he had witnessed Jesus working all kinds of miracles, including raising the dead to life. He must surely be the liberating Messiah, not a suffering one. How could Jesus concede defeat in the hands of His enemies, even ahead of time? That was totally unacceptable for Pete.

Jesus was equally strong in his reproach of Peter: *“Get behind Me, Satan! Because the way you think is not God’s way but man’s.”* A total reversal of the storyline! Earlier, Jesus commended Peter because His Father had revealed His identity to him. Now, He reproached Peter for his human thinking. It had been deeply influenced by the prevalent Jewish interpretation of the prophetic announcement of the Messiah – Judaic theology.

Jesus checked Peter’s wrong understanding of his correct confession of Him as the Christ. By doing this, Jesus underscored the need to understand faith correctly. While faith comes from God’s revelation, understanding its content is a human pursuit, but a pursuit that is guided by the scriptures. In the scriptures, prophets like Isaiah announced the Suffering Servant of God. Today’s first reading is one prophecy in this regard.

The early Church, that is, Christians in the first few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, associated the Messiah with this Suffering Servant of God. Mark's Gospel came from this early Church under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It recorded this episode about Jesus' identity to provide the right understanding of Jesus as the Messiah. It had a hindsight privilege: in reality, Jesus had been crucified and thus fulfilled the prophecies of the Suffering Servant of God. However, His death was not His defeat, but His step to victory in His resurrection. Therein lay His power and the salvation He brought: a liberation much more important than a political one, for it brought eternal life.

Against the backdrop of eternal life, Jesus spelled out what following Him meant: *"renounce one's self, take up one's cross and follow Him"*. *"Following"* Jesus the suffering Messiah calls for the adoption of His attitude. It has to do first with *"renouncing one's self"*, which is, putting one's self aside in order to come to the aid of others, especially the poor and needy, which the second reading from James' letter highlights. Secondly, *"take up your cross"*; this flows from self-renunciation, for underpinning it is love. The end game is to possess the eternal life Jesus secured.

From this viewpoint, earthly life is subordinate to eternal life and to be lived for it. This point is clear in Jesus' declaration about *"saving one's life but losing it and losing one's life but saving it"*. It underpins His own death at which He lost His earthly life and resurrection at which He secured eternal life. It gives total sense to His call to all those who want to be His disciples to renounce themselves and take up their cross to follow Him.

Today's Gospel teaches that authentic faith has everything to do with life, a point St. James affirms in the second reading. Authentic faith translates into a life of relationship of love with God and with neighbour. Faith can be authentic only when it is enlightened by an understanding of who God is and what He wills. Such understanding of God comes from theology founded on the word of God. This word of God itself came to be written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit who guides the teaching authority of the Church to understand it correctly.

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 2:12,17-20; James 3:16-4:3; Mark 9:30-37

Why are my personal prayers and the community's prayers often not answered?

For sure, this is a question many adherents of different faiths are asking. Many non-believers exploit it to attack believers, as today's first reading points out. The "godless" are out to attack the "virtuous" on cynical grounds of doing them a favour. For the "virtuous" are God's children and claim that they enjoy His care and gentleness; and even when "*condemned to a shameful death*", He will "*look after them.*" To the extent their stance implies the belief of the "virtuous" that they are in God's loving embrace at death, the "godless" are right.

The reading from the letter of James hits the nail on the head as regards getting no answer from God to one's prayers. It identifies two attitudes that block God's answer. The first has to do with "*jealousy and ambition*" which give rise to "*disharmony and wicked things of every kind*". Indeed, ambition yields a jealous struggle for power often leading to bloodshed. It rejects "*wisdom from above*" which is God's answer in favour of one's ambition for power.

The second attitude is common; it has to do with "*the desires fighting inside*" the self. These desires derive from a personal ambition that drives the person to achieve it even by force, if need be. They underpin the person's prayer and turn it into one "*for something to indulge*" in them. Such a prayer is self-centred and self-serving. It closes itself to God's viewpoint which ensures the well-being of the individual in relation to that of the community.

The Gospel today sharply contrasts human ambition and desires with God's viewpoint and desire. God's viewpoint is reflected in Jesus' prediction about His passion, death and resurrection awaiting Him in Jerusalem, depicting the kind of Christ He was – the suffering Christ.

Just before this prediction, two important events took place: Jesus' transfiguration and His cure of an epileptic boy who was also a demoniac (cf. Mk. 9:1-20). At Jesus' transfiguration His Father bore Him this testimony: "*This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to Him*" (Mk. 9:7). This experience was Jesus' foretaste of His resurrection given to make sense of His violent death on the cross. In the second episode, the father of the epileptic boy brought him to

Jesus' disciples for a cure but they failed miserably. A great crowd had gathered to watch the entire event. Immediately after coming down from the mountain of transfiguration Jesus broke into the crowd to exorcise the demon.

The second part of today's Gospel unveils the reason for the disciples' failure to cure the epileptic boy. Even after Jesus' prediction regarding His death in Jerusalem, the disciples were arguing about who among them was the greatest. They were preoccupied with this ambition. Most likely, then, their attempt to cure the epileptic boy was to showcase their power and thus prove to be the greatest among them. Their question to Jesus as to why they had failed to cure the boy was very likely to catch the secret to power and ultimately achieve their ambition. Jesus' answer was straightforward: only by prayer could such a spirit be exorcised. But prayer must be offered with the right disposition.

In the second part of today's Gospel, Jesus spelled out the right disposition: the first, that is, the greatest, is one who makes himself last and servant of all. Such a person will have the well-being of others as his first concern. His prayer to God will reflect this fundamental mindset of his. What happens then? Whatever he prays to God for will be truly for the good of all and he will put in the necessary effort to bring it about. As he does so, God will give him the grace to achieve it. That is God's answer to his prayer.

A heart for the good of others and for the community ensures faithful and unceasing commitment to their wellbeing as well as genuinely working with others to bring it about. A believer with this heart not just turns to God in prayer but is also ready to play his/her part. His/her faith in God leaves an openness to "God's way" rather than "my way" and therefore an ability to recognize His answer in ways totally different from or beyond expectation.

For sure, God answers all prayers. In the light of the second reading, unanswered prayers are the result of one's wrong perception shaped by one's unfulfilled ambition. They could also be the result of one's passivity or unwillingness to do one's part. They could also come from one's narrow and selfish expectations. The reality is that God works in ways best not just for us, but for others as well – for the community at large, local as well as universal.

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Numbers 11:25-29; James 5:1-6; Mark 9:38-43,45,47-48

The desire for power is a human tendency. The struggle for power is a common phenomenon in our world.

Taken with last Sunday's Gospel, today's Gospel reading gives a good instance of this human tendency. Last Sunday, the Gospel narrated Jesus predicting His passion and death awaiting Him and checking His disciples' struggle to be the greatest among them. He highlighted the virtue of being "last of all" as indispensable for discipleship. As today's Gospel immediately follows that of last Sunday, it is right to assume their close connection.

In this connection, it is also right to assume that Jesus' prediction and teaching were still very fresh in the minds of His apostles in today's episode. Yet, however, John was still preoccupied with a past event: a man was casting out devils in Jesus' name and the apostles tried to stop him just because he was not one of them. The preoccupation betrayed a sense of monopoly which itself reflected a deep ambition for power. Only the apostles, so John thought, had the right to use Jesus' name to exorcise because He had chosen them to belong to an exclusive group. Yet, earlier on they had failed to drive a demon out of an epileptic boy.

John's sharing about the apostles' reaction to an exorcism inevitably raises a question: how could he pursue this matter immediately after Jesus had categorically checked His apostles' struggle for power? The underlying reason seems clear: an unconscious ambition for a position of power fuelling a sense of special privilege of belonging to a special group by Jesus' choice. That perceived privileged choice yielded a strong complex of superiority and exclusivity.

At the time of their call and choice by Jesus, the apostles left their families and possessions behind to follow Jesus. In the course of their following Him, they saw Him work many miracles, including even raising the dead to life and casting out devils. Indeed, He had manifested power over death and the devils. No doubt, such extraordinary power was impressive and attractive. Over time, the apostles allowed their experience of Jesus to lead them to covet ambitious desires for positions of power in His kingdom. These ambitions gradually took root in them. They surfaced in their arguments over who among them was the

greatest and in their attempt to stop the “outsider” from exorcising in Jesus’ name. And even after Jesus had checked them, their ambitions still remained and surfaced in John’s reference to this event.

It is noteworthy that in the first reading, Joshua, Moses’ righthand man, also had an acute sense of monopoly. Thus, when told that Eldad and Medad were prophesying, he urged Moses to stop them. This episode goes to show how far back in the history of God’s people the sense of monopoly reached. It led to a perception of privilege and exclusivity in God’s choice for a prophetic mission!

Moses’ response to Joshua was, in essence, no different from Jesus’ to John. Jealousy had no place in the Lord’s mission. His Spirit was not an exclusive monopoly! The prophetic mission was for the service of all and the Spirit was given to carry it out. Thus, the more prophets, the better the people would be served. In the same way, using the name of Jesus in one’s mission was not a privilege exclusively reserved for the apostles. As in last Sunday’s Gospel, Jesus again reiterated His call of His apostles to be servants of all.

A servant mentality would make Jesus’ disciples “give drink” to others on grounds that they too belonged to Him. Doing so would be rewarded. On the contrary, putting an obstacle to their sense of belonging would be a serious offence with serious consequences. Reward is identified as life in the kingdom and serious consequences as damnation in hell.

Struggle for power gives rise to jealousy and necessarily leads to putting the other(s) down, often regardless of consequences. An inevitable consequence is division, to say the least. But it could turn out to be warring factions. Our world is not lacking in examples.

In checking His apostles’ struggle to be the greatest and thus most powerful, Jesus was offering the way forward not just for the community of His disciples but also for the universal human community. The way forward is for the world community to be a human family which, in the final analysis, is God’s family. In that family, love is the governing principle of life. In love, everyone’s dignity and rights are upheld, while leadership is exercised in service.

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Genesis 2:18-24; Hebrews 2:9-11; Mark 10:2-16

The family is the most basic human community founded on blood. It is the first community to which any human person belongs. It is where Christian discipleship is lived most intensely.

Marriage and the family were instituted by God right at the beginning of creation. This is proclaimed in today's liturgy of the word. The first reading narrates God creating the man from the soil and the woman from his rib. She was a fitting companion for the man, for as he acknowledged, she was "*bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.*" For this reason, they became "*one flesh*", that is, they were bonded to each other in marriage.

This "*one flesh*" reflects the image of God in the man and woman in an earlier creation story (Gen. 1:26-27). For God is one because He is love. Though the Trinity does not figure in the creation story, God's words in Gen. 1:26, "*Let us make man in our image*", allude to a trinitarian decision. Total and perfect love undergirds the unity of the Trinity. In the same way, total love undergirds the "*one flesh*" between the man and his wife and fidelity sustains it.

Fidelity is another aspect of the image of God in the man and woman He created. Love within the Trinity is everlasting because the triune God is ever faithful. God's fidelity, however, is not confined to the Trinity, but also extended to His human creatures. For indeed the triune God is faithful to His love for all humankind. The fidelity of the man and his wife to each other in love reflects God's fidelity. Just as the unity within the Trinity is everlasting because divine fidelity is unfailing, so the "*one flesh*" in fidelity between the man and his wife is lifelong. In today's Gospel, Jesus affirms lifelong marriage as God's intention. To trap Him, the Pharisees throw Him a challenge on the permissibility of divorce. He clarifies that Moses allowed it because the people were unteachable, but insists: "*what God had united, man must not divide.*"

A third aspect of the image of God is a share in His creative power. Love is life-giving and productive. God's love led Him to create human beings and give them life. In their union of love, the man and the woman are not just to give life to each other but also to "create" life by bringing forth children. With these

children, they constitute a family. Their love from now on will not be confined to each other but extended to their children, reflecting the Trinitarian love.

The creative aspect of the image of God links the second part of today's Gospel with its first part. The second part revolves around children. While His disciples are indignant with children being brought to Him, Jesus commands, *"Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."* By this command of His, Jesus in a sense affirms the family as God's plan for the man and the woman in marriage. The family comes into existence when children are born from their parents' union of love. The family of love reflects the Trinity – the God of love.

In a true sense, the family is a primary cell of the universal family of God on earth. God's universal family is His kingdom in the making. God's kingdom belongs not just to children but to parents as well. For in God's family, all are God's children. As such, as today's Gospel upholds, it is not right for anyone to stop children from going to Jesus. He has come to proclaim and inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth. The point is clear: the kingdom of God is not an exclusive property for it belongs to everyone. Thus no one has the right to keep anyone away from it, especially those who do not count in society, including little children. From this viewpoint, every human family marked by true and faithful love reflects the kingdom of God in a real way.

"On the way" to Jerusalem, Jesus had been giving formation to His disciples. After checking their struggle for positions of power, His response to the Pharisees' question on divorce highlighted the importance of love and fidelity in marriage. This love and fidelity sustain the *"one flesh"* in marriage and the family, and reflect God's image. They call for a childlike disregard for self-importance and lead to the kingdom of God.

The family is the primary place where members reflect the image of God and live out their Christian discipleship to the fullest. For there love translates into total self-giving and yields unity. From there, it reaches out to others. In this sense, the family is a cell of the kingdom of God.

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 7:7-11; Hebrews 4:12-13; Mark 10:17-30

Eternal life is generally perceived as life after death. It is viewed as the goal of life on earth.

The story in today's Gospel touches on one practical aspect of the Christian belief in eternal life. Its author, Mark, narrates a rich man asking Jesus: "*Good master! What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" At surface level, the man's question appears to be paradoxical. For, "inheriting" conveys receiving a piece of property without having to work ("do" something) for it. But at its deeper level, it strikes at the root of the rich man's experience as well as his mind.

The man is materially rich because he has worked for it. With this wealth of his, he is assured of a good life on earth. But with the inevitability of death, he seeks to possess life after death. His earthly experience of wealth convinces him of the need to do the needful to inherit eternal life. When examined by Jesus, he confidently responds that he has faithfully kept the commandments Jesus lists out for him. For sure, his response is honest as he eagerly desires eternal life.

However, formulated mostly as prohibitions, the letter of the commandments is easy enough to observe. But the prohibitions have a spirit, an underlying purpose: it is to love one's neighbour. Jesus' challenge to the rich man underscores it: "*Go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven*". Love is the way to invest in heaven. Its returns are in the form of eternal life, the treasure in heaven. Jesus' invitation, "*then, come follow Me*", is grounded on love as His way of life. To follow Him is to love as He loves. He will lead those who so to eternal life in heaven.

The Gospel story notes that the rich man's "*face fell and he went away sad.*" Why? Because he has been keeping the letter of the commandments faithfully, but that is still not enough. How disappointing indeed! Now he is required to part with his wealth to help the poor in love. There is just too much to give up. Here, he shows he is unwilling to keep the spirit of the commandments. He fails to realize that good life in heaven, that is, eternal life, makes life on earth good as well. He has not experienced this because his earthly wealth is an obstacle to it. He is therefore overcome with sadness. Perhaps, his current sadness is a culmination of his frequent bouts of sadness in life, despite his wealth and good

life. For he cannot be sure if he will have a similarly good life after death. That is why he runs to Jesus to seek certitude of it.

Following the rich man's negative response, Jesus remarks: *"How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God."* His hyperbole of *"a camel passing through the eye of a needle"* drives home the point that entry into the kingdom of God is not possible if it is made secondary to all earthly values rather than the goal of life. In other words, no one who is unwilling to do what it takes to reach the goal of life can ever hope to achieve it. To be sure, no one can ever achieve eternal life by their own efforts. That is why Jesus has come to achieve it for all. One needs to follow Him to inherit eternal life, by adopting His way of life and loving others.

The demand to sell everything one owns and give the money away is humanly unreasonable and impossible. Realizing this, Jesus' disciples ask, *"In that case, who can be saved?"* Jesus' answer to the disciples' question is, *"For men, it is impossible, but not for God: because everything is possible for God."* It highlights eternal life as a gift from God. God gives it to everyone; so, everyone can inherit it. Thus, even if one finds it hard to part with one's wealth totally, one's readiness to love and help the poor is enough for a start. With God's grace, the giving will grow. In this regard, it is noteworthy that while Jesus uses a hyperbole in His response to His disciples, He does not shut the rich man off from eternal life.

Jesus' hyperbole leads Peter to ask, *"What about us? We have left everything and followed you."* Peter's question is significant against the backdrop of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem where, as He foresees, He will be persecuted and put to death. Jesus wants His apostles to be aware that following Him may land them in persecution too. In the light of this, His response, while assuring His disciples a hundredfold reward on earth and eternal life, also warns them of persecution to come. Jesus does not restrict His response to His twelve apostles but gives it a universal extension to include all disciples.

From today's Gospel story, we as Jesus' disciples are first given the assurance of God's offer of eternal life to us and thus called to make it the goal of our earthly lives. This means, our desire to inherit eternal life must motivate us to love our neighbour and come to the aid of the poor and the needy. In all this, we are called to count on God's love and grace, for whom nothing is impossible.

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 53:10-11; Hebrews 4:14-16; Mark 10:35-45

Selective or half-hearted listening blocks correct or full understanding, or even gives rise to misunderstanding. More often than not, this adversely impacts relationships. Inability or refusal to listen makes understanding altogether impossible and obstructs growth in relationships. I guess there are various other types or degrees of listening.

Today's Gospel presents Jesus' disciples displaying a couple of types of listening. To capture them, account must be taken of the context of the Gospel episode. The context is Jesus making His way to Jerusalem with His disciples. There, as He has predicted three times earlier on, He will be made to suffer and condemned to death; but on the third day He will rise from the dead. Jesus takes opportunity of His journey with His disciples to form them so as to enable them to take on His way of life. In this sense, it can be said that on the way to His destiny in Jerusalem, Jesus is forming His disciples in the "way" of His own life and ministry.

What is Jesus' way of life? Today's Gospel spells it out thus: *"The Son of Man Himself did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."* This way of life is willed by God, as Isaiah prophesied in the first reading: *"Through him what the Lord wishes will be done... By his sufferings shall my servant justify many, taking their faults on himself."* Isaiah's prophecy throws light on what Jesus in the Gospel means by *"giving His life as a ransom for many"*. It is *"to justify many by taking their faults on himself."* He has come to take our place to pay the death penalty due to our sins so as to bring us forgiveness of sins.

That is Jesus' way of life and all along on their way to Jerusalem He has been forming His disciples to take it on. But unfortunately, they have not been listening fully. Their minds are preoccupied with positions of authority, power and honour as the world practises them. Today's Gospel presents the culmination of their unbridled ambition. The two sons of Zebedee, James and John, boldly ask Jesus in no uncertain terms for a place at His right and at His left in His glory. They are aiming for the highest places in Jesus' kingdom. That ambition has been brewing in them and now that Jesus has three times revealed to them His fate in Jerusalem, they feel the urgency to make their request before it is too late.

The indignation of the other ten with these two brothers betrays the same ambition in them. In fact, they should have no reason to be indignant since, if such positions exist, they are free for all and all have equal right to battle for them. From this viewpoint, their indignation seems to be turned in on themselves: while harbouring the ambition, they have not had the courage to make it known to Jesus and they have now lost out to the two brothers.

Their ambition and struggle to be the greatest have blocked the listening ears of the twelve. Jesus' ongoing teaching has not sunk in or they have misunderstood it. His three predictions about His suffering and violent death have not won their concern or sympathy. Or perhaps, they have only selective listening, choosing to hear only Jesus' prediction about His rising from the dead.

Jesus' way of life goes against the world's mindset about power and authority: *"their so-called rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt."* This world's mentality has penetrated the disciples and prevented them from listening to Jesus fully or correctly. It has given rise to a wrong understanding of discipleship and thus of their relationship with Him. He, therefore, undertakes to check them in no uncertain terms.

Jesus' disciples are to steer away from the ways of the world and adopt His way of life: *"to be great is to serve and to be first is to be last"*. They must be ready to give their lives for others. They cannot do this *"as a ransom for many"*, for only He can do it. But, they are to do whatever it takes to bring the salvation He has achieved to others. For this mission, the right disposition is a willingness to serve – that is, to make sacrifices for others, certainly not to lord it over others.

We claim to be disciples of Christ. His teaching to the twelve in today's Gospel must therefore apply to us. The question each one of us needs to ask is: Am I listening to Jesus? If so, how am I doing it – selectively, partially or wholly? If not, why? Are there self-centred preoccupations, obsessions or concerns that are blocking me? What are my experiences of the consequences of my listening or not listening to Jesus? What is Jesus calling me to do?

THIRTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 31:7-9; Hebrews 5:1-6; Mark 10:46-52

Blindness is a serious impediment in many respects. For example, it blocks one's vision of surroundings and thus one's experience of the beauty of nature. It reduces confidence and slows down movement. The list goes on.

Today's Gospel narrates a blind man by the name of Bartimaeus seeking a cure from Jesus. The story is set on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem with His disciples and a large crowd, at a point when He had just left Jericho. This means He was drawing close to Jerusalem, the city of His destiny.

We recall that Jesus had been taking the opportunity of His journey to Jerusalem to teach His disciples about His way of life. In His teaching, He had thrice foretold the violent death awaiting Him in Jerusalem to be followed by His resurrection on the third day. In this way, He was to give His life as a ransom for all fallen humankind so that they might receive salvation: forgiveness of sin and eternal life. His death and resurrection were to culminate His mission.

Those called or wishing to be His disciples must adopt His way of life. To this end, He repeatedly checked the unbridled ambition of His twelve to be the greatest among them and instructed them to serve as He was serving. However, they persisted in pursuing their ambition, arguing among themselves who was the greatest. Last Sunday's Gospel depicted a showdown among them: the two brothers James and John plucked up the courage to request Jesus for the highest conceivable positions of authority and power in His glory; this drew the indignation of the other ten.

The unbridled ambition of the twelve made them blind to what Jesus was all about, despite Peter's earlier correct confession of His identity as the Christ and His repeated teaching to serve. The story of the miraculous cure of the blind man is positioned here to drive home a few important points about the disciples' blindness and what they must do to follow Jesus. Some details of the story are significant.

The blind Bartimaeus *“heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth”* and shouted, *“Son of David, Jesus, have pity on me.”* This was his confession of faith which fundamentally was similar to Peter’s profession at Caesarea Philippi. *“The Christ”* professed by Peter was the Son of David, that is, descended from him. In that faith, Bartimaeus humbled himself to seek Jesus’ mercy and compassion, that is, His salvation. This sharply contrasted with the ambition of the twelve for authority, power and glory.

For what he had done, many of Jesus’ disciples *“scolded”* Bartimaeus and *“told him to keep quiet”*. Such a response from the disciples went against the very essence of discipleship which was to serve. They were attempting to block him from Jesus and in this way showed that they were blind to what He was about. Bartimaeus’ persistence in his humble request for Jesus’ mercy and compassion also sharply contrasted with the twelve’s persistent ambition for authority, power and glory. It drew Jesus’ order to His disciples: *“Call him here.”*

Jesus’ response to Bartimaeus’ humble request was actually a call; it was a call because of his faith and humility. Bartimaeus’ response was spontaneous and dramatic: *“throwing off his cloak, he jumped for joy and went to Jesus.”* His physical gestures were all directed to one purpose: *“Master, let me see again.”* For sure, he desired restoration of physical sight. But Jesus commended his faith and pronounced salvation on him: *“Go, your faith has saved you.”* Following that, *“immediately his sight returned and he followed Him along the road.”*

Jesus restored Bartimaeus’ physical sight in merciful response to his request in faith but also as a sign of his salvation. In this salvation, he “followed” Jesus to His destiny in Jerusalem, in response to His call of him. In other words, he became a disciple of Jesus, and a genuine one at that. In his faith and humility, Bartimaeus is presented as the kind of disciple Jesus had been wanting His twelve apostles to be. Like him, they must *“throw off their cloak”*, that is, their ambition with which they have been deeply obsessed. Their ambition had led them to a jealous competition with each other. It had blocked all joy and spirit of self-sacrifice in the service of others. They needed to be cured of their blindness. We too need the same cure to be genuine disciples of the Lord.

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Deuteronomy 6:2-6; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 12:28-34

Over the past several Sundays we have been following Jesus on His long journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. He has now finally reached His destination where He is kept busy for a few days before His way to the cross on Calvary.

Today's Gospel reading narrates one episode in Jesus' busy days in Jerusalem. A scribe approaches Him to ask: "*Which is the first of all commandments?*" This question must have been preoccupying the scribe because the Jewish law code has 613 commandments covering all aspects of life. Jesus' answer quotes a sacred text, Dt. 6:4-5, found in the first reading. The text is commonly referred to by its two opening words in the Hebrew text: "*Shema Israel*" ("Listen, O Israel"). It is sacred and so, a devout Jew recites it three times a day.

The text extends a call to every Israelite to listen to what it proclaims. The content is a confession of faith followed by a commandment. The confession, "*The Lord our God is the one Lord,*" is of utmost importance because of the rampant idolatrous practices of the day. It is a call to return to the true God.

The return to the one true God calls for wholehearted love for Him: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength.*" For, He has been looking after His people all along and meeting their needs. And even when they abandon Him, He still loves them, calls them back and forgives them.

In His answer to the scribe, Jesus goes beyond what the Mosaic Law prescribes. He brings in a few new elements. First of all, in addition to the "*Shema Israel*", He brings in another commandment: "*You must love your neighbour as yourself.*" This commandment is stipulated in Lev. 19:18. Although Jesus qualifies love of neighbour as "*the second*" commandment and the love of God as "*the first*", by bringing them together He is driving home the point that they are inter-related. Observance of one is also the observance of the other. Their inter-relationship is a new understanding Jesus brings to the two commandments.

Next, Jesus brings the concept of neighbour to a level beyond what the Mosaic Law perceives. The Book of Leviticus sees neighbour as essentially a fellow Jew and in certain cases a foreigner who has been integrated into a Jewish family. But for Jesus, neighbour includes one's enemies as well. So, every person is a neighbour. The underlying reason is simple: God has created everyone in His own image and likeness. Loving God the Creator leads to love of His human creatures.

Then Jesus presents the reward for loving God and neighbour in terms of the kingdom of God. The first reading equates the *"fear of God"* with *"keeping His commandments"* and assures its reward in earthly terms: *"prosperity"*, *"great increase [in population]"* and *"long life in the land where milk and honey flow"*. That is because there has been no revelation as yet about eternal life. In His commendation of the scribe's appreciation of the two commandments of love as *"more important than any holocaust or sacrifice"*, Jesus says: *"You are not far from the kingdom of God."* He replaces the land in the Mosaic Law with the kingdom of God, long life on earth with eternal life in the kingdom.

Jesus' words of commendation to the scribe have a significant implication. To be *"not far from the kingdom"* is still to be outside it. The scribe has yet to enter it. In order to do that, he now needs to put the two commandments into practice, since he has understood their value. For this, he would do well to follow Jesus on His way to the cross and in His way of the cross.

For Jesus' death on the cross manifests His total love for all fallen humankind, because by it He is taking their place to pay the death penalty due to their sins. At the same time, it is His obedience to His Father's will to save all fallen humankind and restore to them His image which they have lost by their sins. Jesus obeys His Father totally because He loves Him with all His heart, mind and soul.

Jesus is inviting the scribe to witness His love of God and neighbour to be manifested in His total self-giving in His way of the cross. It is in fact a call to discipleship which in essence consists in putting the double commandment of love into practice. In the final analysis, Jesus is inviting the scribe to follow Him into the kingdom of God, to enjoy eternal life there. Jesus is extending the same invitation to all of us. What is our response?

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

1 Kings 17:10-16; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

Doing charity or donating to charities, happily, is not uncommon. Humanitarian causes, thank God, do draw people's attention and heart. "Heroic charity" which involves total self-giving is less common.

"Heroic charity" is what the stories of the first and Gospel readings acclaim. Both cases involve a widow. The Old Testament depicts God paying special attention to widows and orphans. For they are people without stable support in all respects of life. Widows are often exploited because of their vulnerability.

In the first reading, the widow is from Sidon, a town in a Gentile region. She has a son. In his flight from King Ahab, the prophet Elijah goes to that town and there he encounters the widow. The prophet has called on a drought as a punishment for the king and his people who have turned to idols and pagan gods, especially Baal believed to be the god of rain, fertility and good harvest. The king is all out to do away with the prophet for what he has done.

In that drought, the woman struggles to survive and look after her son. She is on her way out to gather sticks to cook what she believes to be the last meal for the two of them. At this point Elijah arrives and asks first for a little water and then a scrap of bread. In the given situation, the prophet's request is a huge demand calling for a heroic response. He assures the widow that the "*God of Israel*" will grant her a continuous supply of food till the rain comes. Very likely, the widow finds it difficult to accept that assurance, because the "*God of Israel*" is not her God, and she refers to Him as "the Lord your (Elijah's) God." Moreover, she and her son are also in dire need and the little that she has is barely enough for their last meal before they die. Surely their need comes before that of Elijah.

The widow makes a heroic decision and sacrifice in order to meet the prophet's request. Her reward is exactly what Elijah has promised: her "*jar of meal was not spent nor the jug of oil emptied.*" For sure, the "*God of Israel*" is looking after her. He does not make any distinction between Israelites and Gentiles. He is the God of all peoples. In addition, He sees her heroic generosity towards a person in need without any racial regard. In her poverty, she gives the little, which is all she has, to feed a hungry beggar, putting his welfare above that of her own and her son's. The other widow figures in the Gospel story. She draws Jesus' special attention and praise. She has only "*two small coins, the equivalent of a penny*". She puts all

that into the temple treasury, for the maintenance of the temple. She could put in just one coin and keep the other for her own use. But her love for God represented by the temple moves her to put in both coins, *“all she has to live on”*. That means, she is offering her whole life to God.

Jesus points out the contrast between this widow’s whole-hearted generosity and the contribution of the rich from the *“money they have left over”*, that is, from their surplus. In this contrast, she has contributed more than all the others. Hers is a heroic act of generosity, a heroic love offering, amounting to a heroic commitment of life to God.

Further light is shed on the widow by the caution Jesus raises against the scribes in the first part of the Gospel. These scribes seek public attention and acknowledgement. Behind the scenes, they *“swallow the property of widows”*, when they should be looking after them. It may be that Jesus is alluding to a possibility or perhaps even to a habitual practice of misappropriating or misusing the temple contributions. But this possible exploitation does not deter the widow from putting all that she has into the temple treasury.

The episode of the poor widow’s total self-offering is an appropriate sequel to last Sunday’s Gospel. We recall the story: a scribe posed the question of the greatest commandment to Jesus. In response, Jesus cited the *Shema Israel* (“Listen Israel”) text from the Mosaic Law, highlighting love of God with all one’s heart, soul and strength. He then quoted another law: *“Love your neighbour as yourself.”* The widow in the Gospel lives out the *Shema Israel*, loving God whole-heartedly. The widow of Sidon in the first reading is an epitome of one who loves one’s neighbour as oneself, regardless of race and religion.

The two widows together depict true Christian discipleship. They offer us genuine lessons of love. Love is Christ’s commandment for His disciples: *“Love one another as I have loved you”* – total love. From this standpoint, it is also the identifying mark of discipleship: *“By this all people are to know you for My disciples: the love you have for one another.”* By tying them together in last Sunday’s Gospel, Jesus is declaring that love of neighbour is a true expression of love for God. Heroic love for neighbour is an unmistakable sign of loving God with all one’s heart, mind and soul.

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Daniel 12:1-3; Hebrews 10:11-14,18; Mark 13:24-32

Intriguing yet frightening! This may be the kind of response to scriptural passages announcing wars and natural catastrophes as signs of the coming of the end of the world or end-time. Today's first and Gospel readings are two of these scriptural passages. How are we to understand them?

A correct understanding must take into account the apocalyptic characteristic of these texts. Apocalyptic writings deploy mysterious symbols from the celestial and cosmic realms like angels and stars, earthly catastrophes and wars, the human and animal world, and even numbers. Usually, they address times of hardship and suffering, especially persecution. Their purpose is to offer encouragement and hope. To understand their message, the symbols used must be decodified; in other words, their code must be broken and deciphered. Otherwise, instead of encouragement and hope, these apocalyptic symbols may be taken literally and can paralyse the addressees in fear.

As the Church approaches the end of her liturgical year, she draws attention to the end-time. She therefore takes up apocalyptic texts for the Liturgy of the Word in her Eucharistic celebration. The first reading today is from the Book of Daniel, which is a heavily apocalyptic book. The Gospel reading is from chapter 13 of Mark's Gospel, a chapter presenting Jesus' discourse, also in apocalyptic categories, on the last times or end-time. Both these readings were written with a persecution in mind.

The persecution forming the backdrop of the first reading was that carried out against the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century B.C. This king was all out to destroy religions, especially Judaism. In his campaign, he desecrated the Temple of Jerusalem and forced Jews to eat pork, an unclean and therefore forbidden food. To offer encouragement and hope, the first reading presents two important points. The first concerns "*Michael, the great prince*": he will "*mount guard over the people*". This archangel, armed with God's power, will bring deliverance to the persecuted people of God. The second point concerns the resurrection from the dead: "*many will awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting disgrace.*" This resurrection is the ultimate deliverance as it will be from death – not in the sense that one will not die, but in the sense that one will rise from the dead to "*everlasting life*". For sure, while the first deliverance comes from God's archangel, vested with God's power, the final one

comes from God Himself. The message offered is: God is watching and will act with His power.

The Gospel takes the reality of the announcement of the resurrection in the first reading further. It depicts what will happen at the end-time: *“The Son of Man (will come) in the clouds with great power and glory... and send the angels to gather His chosen from the four winds, from the ends of the world to the ends of heaven.”* The Son of Man refers to Jesus Christ. He will come a second time at the end of time to gather all those raised from the dead in the kingdom of God. Again, the power of God is highlighted. It is wielded by Jesus the Son of Man.

This power of God is supreme. When Jesus comes with it, cosmic bodies will submit to it. That is the meaning of the declaration, *“the sun will be darkened, the moon will lose its brightness, the stars will come falling from heaven and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”* In the same way, death which seems to have an inescapable hold over every living being will be defeated. For Jesus will raise the dead to life and bring them into the kingdom of God to possess eternal life there.

Jesus’ supreme power will be manifested even before the end time – at His own resurrection from the dead. It eclipses all apocalyptic features. Jesus’ resurrection is truly *“near, at the very gates”*, as He gives His discourse in His final week in Jerusalem. Just as the fig tree indicates that *“summer is near”* when *“its twigs grow supple and its leaves come out”*, signalling new life, so also Jesus’ resurrection proves His victory over death and signals the eternal life He is leading those raised from the dead to possess in the kingdom of God.

Mark’s Gospel took its final shape when Jesus’ disciples suffered persecution in the hands of the Romans. This persecution was only to be expected because Jesus had predicted it and He had been crucified. But His resurrection from the dead should serve to assure the eternal life in the kingdom, just as the fig tree signals new life with its new foliage.

The message of encouragement and hope, couched in apocalyptic categories, is offered not just to those suffering persecution, but also to us as we face the ups and downs of everyday life. God is there with His power to sustain us and, when death comes our way, to raise us to life. Jesus will bring us to His kingdom.

FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING

Daniel 7:13-14; Apocalypse 1:5-8; Mark 18:33-37

The Church concludes her liturgical year with the Feast of Christ the King. This is because the liturgical year celebrates God's work of salvation: from the promise of the Messiah till His second coming at the end of time. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God made Man, anointed and sent into our world more than two thousand years ago, to bring salvation to all fallen humankind. He will come in all His glory and power at the end of time to bring saved men and women into His kingdom.

Jesus' kingdom is not of this world; it is the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God. It is totally different from the kingdoms of this world. Jesus is truly King. At His first coming, His kingship was manifested in ways diametrically opposed to the ways of earthly kingships. Today's Gospel highlights it. It depicts powerlessness and subjection to human kingship because it does not subscribe to violence and retaliation.

The dialogue between Jesus the King and Pilate, representative of Caesar the Roman Emperor, centres around His kingship. Pilate's question on it narrows it down to earthly categories: *"Are you the king of the Jews?"* In Pilate's mind, it could only be limited to this race, because in the Roman Empire, only Caesar was Emperor – King of the entire Empire. Every other leader was his representative to a particular colony subjected to him and thus governed in his name.

Jesus' answer was in the form of a question: *"Do you ask this of your own accord, or have others spoken to you about Me?"* The question was deliberate and it threw Pilate's very narrow misconception back to him. Pilate was confused by the entire situation: if Jesus was king of the Jews, how could His subjects, *"your own people and the chief priests"*, have handed Him over to him? Where was his power? Where was His authority? What kind of kingship did He possess?

At this point, Jesus' corrected Pilate's misconception and cleared his confusion. He asserted, *"Mine is not a kingdom of this world; if My kingdom were of this world, My men would have fought to prevent My being surrendered to the Jews."* "Fight" belongs to the way of earthly kingdoms, as they engage in rivalry for power and domination. Jesus was a victim of this predicament within the "kingdom of the Jews" entrusted to Pilate.

Jesus then elaborated on His kingdom: *“Yes, I am a king. I was born for this, I came into the world for this: to bear witness to the truth.”* His kingdom is marked by “truth”. That truth is multifaceted and time allows only a passing mention of just a few important aspects here. It has first of all to do with who God is and Jesus’ own relationship with God His Father in the Spirit. Then, it touches on God’s loving plan of salvation for fallen humankind, for which God anointed and sent His Son Jesus. Salvation consists of forgiveness of sins and bestowal of eternal life. Receiving it calls for living in love – love for God and love for one another. In this light, Jesus’ kingdom is one of love which embraces justice and forgiveness, mutual respect and acceptance, peace and harmony.

Coming with His Kingship marked by truth, Jesus did not have recourse to violence. With His skill in drawing people to Himself, He could have incited a revolt in His favour. But that was out of the question. The witness He bore to the truth was His non-violence, refrain from retaliation, acceptance of the unreasonable persecution and eventual crucifixion, marked by His forgiveness of His enemies. Concluding His dialogue with Pilate, He remarked: *“All who are on the side of truth listen to My voice.”* His disciples were those who accepted His witness and believed in the truth He conveyed. In this acceptance, they would put into practice what He had instructed them to do: love God and love neighbour. Their lives of love are signs of Jesus’ continued kingship on earth.

Though belonging to His kingdom, Jesus’ disciples live in this world. Despite the many different values and characteristics of earthly kingdoms, they are to remain faithful to the values Jesus taught, so that like Him they will bear witness to the truth in all its many facets. Jesus will come again at the end of time. This second coming of His will be marked with power and glory to which, as the first reading from the Book of Daniel depicts, all nations and their kings will submit. For indeed, He will manifest Himself as the universal and eternal King!

When Jesus comes in all His power and glory at the end of time, He will bring into His heavenly kingdom all His faithful disciples, those *“who are on the side of truth and listen to Him.”* This is the assurance the Church is offering us from Jesus’ teaching at the end of her liturgical year. In the light of it, we are called to take stock of ourselves to see how we have lived in the past year as well as make a resolution to live better in the coming new liturgical year.

YEAR C

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SEASONS AND FEASTS	SUNDAYS IN ORDINARY TIME
ADVENT	
First Sunday 1	Baptism of the Lord 63
Second Sunday..... 3	Second Sunday 65
Third Sunday 5	Third Sunday 67
Fourth Sunday 7	Fourth Sunday 69
	Fifth Sunday 71
CHRISTMAS	
Christmas Midnight 9	Sixth Sunday 73
Christmas Day 11	Seventh Sunday..... 75
Holy Family 13	Eighth Sunday 77
Epiphany 15	Ninth Sunday 79
	Tenth Sunday 81
LENT	
Ash Wednesday 17	Eleventh Sunday 83
First Sunday 19	Twelfth Sunday 85
Second Sunday 21	Thirteenth Sunday 87
Third Sunday 23	Fourteenth Sunday 89
Fourth Sunday 25	Fifteenth Sunday 91
Fifth Sunday 27	Sixteenth Sunday 93
HOLY WEEK & EASTER TRIDUUM	
Passion / Palm Sunday 29	Seventeenth Sunday 95
Holy Thursday 31	Eighteenth Sunday 97
Good Friday 33	Nineteenth Sunday 99
Easter Vigil 35	Twentieth Sunday 101
EASTER	
Easter Sunday 37	Twenty-first Sunday 103
Second Sunday 39	Twenty-second Sunday 105
Third Sunday 41	Twenty-third Sunday 107
Fourth Sunday 43	Twenty-fourth Sunday 109
Fifth Sunday 45	Twenty-fifth Sunday 111
Sixth Sunday 47	Twenty-sixth Sunday 113
Ascension 49	Twenty-seventh Sunday 115
Seventh Sunday 51	Twenty-eighth Sunday 117
Pentecost 53	Twenty-ninth Sunday 119
FEASTDAYS	
Holy Trinity 55	Thirtieth Sunday 121
Body and Blood of Christ 57	Thirty-first Sunday 123
Assumption 59	Thirty-second Sunday 125
All Saints 61	Thirty-third Sunday 127
	Christ the King 129

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Jeremiah 35:14-16; 1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2; Luke 21:25-28,34-36

In a serious disaster or critical situation, fear and panic, helplessness and a sense of hopelessness can cloud God's presence completely.

That was the experience of the people of Israel in exile: the northerners in Assyria and southerners in Babylonia. The Babylonians had invaded and conquered Judah, and destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its Temple. The Temple was God's dwelling place on earth. Jerusalem in which the Temple was sited was therefore considered God's city. Their destruction meant the loss of God's presence for His people. Over and above all that, the exile brought the people far away from their homeland and thus from the presence of God as well.

In this situation of vacuum arising from their feeling of God's absence, the people longed for His presence and cried for it. In His response, He promised through the prophets that He would come into their midst. Today's first reading taken from the Book of Jeremiah carried such a promise: *"I will raise a virtuous branch for David"* – for the land of Israel and for the land of Judah. That promise had to do with the Messiah, the Saviour to descend from the line of David.

David was the greatest king the people of God ever had. But unfortunately most of his successors were corrupt, dishonest, unjust and exploiting the people. Corruption and exploitation, injustice and dishonesty led to the sufferings of many citizens and made them very poor. They had brought about the fall of both the northern and southern kingdoms and the exile of their subjects. Against this backdrop, the promise of the Messiah meant a lot for the people. For the Messiah would be a king of honesty and integrity. His reign would mark the land of Israel as one of integrity so that its city would be given the name *"The Lord-our-integrity"*. The promise assured the exiles that God was going to act. That meant He was still with them.

For the exiles, God fulfilled His promise by moving Cyrus the Persian King to decree and work out their return to their homeland. But the definitive fulfilment came when God sent His Son into our world. The Son of God emptied Himself of His divinity to become man. He was born into the line of David and took the name Immanuel which meant "God-with-us", thereby indicating God's presence not just with the Jews but also with the entire humankind. God Himself had given Him the name "Jesus" which meant "YHWH saves", because He was to

bring salvation to the whole world. He will come again at the end of time to bring the righteous to His kingdom.

Today's Gospel announces Jesus' second coming at the end of time in apocalyptic categories: cosmic, celestial and terrestrial catastrophes. In the midst of these catastrophes, people "*will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory*". Jesus' second coming will be a manifestation of God's indestructible presence. Thus, Jesus exhorts, "*Stand erect, hold your heads high, because your liberation is at hand.*" That liberation will be admission into the eternal presence of God in His kingdom.

But unfortunately, as Jesus warned, there would likely be a "*coarsening of hearts through debauchery, drunkenness and cares of life*". These are only a few of the many typical sins human beings commit. Jesus is asking us to "*watch*", that is, to be on our guard against indulging in sins and numbing our hearts to them. For then we will have been trapped in our sins.

Watching requires of us to "*stay awake*" and "*pray at all times*". What are we to pray for? Two things. The first thing is "*for the strength to survive all that is going to happen*". In the light of the catastrophes, this object of prayer has to do with the courage to face Jesus at His second coming. For His purpose then is to judge all humankind and lead the faithful ones into His kingdom. This purpose underpins the second object of prayer: "*to stand with confidence before the Son of Man*". The confidence comes from a moral certitude of being admitted into God's eternal presence in His kingdom.

The experience of the presence and absence of God is really common. As we take steps – one step at a time – to treasure His presence and not crowd Him out our lives through our sins, we will reach a stage when we will be ready for the second coming of Jesus. Then we will stand erect and hold our heads high, ready to meet Him with confidence, for we are certain that He will lead us into the eternal presence of God in His kingdom.

The Church's liturgical year begins with Advent to serve as a waiting and preparation for Christmas, the first coming of Christ. On surface level, the focus on the end-time in the liturgy of the word seems to be out of place. But because Christ's first coming took place more than two thousand years ago, we are now awaiting His second coming. From this standpoint, part of our purpose of celebrating Christmas is to deepen our certitude of His second coming. This certitude motivates us to "*watch and pray*" as we prepare ourselves for it.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Baruch 5:1-9; Philippians 1:3-6,8-11; Luke 3:1-6

Human history seems to be shaped by humankind, especially their leaders. Generally, it is leaders who make decisions for their nations but in consultation with citizens. Dictatorial leadership leaves no part for the people.

God is present in the midst of humankind. What role does He play in human history? Today's Gospel gives us hints of His role, in the mission of John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet to announce and prepare for the coming of Jesus. The Gospel depicts human history, international and local, as the backdrop for John's ministry. The world's supreme leader then was the Roman Emperor, Tiberius Caesar. He had appointed representatives to exercise his universal rule in local regions. In Palestine, he had Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judaea, Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip, the tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias, the tetrarch of Abilene. There were religious leaders as well: the high priests, Annas and Caiaphas. For sure, Caesar, the Roman Emperor, was the one to make policies for all his subjects. His local representatives ensured the faithful execution of his policies in the respective regions of their charge. From this viewpoint, the history of the Jewish people was to a great extent shaped by their secular leaders in different generations. Their religious leaders had their jurisdiction confined only to the religious sphere.

The Gospel reading today situates John's mission "*in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar's reign*" – that is, in a very definite period (29 A.D.) in the history of his people as well as in the history of the world. Both levels of history had been shaped by secular and political leadership, supported by religious leadership. As Jesus' forerunner, John announced and prepared the people of his generation for His coming. In Jesus, God came into concrete history as it was, with its political, social and religious realities as they were. In doing so, God bore with His people and all humankind the good and bad effects of the policies of both the secular and religious leaders.

From this viewpoint, God was side-lined with His people by the powers-that-be. Thus, His "*word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness*" where John was living, perhaps to be free from policies against God's will, but certainly to prepare himself for his ministry as Jesus' forerunner. After receiving God's word,

John “went through the whole Jordan district proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”. Three interconnected elements characterised John’s mission as Jesus’ forerunner: baptism, repentance and forgiveness. To obtain forgiveness of sins, one would need to repent and go to him for baptism.

But John’s mission was oriented towards Jesus. The Gospel according to John narrates John the Baptist pointing Jesus out to his disciples: “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29). John was always aware that forgiveness of sins came from Jesus, not him, and his mission was to lead his disciples to Jesus. He himself remained “a voice crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare a way for the Lord; make His paths straight.’”

Repentance is a change of heart. Only this change of heart can guarantee better policies for humankind, which today’s Gospel depicts in these terms: “Every valley will be filled in; every mountain and hill be laid low; winding ways will be straightened and rough roads made smooth.” In Jesus God broke into human history to take away the sins of the world. But every person, including all leaders, must make a free decision to accept Jesus’ work of salvation – forgiveness of sins and eternal life. The free decision starts with repentance and leads to justice and love, policies depicted as levelling of terrain and straightening of roads.

It is only this positive response that will move leaders to work out policies for the good of everyone and citizens to respect and accept one another in love. In this way, leaders and people will shape history in line with the salvation that Jesus came to bring to the world and for which John the Baptist prepared the people of his time. It is only then that in the end “all mankind shall see the salvation of God.”

God broke into our human history through Jesus to take away all our sins so that we would align our lives and history with His design. His design is for all of us to share in His eternal life in His kingdom of truth and justice, peace and love. Advent celebrates God coming into our world through Jesus and rings out His call to us to turn away from our sinful ways and accept His offer of life.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Zephaniah 3:14-18; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:10-18

Traditionally, the Church calls today “Gaudete (Rejoice) Sunday” or “Sunday of Joy”. Joy is the red thread running through all three readings.

The joy proclaimed in all these readings is not to be confused or even identified with that popularly conceived of. This latter springs from success, wealth, fame or any worldly achievement and does not last. It easily vanishes in the face of problems and failures, sicknesses and sufferings. On the contrary, biblical joy is stable and lasting because it is rooted in God’s love. For sure, God’s love is constant and consistent, enduring and everlasting.

In the first reading, the prophet Zephaniah, addressing the people of God as “*daughter of Jerusalem*” and “*daughter of Zion*”, called on them to “*shout for joy*” and “*rejoice with all their heart.*” These people had abandoned their God for idolatry. Among the idols was wealth which they had resorted to corruption and cheating to obtain. They thought wealth was going to give them joy. All along, the prophet had been condemning these sinful practices and announced God’s harsh punishments for them. One form of punishment was conquest and domination of the people by foreign powers. When that came, all their wealth would be gone and of course their joy would vanish along with it.

In today’s first reading, the prophet changed his tone and message; he proclaimed joy. This was because he saw God coming to intervene in love by “*repealing their sentence and driving their enemies away*”. For sure, God’s power was far greater than that of all the enemies put together. There was no doubt that to protect His people, He could stay any form of attack from their enemies. But more than that, the prophet assured the people: “*The Lord, the king of Israel, the Lord your God is in your midst.*” Indeed, God’s presence in their midst guaranteed everything else of concern and importance. Above all, as the reading asserts, “*He will renew you by His love*” and in this renewal, “*He will dance with shouts of joy for you.*” God Himself would radiate His joy in His love for His people. That joy was surely enduring and lasting.

The second reading depicts this joy in terms of being “*always happy in the Lord*” and gives the reason for it: “*the Lord is very near*”. It ought to be noted that the Letter to the Philippians speaks from the perspective of the Lord’s second coming at the end of time. Since its timing is unknown, it is wise to anticipate its imminence so as to prepare well for it. For then the Lord’s coming brings joy.

While the second reading speaks of the Lord's second coming, the Gospel today alludes to it and proclaims the imminence of His first coming. John the Baptist appeared on the scene. His mission was to prepare the hearts of people primarily for Jesus' coming which was so imminent that *"a feeling of expectancy had grown among the people who were beginning to think that John might be the Christ"*. John very humbly and honestly disclaimed the people's identification. He then drew the people's attention to Jesus and affirmed, *"He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire."* Here, he referred to Jesus' first coming, spanning from His public ministry to His ascension followed by His outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Then John asserted that Jesus would *"gather the wheat into His barn... and burn the chaff in a fire that will never go out"*. This is an analogy for judgment at the end-time. It means John also talked about Jesus' second coming.

Both comings would require preparation. The Gospel therefore presents people, including tax collectors and soldiers, asking John the Baptist, *"What must we do, then?"* He told them to share with the needy and not to exploit or intimidate people for personal monetary gains. Living these attitudes in life would put one in good stead to encounter Jesus the Saviour at His first coming and face Jesus the Judge at the second not just without fear but more so with joy.

Thus, John the Baptist *"announced the Good News"* to the people. The Good News was a development of the *"news of great joy"* the angel announced to the shepherds. There, the good news was the birth of Jesus the Saviour (Lk. 2:10); here, it was Jesus coming to exercise His public ministry. These announcements were two stages of one good news of joy: God coming in Jesus to live among humankind and save them all.

Jesus had already come to bring salvation consisting of forgiveness of sins and bestowal of eternal life. Now, He is with us through His Holy Spirit whom He sent from His Father's right hand and continues to offer us forgiveness of sins and eternal life. At the end of time, He will come again to separate us from evil so as to bring us into His Kingdom.

Advent is a time when we prepare to celebrate Jesus' first coming and await in hope for His second one. In between these two comings, He is present with us through His Holy Spirit. His unfailing presence fills us with joy and gives us the confidence to look forward to His second coming to lead us into His Kingdom. This means we will be in His eternal presence to share in His eternal life. Surely, this fills us with hope and everlasting joy – the joy Gaudete Sunday proclaims!

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Micah 5:1-4; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-44

Only with the Holy Spirit is an encounter of faith possible and can it bring joy. Today's Gospel narrates such an encounter but presents it between two extraordinary women, with universal impact.

Mary was chosen by God to be the Mother of His Son made flesh in Jesus Christ to bring God's salvation to all fallen humankind. She conceived Jesus in her virginity through the power of the Holy Spirit. Her divine and virgin motherhood was her unique privilege. Similarly, Mary's old and barren relative Elizabeth was blessed in an extraordinary manner. God had enabled her to conceive a son, the son He had chosen to be His Son's precursor to prepare the hearts of people for His coming.

After announcing to her that she was to be the Mother of the Son of the Most High, the Angel Gabriel told Mary that Elizabeth was in her sixth month of pregnancy. That was why Mary immediately set out to pay a visit to her. It was not a casual visit as it was to last three months, that is, until John the Baptist was born. Indeed, the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth with their babies in their wombs was no ordinary encounter, but one with a profound significance

From the human point of view, John needed to meet Jesus before he could exercise his ministry of preparing the hearts of people for His coming. Mary's visit to Elizabeth was to meet this need. In this visit, the Holy Spirit was clearly at work. For, as the story asserts, the moment Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child in her womb leapt for joy and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. The child's gesture of leaping for joy indicated he too was filled with the Holy Spirit. Empowered by the Spirit, Elizabeth recognized the child in Mary's womb as her Lord, for she proclaimed Mary as "*the mother of my Lord*". In the same way, the Holy Spirit endowed the child in her womb with the same recognition.

The encounter between the two sons in the wombs of their mothers highlighted the continuity in God's plan of salvation from the Old Testament to the New Testament and therefore God's fidelity to it. For John the Baptist was the last of the Old Testament prophets. Prophets before him had announced the coming of the Christ. He now proclaimed His imminent coming. In this light, Mary's visit

to Elizabeth marked the dovetailing of the Old Testament with the New Testament. The people of the Old Testament were represented by John and his parents – John being the last Old Testament prophet and his father Zechariah being an Old Testament priest. Jesus inaugurated the New Testament era. In Him, God brought all His promises in the Old Testament to fulfilment.

Mary's visit to Elizabeth manifested God's coming in Jesus to visit His people and also the entire humankind to bring them salvation. For sure, this visitation could not but bring joy to the world. Indeed, joy permeated the entire visitation story as it unfolded by the power of the Holy Spirit. Both John and his mother experienced it.

Joy is possible only if one positively responds to the Holy Spirit's offer of faith. It is clear in the story that Elizabeth and John were filled with faith when they acknowledged the child in Mary's womb as their Lord. Not only that, Elizabeth also declared Mary's faith: *"Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled."* Vis-à-vis Mary, the object of faith was the Lord's choice of her to be the Mother of Jesus, the Messiah God promised.

Mary was a member of the people of God of the Old Testament as well as the entire human community in the New Testament era inaugurated by her Son. She believed that her Son the Messiah came in fulfilment of God's promises made in the Old Testament but meant for the entire humankind in all generations to come. This faith of hers brought her great joy. Elizabeth's declaration of her joy used the word *"blessed"* (*makaria*). This was the happiness of the beatitudes. In the beatitudes (cf. Lk. 6:20-23), Jesus assures His disciples of the same joy (*makaria*) in their life of faith oriented towards the kingdom of God. On another occasion when a woman declared His mother blessed (happy), Jesus retorted, *"Still happier those who hear the word of God and keep it!"* (Lk. 11:27-28). By these words, Jesus declared His mother blessed because she kept God's word, while at the same time applying the blessedness to His faithful disciples.

The fabulous encounter between Mary and Elizabeth crosses to us God's visitation with His salvation for all fallen humankind. It was an encounter of faith in the Holy Spirit exuding joy because God had come into the world through His Son Jesus Christ. In faith inspired by the Holy Spirit, we stand to benefit from God's visitation and this gives us joy. Christmas celebrates this great event!

CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS

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

Christmas exudes a joy beyond all joys because it celebrates the unimaginable and incredible mystery of God becoming and being born as Man in Jesus. Traditional carols have the magic of rekindling Christmas joy.

Carols were composed with inspiration from Christmas stories in the Bible and theological reflections on them. But there is one carol that came straight from tonight's Gospel itself: "*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to men who carry His favour.*" A great host of angels sang it to shepherds after the announcement to them of the news of great joy that in the city of David a Saviour had been born to them. For sure, the angels' carol was marked with the great joy of the Saviour's birth, of God becoming and being born as Man.

The angelic host gave glory to God for His stupendous gesture of love and humility. For He had decided to break into the history of humankind and live among them to save them from the destruction that their sins had brought them. With sin came injustice and disorder that corrupted the human community and created extreme classes of people.

The Gospel tonight depicts these classes. On the one hand, the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus held total power and governed his people through his appointed delegates called governors. Quirinius was the governor of Syria. With just one decree for a census, Caesar Augustus caused a mass movement of his subjects. On the other hand, there were marginalized and powerless shepherds. They counted for nothing and were exploited to look after the flocks of their masters under harsh and perilous conditions of life.

Wielding such power and exercising such control, Caesar Augustus was able to make sure that there was no trouble and no uprising in his Empire. He thus considered and presented himself as the one guarantor of peace and saviour of his people. But the peace under his reign was just an absence of conflicts and rebellion. At the bottom of it all, it was actually the fear of being punished or even of being crucified that made his subjects stay clear of violence.

The birth of the Saviour marked the start of a new Empire – the kingdom of God on earth. Life in God’s kingdom would be marked by true peace. This peace would restore the right order created by God and guarantee the well-being of every human person on earth. This was expressed in the angels’ carol: *“Peace to men who enjoy His (God’s) favour.”* By becoming Man to bring this peace to sinful humankind, God showed He was determined to restore the right order and relationship among men. Thus, those promoting it enjoy God’s favour.

The carol ties this peace with God’s glory. Accepting and promoting peace mean going along with God and living by His will. Doing so thus gives glory to God. Peace makes no distinction between human persons, for all are equal in God’s sight. In this equality willed by God, the rich and the powerful like Caesar Augustus and Quirinius must come down to the level of the shepherds or upgrade their status, all in respect for their God-given dignity.

To this end, the Son of God Himself set an example for the rich and powerful; He condescended from His divine status to be born as Man, Jesus. His birth took place in very humble and humiliating conditions. That condescending gesture of God was too repulsive to be accepted by human society. With such mentality, the human community made no room for the baby Jesus to be born in any inn. Despite that rejection, God still proceeded with His plan and Jesus was born in a manger in Bethlehem. In this way He offered a spectacular lesson for humankind: be ready to promote peace at any cost.

Jesus’ birth in humble conditions was not just a show. His entire ministry was to uplift the poor and the marginalised. He found rejection by the powers that be, to the point that they were all out to put Him to death on the cross. True enough, His opponents succeeded in crucifying Him. But it was His death on the cross that brought us forgiveness of sins, for by it He took our place to pay the death penalty due to our sins. On the third day, He rose from the dead and secured eternal life for us.

The crib and the cross assure us that God will have the last word in history. Jesus was indeed the Son of God made Man. He reached out to all of us sinful humankind to save us from eternal death. He restored to us our lost dignity and reconciled us with His Father. He brought us true peace in love. Jesus, not the Roman Emperor nor any world leader, is the true Saviour of the world.

CHRISTMAS DAY

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

God's love for every single person on earth knows neither bounds nor conditions. Christmas proclaims this, especially from the viewpoint of humility and humiliation.

Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus our Saviour, the Son of God made Man. Indeed, the Son of God became Man. All this was unheard of, unimaginable, unthinkable, unbelievable! But it happened and captivated the entire world in fascination, ecstasy, joy and gratitude, to the point that it has been universally celebrated for generations till today. It is all because of God's unlimited and unconditional love for all of us.

To appreciate God's love for us, it is helpful to go back to the beginnings, that is to the origin of time and creation. Of all His creatures, God bestowed His own image and likeness only on human beings. That was an act of sheer love on His part. For through it God the Creator wanted to share His life and faculties with the man and woman He created. He was not hampered by fear of any risk – like, for example, the man and woman abusing the God-given faculties to rebel against Him. As it turned out, they did really rebel. Still, God loved them, as He did not leave them to perish but instead promised them a Saviour.

To fulfil that promise, God's own and only Son emptied Himself of His divinity to become Man in Jesus, Saviour of the world. God's Son was there with God the Father in the beginning to create the universe and human beings. For sure, He was Creator with His Father. But He put aside this almighty creative status of His to become a created being and dwell among rebellious humankind. What humility that was! What self-humiliation that was! Above all, what love that was!

The Gospel for today's Mass proclaims this great gesture of self-humiliation the Son of God undertook with His infinite love and most profound humility. With its opening temporal indication, *"In the beginning"*, the Gospel goes back to the beginnings in eternity and depicts the Son of God as the "Word". In this way, it emphasizes God's desire to communicate, that is, to relate with all humankind. With three very short and categorical affirmations, it asserts the eternity and divinity of the Word: *"In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God.*

The Word was God.” Following that, it presents the agency of the Word in creation: all created beings came to be through Him and had life in Him. The Word played a creative role together with His Father as the almighty God.

The Gospel then makes an incredible leap down to the lowly estate the Word had chosen to become: *“The Word was made flesh.”* “Flesh” here indicates the human person in all his/her weaknesses and limitations. Because human beings had sinned against God their Creator, “flesh” also indicates sinfulness. The eternal, all-powerful and sinless Word of God condescended to be in solidarity with sinful human beings, to take their sins upon Himself without becoming a sinner. What humility that was! What self-humiliation that was! What love that was!

That the Creator God should become created Man was unbelievable. That was why His own people, the Jews, did not accept Jesus. He encountered rejection to the point of being to death on the cross. As punishment for hard-core criminals, Jesus’ death on the cross was His humiliation at its lowest point. But His love turned that deepest humiliation into a saving reality. For on the cross He took the place of sinful humanity to pay the death penalty due to sin. In this way, He won for them forgiveness of sins and life eternal. He saved them all.

The Gospel declares an incredible consequence of that salvation Jesus brought to the world: *“To all who did accept Him, who believe in His name, He gave the power to become children of God.”* What grace this is. No one deserves to be a child of God. But God offers this grace to everyone, in spite of our sins and rebellion against Him. He looks not so much at our sins as at His own image in us. With our sins forgiven and eternal life given to us, He made us His own children in His Son Jesus Christ. What unconditional and infinite His love is!

God is ever so loving and forgiving. We find this hard to accept because we are conditioned by our selfishness and self-centredness, our reluctance to reach out and forgive. As a result of this negative trait of ours, in critical times, we tend to find it difficult or even impossible to believe that God is there for us with His love. To offset the mentality, we need to let our celebration of Christmas rekindle our faith. Let it be an assurance of the reality that God is: unconditional and unbounded love. As love, He chose to dwell among us and intervene for us.

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY

Ecclesiasticus 3:2-6,12-14; Colossians 3:12-21; Luke 2:41-52

At one parish celebration of Mother's Day, a game was organised which mothers with small children were invited to play. All participants were blindfolded and randomly jumbled. Mothers and children were then to look for one another in silence. There was one mother who, after finding her child, broke down in tears. At the end of the game, she was asked to share her emotions. She shared that she had been overcome with a sense of loss of her child in her search of him. So, when she had found him, she was overcome with a profound joy – thus her tears!

The story of Jesus being lost and found in the Temple was not a game, but a true one. If a game could lead a mother to sense anxiety as she was looking for her child, how great an anxiety the real loss of Jesus must have brought to His parents. Their frantic search for Him eventually led them back to the Temple where they found Him. The mother shared her anxiety with the boy Jesus: *"My child, why have you done this to us? See how worried your father and I have been, looking for you."* Such anxiety was only to be expected.

Jesus' reply to His mother must have shocked her. *"Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father's affairs?"* The Gospel tells us that His parents *"did not understand what He meant."* Any normal parents would have found such a reply very rude if not offensive.

How did Mary respond to Jesus' words? The Gospel states, *"His mother stored up all these things in her heart."* Jesus went home to Nazareth with His earthly parents *"and lived under their authority. He increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and with men."*

This double statement takes off from Jesus' reply to His mother which, far from being rude and offensive, is revelatory. It reveals another family relationship Jesus had – that with His heavenly Father. The Temple was considered to be His Father's house. It was Jesus' home. So Jesus decided to stay back to be *"busy with His Father's affairs"*. What were these affairs of the Father? Salvation, and Jesus was sent to bring it about.

Today's Gospel story therefore reveals the double family to which Jesus belonged: the Holy Family of Nazareth, with Mary and Joseph as His parents; and the divine family with God as His Father with whom He was one through the Holy Spirit. He stayed back home in His Father's house for this relationship. After

being found, He went back to Nazareth with Mary and Joseph. These provided Him the care and formation He needed as a human person. At the same time, He also drew wisdom from His Father through the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Gospel story ends with this affirmation: *“Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and men.”*

As a human person, Jesus grew up in the family of Nazareth. His earthly parents Mary and Joseph conscientiously did their best to bring Jesus up as a good and God-fearing Man. For sure, they provided Him His human formation as well as formation in faith. Once a year they brought Him to the Temple of Jerusalem for the Passover feast. Luke’s Gospel reports Him exercising His ministry in a Sabbath day service in the synagogue of Nazareth. There, He read from the scroll of Isaiah and preached. This is evidence of His religious upbringing in the Nazareth family.

The fifth joyful mystery of the Rosary interprets today’s Gospel story as Jesus being lost and found in the Temple. While humanly this is correct, the point the Gospel aims to emphasise is Jesus’ deliberate decision to stay behind in His Father’s house for His Father’s affairs. Setting aside Jesus’ decision, the idea of loss of a child comes strongly across to us.

Losing a child physically is a terrible tragedy, but losing a child spiritually is an even greater tragedy. A child is spiritually lost when he/she loses God. For losing God or not having Him at all is the greatest tragedy. Without God, life is devoid of real meaning. It is therefore vital to take every step to ensure that we do not lose God at all. This requires us to do all that is necessary for every one of our children to get to know God and put Him at the centre of their lives.

On this point, the Holy Family of Nazareth offers us an important lesson. Jesus’ focus on His heavenly Father came from His religious upbringing in Nazareth. His submission to His earthly parents was due to His human formation. Both aspects of His upbringing undergirded His life and ministry. His mother Mary’s response when she failed to understand Him was to *“store all these things in her heart”*. That was a response of faith, leaving everything to God.

It is important to bring children up in good relationship with God. For this, family prayers and participation in the Eucharist on Sundays are important. Catechism classes are necessary. Parents would do well to imitate Mary to have a heart of faith and trust in God as they relate and dialogue with their children. A holistic upbringing of children will put them in good stead for their life and work.

FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY

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

On this Feast of the Epiphany, we celebrate the manifestation of the Infant Jesus to the Gentile world, represented by wise men from the East. The event fulfilled the prophecy given by Isaiah: *“Camels in throngs will cover you, and dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; everyone in Sheba will come, bringing gold and incense and singing the praise of the Lord.”*

The story of the wise men from the East being led by a star to Bethlehem to encounter the baby Jesus is fascinating. It is often featured in Christmas cards and cribs – and rightly so. But we must go beyond the emotional and sentimental fascination of the story to reach its theological and spiritual significance which is even more fascinating.

In the first place, the story reveals the identity of the baby the wise men were led by a star to search for. To these wise men, the infant was more than *“the king of the Jews”*; He was God. So, they *“had come to do him homage”*, that is, to worship Him.

On the other hand, there was Herod. He felt threatened. For to him, a rival *“king of the Jews”* had been born. So, he consulted *“all the chief priests and scribes of the people”* regarding this child. These were the religious and scripture experts of the day. From them Herod learnt the truth about the child: He was *“the Christ”* – that is, *“the anointed one”*; and He was to be born at Bethlehem in Judaea. Another aspect of the child’s identity came to be revealed.

Apart from the child’s identity, the Gospel story unfolds how the wise men eventually found the infant king of the Jews. They were led by a star. Very likely they were astronomers – scientists engaged in the study of stars. Their study of the stars had led them to a humble and honest acknowledgement of the Creator of the stars and the universe. But even if they were not astronomers, the universe and all its wonders, that is, creation still spoke to them very strongly about the Creator God.

Nature and creation for sure do proclaim God. But their revelation is only partial. It needs to be supplemented by the scriptures. In Jerusalem, the wise men learned from the scriptures that the child was born *“at Bethlehem in Judaea”*.

Their natural and historical knowledge was thus supplemented with the revelation God gave through His prophets.

With that revelation they were able to continue their journey in the right direction and arrive at the place where the child was. They offered Him gifts which acknowledged the child's identity. Gold was fit for the infant as King of the Jews. Frankincense used in worship pointed to the Godhead of the infant. Myrrh, offered to Jesus with wine just before His crucifixion (Mk. 15:23) and used as part of a mixture for His burial (Jn. 19:39), indicated that the infant Jesus was the suffering Christ destined to be put to death by the chief priests and elders of the people. Through these gifts the wise men expressed their faith in the threefold identity of the infant: King, God and Christ.

Science enriched by faith led the wise men to recognize God in the baby Jesus and submit themselves to His will. They then followed the instruction they received in a dream to *"return to their own country by a different way."* In the context of the story, that change of direction was to thwart Herod's plan to kill the child. But spiritually, it indicated a life course charted according to God's will.

The Gospel story is of great relevance to us today. It assures us that the infinite and all-holy God chose to become finite Man to dwell among sinful human creatures. His purpose was to save them from sin and eternal death. The Creator God is truly present in creation and actively intervening in human history to bring salvation not just to the Jews but to the entire humankind. Nature and its sciences, complemented by sacred scriptures, testify to God dwelling among us and saving us with unconditional love.

We who have accepted this revelation of God must, like the wise men from the East, follow a different way – that is, the way of God. Our lives must be lived no longer according to our own wills but to the will of the God and the Saviour we have met and worship. In our encounter with Him, we receive His light. We must let it shine in our dark world to lead others to the Christ, our God and King.

Today, as we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany, we can only be filled with gratitude to the Lord. For He cared to become Man to dwell among us and within us, to intervene in our history and our personal lives, to save us from sin and give us life. We thank Him for the revelation He has given us of this great mystery of the Incarnation geared towards our salvation. Our best and most fitting gifts to Him are the gifts of ourselves and our lives to Him as we recognise Him in our neighbours and love Him by loving them.

ASH WEDNESDAY

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

The season of Lent begins today – Ash Wednesday. This name comes from the Church’s traditional and liturgical practice of imposing ashes on the faithful. The question is: why do we receive ashes?

Lent is a penitential season. The imposition of ashes follows a long-standing penitential practice in the Old Testament. It marks repentance from sin and a desire to turn back to God. In addition, it serves as a clear reminder that God created His human creatures from the dust of the earth. These two points undergird the Church’s two alternative formulas uttered during the imposition of ashes: “Remember you are dust, and unto dust you shall return”, and “Turn away from sin, and believe the Gospel.”

The first formula goes back to the creation story in Genesis. The story describes God fashioning man *“from the dust of the ground”*. He then *“breathed into his nostrils the breath of life”* (Gen. 2:7) and *“the man became a living being”* (Gen. 2:8). From the rib of the man, God fashioned a woman whom He gave to him to be his wife. Unfortunately, this first couple sinned against God. When God took them to task for their sin, He told the man saying: *“You are dust and unto dust you shall return”* (Gen. 3:19). This was a declaration of death as a punishment for their sin.

But while declaring death, God also promised the fallen man and his wife salvation. He did it when He cursed the serpent which had tempted the man and his wife to sin. He said to the serpent: *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you shall strike his heel”* (Gen. 3:15). The Church interprets these words to mean the Blessed Virgin Mary and her Son Jesus Christ.

The creation story is about life and death as well as salvation – which is restoration to life. It was not just the first man and woman who had sinned and thus landed in death; the entire humankind as their descendants too met with the same destiny. God’s promise of salvation was thus not just for the first fallen human couple but for all fallen humankind. Jesus came in fulfillment of God’s promise of salvation. His mission was to deliver all fallen humankind from the pit of eternal death by taking unto Himself their sins to destroy them. The second reading from 2 Corinthians affirms, *“God has made the sinless one into sin, so that in Him we might become the goodness of God.”*

We know from the Scriptures that Jesus brought this salvation by His own death on the cross and resurrection. This saving event constituted the core Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection are facts of history. The salvation He brought thereby is a reality. It consists of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. It is there for everyone to receive. But a personal decision to accept it is called for. The call is articulated in the second formula: "Turn away from sin, and believe the gospel." The call is primarily to accept Jesus Christ and the life God sent Him to bring to all of us. The reception of ashes is an expression of the positive response to this call.

Our response must go beyond the liturgy and translate into life. The three traditional practices of almsgiving, prayer and fasting constitute a holistic way of living out the response. They touch on every aspect of our life: relationship with God, relationship with neighbour, and relationship with our own inner self. For in prayer, we focus on God and give Him the centre-place in our life. His presence and providence are necessary for life. Prayer sustains our relationship with God and revolves our life around Him. Almsgiving which is primarily but not exclusively giving monetary or material aid turns attention to our neighbours, especially those in need. It builds up relationship with neighbours, which a genuine relationship with God necessarily leads to. Fasting is a self-discipline to gear us towards a purposeful life in terms of good relationship with God and with neighbour.

In His teaching on these three traditional practices, Jesus is very mindful of a possible unhealthy intention: to carry them out for show in order to draw public attention to oneself. Such an intention takes the value off these practices as it turns them into hypocritical acts. Public recognition is what is sought and when achieved, it becomes the reward for the pious practices. The real reward, however, comes from the heavenly Father. He sees and rewards these practices even when they are carried out in secret.

Prayerfully in this season of Lent we will carry out these practices in genuine and faithful response to Jesus' call to believe and accept Him. We pray that in this way in the coming Easter we will truly experience the new life Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead to achieve and offer us. Let our reception of ashes today be an authentic expression of our decision to turn away from sin and accept God's offer of salvation achieved by His Son Jesus Christ.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Deuteronomy 26:4-10; Romans 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13

Advancement in science and technology has, to a great extent, resulted in a loss of the sense of God as well as focus on Him. Faith in technology and its power to advance human life and society has replaced faith in God and His power. All this is because the former produces visible and tangible effects, while God remains invisible and His presence, providence and power require faith, blind faith if need be, to accept. Even then, faith still does not seem to fully guarantee a steady and sustained fidelity to God, as the experience of temptations testifies.

Today's first and Gospel readings give us an important guide to keep our faith in God and focus on Him. The first reading from Deuteronomy stipulates the offering of the first fruits of the land to the Lord. The rite is accompanied by a formula of faith. In the Promised Land, the people of God were envisaged to encounter serious temptations. For, the sedentary population had a culture and way of life superior to theirs, since they had been slaves in Egypt and wanderers in the wilderness for forty years. These were likely to attract them and perhaps gradually dragged them into embracing the polytheism and idolatry of the local people.

To help them ward off these temptations, through Moses, God marked out certain days of the year as important feast-days. On these days they were to observe certain rituals and make certain offerings to God to focus on and worship Him. One such day was the offering of the first fruits of the land. The formula of faith, called the "historical credo", articulated all God's wonderful interventions for them in their history. Starting with their "*father, a wandering Aramaean*" (Abraham), God led His people to the "*land where milk and honey flowed*". Offering to Him the first fruits of the land was a liturgical act that acknowledged and reminded the people of God's gift of the land to them, preceded by His marvelous interventions in their favour.

The Gospel narrates the story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness before His public ministry. Jesus was filled with the Spirit and led by Him into the wilderness where He fasted for forty days. In this experience of His, Jesus identified Himself with His people in the wilderness and prepared Himself for His public ministry throughout which He would encounter many temptations from the devil through His opponents. In the desert, just like His people in the past, Jesus had only His Father to count on as He faced the tempter.

At the end of His fast, Jesus was hungry. The devil approached Him and tempted Him: *"If You are the Son of God, tell this stone into a loaf."* Jesus' hunger represented all human needs. He was tempted to exploit the power He had as the Son of God to satisfy all these needs. The second temptation exploited human desires for power and glory to possess *"all the kingdoms of the world"*. The final temptation went back again to Jesus' divine Sonship, to exploit all the prerogatives of this status to meet the human yearning for fame and name.

Underlying all these temptations was a common double denominator: the devil sought to shift Jesus' attention away from God, that is, from His Father, to His own self and His own glory; ultimately the devil sought to be God as he made clear in his words to Jesus in the second temptation: *"worship me."* But Jesus was very focused in His handling of all three temptations. He quoted the scriptures, which were God's word. His entire life and ministry revolved around His Father's word and will. As a result, His opponents could not tempt Him to budge from His Father's will.

The devil's failure led him to leave Jesus for the time being; but he would *"return at the appointed time"* – that is, during Jesus' agony in the garden, passion and crucifixion. There, the devil made use of leaders and soldiers to tempt Jesus. A cohort led by Judas arrested Jesus. The chief priests led the people to demand His crucifixion. He was challenged to come down from the cross and save Himself (Lk. 23:35-38). Jesus did not give in to all these temptations at all, however great a pain He suffered. Just before His last breath on the cross, He said, *"Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit"* (Lk. 23:46). In this way, He reiterated His response to the devil in the second temptation: *"You must worship the Lord your God."*

Calling God His Father, He affirmed He was the *"Son of God"* and asserted His fidelity to His Father's will. In this way, He inaugurated the Father's kingdom in the world – different from *"all the kingdoms of the earth"*. These seek political and financial powers, fame and glory. God's kingdom, as the Lord's Prayer confesses, is: *"Thy will be done."*

Faith in God and fidelity to His will are our best weapons against the tempter.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Genesis 15:5-12,17-18; Philippians 3:17 – 4:1; Luke 9:28-36

Life has a goal. Its pursuit of the goal is hardly ever plain sailing. There are ups and downs, often more downs than ups. The experience of the ups, even if rare, strengthens the determination to continue pursuing the goal, even or especially in the midst of the downs.

The patriarch Abram and his wife Sarai were childless. That would have been a great part of their downs. In their old age, God made the patriarch a promise of a great reward and a son (Gen. 15:2,4). Humanly speaking, the promise of a son seemed far-fetched and impossible. Thus, Abram proposed to God a realistic and feasible “succession plan”: through his senior-most steward (Gen. 15:3). In response, to kindle the patriarch’s faith, God “*took Abram outside*” and asked him to “*count the stars if he could.*” Following that, God promised him descendants as many as the stars as well as the land of Canaan.

God’s action of taking Abram “*outside*” had a triple purpose: (i) to give the patriarch convincing evidence of His power to fulfill whatever promises He made: the stars were His creation and manifested as well as assured His power; (ii) to give him a visible idea of how many descendants God would grant him; and (iii) to take him out of his inward-looking response to God to look “*outside*” himself so as to have a wider perspective of life. God’s action achieved its purpose, as “*Abram put his faith in the Lord*”.

God carried out another action. He ordered Abram to take a heifer, a goat and a ram, cut them into two halves each and line them up in two rows with a passage in between. He then caused Abram to fall into a “*deep sleep*”. Then when darkness had fallen, He made “*a smoking furnace and fire-brand*” pass “*between the halves*” of the cut animals. This was a drastic action taken by God. Its significance is furnished by two Old Testament texts. Ex. 19:16 records God’s theophany at Sinai through lightning flashes and dense clouds. With their semblance to these natural phenomena, the smoking furnace and fire-brand signalled God’s presence and hinted that it was He who passed between the parts of the animals. The second text is Jer. 34:18-20 which enunciates the significance of passing between the two parts of a cut animal. By passing between the parts of the animal, parties to a covenant agreed to be cut like the animal. This covenant ritual underlined God’s absolute commitment to His promises to Abram of descendants and land.

We note here the interplay between light and darkness. The stars are bodies of light clearly visible in the dark sky. The fire-brand is a body of light and its passage between the halves of the animals was a spectacular sight in the darkness that had enveloped Abram in his deep sleep. For sure, the promises of a son, countless descendants and land accompanied by the brilliant stars in the sky and spectacular covenant ritual constituted a high point in the patriarch's life. They shone a spectacular light on the darkness he had been experiencing, especially in childlessness. With God's promises and commitment to fulfill them, Abram could now move on in life towards the goal set by God for him: the fulfilment of His promises. These promises far exceeded all expectations Abram with his inward-looking and narrow mindset could ever have entertained. His life would be confidently geared towards their fulfilment.

The story of Jesus' transfiguration reflects parallels with Abram's experience of God's intervention. Light and glory contributed to the magnificent event: *"the aspect of Jesus' face was changed, and His clothing became brilliant as lightning"*. Jesus' companions, Peter, James and John, *"were heavy with sleep"* and in their struggle to keep awake, *"they saw His glory"*. That glory unfolded in a few steps, with the first being Jesus' glorious transfiguration. The next was the appearance *"in glory"* of Moses and Elijah, two great Old Testament prophets. The third was the enveloping of Jesus and His disciples by a cloud from which the Father's voice was heard: *"This is My Son, the Chosen One. Listen to Him."*

The event was of course a high point for Jesus. It was His foretaste of His glorious resurrection, the point of His return to His glory at His Father's right hand. But before that, He had to bring His mission to completion, which would be by His death on the cross in Jerusalem. That was *"His passing"* about which Moses and Elijah were speaking to Him. While Peter proposed to *"build three tents"* and remain in the state of bliss on the mountain, Jesus was determined to descend from it to face the painful end of His life and complete His mission.

Jesus had only one goal as He lived His life and carried out His mission. In the words of the second reading, it was to *"transfigure these wretched bodies of ours into copies of His glorious body"* and bring us to *"heaven, our homeland"*. Jesus' goal is now our goal in life. His call to us is: *"Do not give way but remain faithful in the Lord."* On occasions, God gives us experiences of a high. Let these experiences not draw us to remain there and thus, pause, but rather motivate, energize and make us determined to *"listen to Him"*, that is, by faithfully following Jesus the beloved Son of God to our heavenly home.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Exodus 3:1-8,13-15; 1 Corinthians 10:1-6,10-12; Luke 13:1-9

In the face of a serious sickness or huge challenge in life, the cry to God for help is often met with silence and apparent inaction from Him. This experience begs questions like: “God, where are you? Are you there? Do you not care?”

The perceived lack of response from God may give rise to doubts about His presence or His care, or even about His very existence. Or, an explanation may be drawn from a common thinking that God is transcendent, far beyond human reach and experience, because He is infinitely the Most High. Human situations and problems are too trivial for Him.

Today’s first reading dispels all such human thinking. It affirms both the transcendence and immanence of God. While infinite and beyond the reach of human beings, He cares for and reaches out to them. The story the reading narrates is God’s call of Moses to set the people of Israel free from their slavery in Egypt. At the same time, it carries God’s self-revelation to Moses to authenticate his call and mission. Moses could go to the Pharaoh with God’s mandate to negotiate for the liberation of the Israelites.

At Horeb, the mountain of God, an angel of the Lord appeared to Moses “*in the image of a flame of fire coming from the middle*” of a burning bush and thus drew his attention to the bush burning but not burnt up. All these details indicate Moses being in the presence of the transcendent God: the mountain conveys the place of the Most High God; the angel is God’s envoy to human beings; fire is often an element that accompanies a theophany, that is, a manifestation of God. The divine presence made the place a “*holy ground*” and Moses had therefore to “*take off (his) shoes*”. In the light of its significance in Ruth 4:7, by taking his shoes off, Moses was discarding his right to possession and his liberty. That was the right disposition in the holy presence of the transcendent God. An important point the story drives home is the accessibility of the all-transcendent God, at least to Moses for the moment.

Accessibility to the transcendent God would not be possible except allowed by Him. The story in the first reading presents more than God allowing access to Him. It revolves around God Himself reaching out to Moses to appoint him to reach out to the people of Israel in slavery. It recalls God intervening in the history of the people’s ancestors, for which He came to be called “*the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.*” Indeed, He had been actively present in the

history of the people since the time of their fathers. Now that He had *“seen their miserable state... and heard their appeal to be free of their slave-drivers”*, He decided *“to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians and bring them out of the land to a land rich and broad, where milk and honey flowed.”* The transcendent God is truly the God of history, actively present with His people. He is as immanent as He is transcendent.

The enigmatic name God revealed to Moses at the latter’s request affirms His transcendence as well as His immanence: *“I Am Who I Am.”* By it, God identified Himself as “Eternal Existence” and as such, as the “Cause of all existence”, that is, the Creator of everything that exists. Vis-à-vis the mission He was entrusting to Moses, God was assuring him of His supreme authority and almighty power behind it. In other words, authorized by God, Moses would have the power to bring about the liberation of his suffering people from the harsh slavery in Egypt. The all-transcendent God is equally all-immanent. As much as He is *“I Am Who I Am”*, He is also *“the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob”* – His *“name for all time... to be invoked for all generations to come.”*

Jesus is the transcendent God immanent in the life of every human person. He has come to restore humankind’s broken relationship with God. What is awaited is response – the response from everyone of us. The response takes the form of repentance which the two events recalled in the first of the Gospel articulate, in negative terms: refusal to repent will land a person up in the same predicament as *“the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with that of their sacrifices”* and *“the eighteen on whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them”*.

Through the parable of the fig tree, Jesus highlights God’s patient waiting for our repentance. He not only lets us take our time, but gives us His grace to enable us to repent and *“bear fruit”*. He does what it takes to ensure we respond. But He also allows us whatever time we need to give the right response.

Yes, God is transcendent; but He is also actively present in our midst. Often, it is our own inordinate dispositions and inadequate response that block our experience of His immanence. Often, we tend to turn to Him only in times of serious challenges, crises or despair, while daily we either forget or ignore Him altogether. It is important to be aware that our daily “smooth sailing” is due to His active presence with us, in order to be assured of His care for us in times of hardship. The *“burning bush that was not burnt up”* signals the unfading presence of the transcendent God in our midst. He is never tired of us and never gives up on us. On the contrary, He patiently waits for our return to Him!

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Joshua 5:9-12; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3,11-32

A mother of four remarked, “All my four children came from the same mould, but are very different.” God instituted the family. He also created human beings, all with their unique characters.

The parable of the prodigal son Jesus gives in today’s Gospel is loaded: it is rich in significance and manifold in applications. In the context in which it is given, in response to the complaint against Jesus by the Pharisees and scribes, it sought to check their self-righteous attitude. In its use in the liturgy especially in Lent, it is taken as a lesson for repentance. In reflections on the family, its relevance is striking, for the story revolves around the father’s relationship with his two sons and their attitudes behind the responses of the two sons. It is this family significance that this homily singles out for reflection.

The story starts off with the rash demand of the younger son: “*Father, let me have the share of the estate that would come to me.*” That demand has to do with the execution of the father’s last will. It is premature as the father is still alive. In effect, it is tantamount to considering the father already dead. For sure, the younger son is impetuously led by his desire for a good life to make his demand; but his words reflect his awareness that his demand is premature and has hurtful implications on the father.

The young man is self-centred. He seeks his own enjoyment without regard for the family. He does not seem to consider how hard his father and elder brother have worked to pile up whatever wealth the family has. He wants his share and prematurely at that, as if he had the right to it. On top of that, he leaves the family “*for a distant country*” – to be as far away as possible from the family. For him, the family is an obstacle to his happiness, and life in the family is an unbearable burden. Even if this thought were not explicitly on his mind, his departure conveys its impression.

In his quest for a good life, the young man has no sense of the value of what he has demanded of his father. He has also no inkling of what will eventually happen to him. He spends lavishly on himself without financial management and has eventually to hire himself to look after pigs, unclean animals in the eyes of the Jews. What is worse, the pigs he tends have food, and his father’s servants have food, but he is starving. He is hitting rock bottom – and wakes up to his own foolishness. He makes a decision to go back to his father to ask to be treated

no longer as a son because he has treated his father as if dead, but as a servant. But his confession formula betrays his hypocrisy, for he still calls his father, "Father." He is fully aware he can never lose his sonship.

Let us now consider the elder son. He is not happy with his father's welcome of the younger son: restoring him to his position in the family and "*slaughtering the fattened calf*" for a party. His words to his father betray more than jealousy; they express his harsh judgment of his father. Primarily, his father has been unfair to him for he has never offered him even a small animal to celebrate with his friends. There are innuendoes in his words. The father has been foolish enough to be conned by the younger son and does not seem to have learnt his lesson by welcoming him back so lavishly. When referring to his younger brother as "*this son of yours*" he is dissociating himself from the family and thus leaving it, though not physically. His hard work all these years amounts to the work of a "*slave*" rather than a son. In a word, the elder son has put himself above his father in many respects, but in particular from the viewpoint of fairness.

The father knows the characters of his two sons very well. He loves them both equally but approaches them differently. With his impetuous and rash younger son, his love transcends his hurt in giving in to his premature demands. Foreseeing the rock bottom the young man will face, his love underpins his daily watch for his return, and the unconditional and lavish welcome he gives the miserable returnee. Though doubted by the elder son, his love for him is as deep and unconditional as that for the younger son. Knowing the elder son to be a hardworking and rational character, he steps out of the house to reason things out with him. His opening words to him are lovingly reassuring: "*My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours.*" He has been treating him as a son, not a slave as he has perceived, and been concerned about his well-being all along. He will make sure not to sign off the remaining share of his property to his carefree and careless brother. Following this he reaches out to the elder son to accept his younger brother back: "*Your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found.*" These are words that not only appeal to reason but move the heart as well. They are words of love, embracing both the sons.

The story has a strong bearing on family relationships and offers useful lessons on them. Love, unconditional and forgiving love, is the operating force of every family. It moves its members, with their different characters, to respect and accept one another. It also makes room for different approaches when treating one another. It seeks reconciliation where there are hurts and rejoices when that is achieved.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Isaiah 45:16-21; Philippians 3:8-14; John 8:1-11

A common remark on judging is: for an accusing finger, there are three fingers pointing to the self. Today's well-known and favourite Gospel story supports the remark and goes beyond it.

Short though it is, the story of how Jesus handled the serious case of a woman caught in the act of adultery and brought to Him by the scribes and Pharisees is loaded with lessons. So, every detail counts and should not be missed. It is, therefore, necessary to consider it.

The first detail concerns the setting. Jesus was in the Temple and taught *"all the people who came to Him"*. The Temple was His Father's house and therefore His home. Through His teaching, He drew people to it. In the symbolic language of John the Evangelist, this detail conveys a very important point: Jesus, the Word of God, was from all eternity in His Father's bosom, but had come in human flesh into the created world to reveal His Father (cf. Jn. 1:1-18). His mission was to draw people to Himself and in the process to His Father, so as to share in His eternal life. That mission was one of love (cf. Jn. 3:16-17). Therefore, love provided the setting for today's episode.

There was a sudden shift of attention: from Jesus to the group of scribes and Pharisees who had brought along the adulterous woman, very likely with great commotion. They made her *"stand in full view of everybody"*. This act was deliberate: it was to shame her. It was also clearly an act of judgment: to the scribes and Pharisees, the woman had committed a serious sin. By the law of Moses, she ought to be stoned to death. This public act of judgment betrayed the accusers' deep-seated attitude of self-righteousness.

Their words to Jesus as they cast the woman in full view of everybody affirmed objectivity of the case: she was *"caught in the very act of committing adultery"*. Their appeal to the Law of Moses reflected their clarity of mind regarding the punishment: she should be *"stoned to death"*. Why then did they not just carry out the punishment themselves, but decide to bring the woman to Jesus? The Gospel narrator reveals their intention: they did this *"as a test, looking for something to use against Him"*. So, the trial was not so much of the woman, since she required no trial as she had been found to sin, as of Jesus. He claimed to have come to save humankind in love; how would He show the woman His love against the death penalty the Law of Moses imposed on her?

For all the clarity of mind and certitude of their evidence, there is one curious detail about the move of the scribes and Pharisees. The detail comes from an omission. Since the woman was caught in the act, surely, the man who was involved must have been there, equally caught. Where was he? Why wasn't he brought together with the woman? Could there be gender discrimination? Or did he belong to the group accusing the woman? Could there be class discrimination? Why this double standard? This omission is a detail that shatters the sincerity of the accusers and disqualifies them from their role as accusers.

What did Jesus do when confronted with the case? He *"bent down and started writing on the ground"*. He refused to be drawn into a rash action. So, He took time to respond. When the accusers pushed for an answer from Him, He turned the trial they set on Him into a self-trial for them: *"If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."* He then *"bent down again and wrote on the ground"*, this time to give the accusers time to examine themselves. Inevitably, one by one they left, leaving the woman alone with Jesus. For they were no less sinful than the woman! They had one accusing finger pointed to the woman, with three fingers pointing to themselves!

The final detail is furnished by the conversation between Jesus and the woman: *"Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir." "Neither do I condemn you; go away, and don't sin anymore."* Jesus the Word of God made flesh came not to condemn but to give life by forgiving. By her sin, the woman was destined to die by stoning. Without denying her guilt and rejecting the Law of Moses, Jesus' forgiveness of the woman in love liberated her from death and gave her a chance to live again. Indeed, forgiveness not only sets the sinner free but also gives him/her the opportunity to live again.

The short story is loaded with valuable lessons. It is wise to refrain from rash judgment of others and take time to assess a case as well take a good look at oneself first. It is important to be honestly upfront when dealing with a hurt from a neighbour to ensure lasting settlement. Forgiveness, when called for and offered, liberates both the guilty and the accuser, thus giving them the opportunity to start afresh. Law is necessary to regulate life and relationship in a community or society. Law must be fair and thus exclude discrimination of any form. From Jesus' perspective, the application of law ought to be tempered with love and mercy. As Christians, we need to focus on God's love and forgiveness to respond to His call also to love and forgive. Indeed, forgiveness is liberating and love is life-giving.

PALM (PASSION) SUNDAY

Isaiah 50:4-7; Philippians 2:6-11; Luke 22:14 – 23:56

Palm Sunday starts off Holy Week in which attention is focused on the passion and death of the Lord. The blessing of and procession with palms commemorate Jesus' humble entry into Jerusalem where He was tried and condemned to death on the cross. From the very long passion narrative, this homily chooses to highlight its theme of the kingdom (of God), and in particular the attempt of the kingdom of darkness to destroy it.

The passion narrative begins with Jesus' Last Supper with His disciples. It sees this meal as the arrival of "*the hour*" of Jesus' passion and death, and therefore as the accomplishment of His ministry on earth. For sure, Jesus' entire ministry was to proclaim the kingdom of God. Now that He had come to the end of His ministry, as He explained to His disciples, He "*longed to eat this Passover*" with them before His passion. For, as He revealed, He would "*not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God*". He thus tied His last Passover meal with the kingdom of God. The Jewish Passover meal commemorated their liberation or salvation. Jesus had come to bring this liberation in a radical way: liberation from Satan's slavery and possession of eternal life in the kingdom of God. To be expected, Satan would put up a hard fight with Jesus.

Satan had sown among the disciples an inordinate desire for positions of authority and power. In the course of the meal, a dispute broke out among them as to which of them would be the greatest. Their struggle would eventually destroy their unity as a community and block their entry into the kingdom. Jesus corrected their inordinate ambition by highlighting servant leadership, which marked kingdom leadership. Should they embrace that, Jesus promised to "*confer a kingdom*" on them, as they would "*eat and drink at His table in His kingdom*." In this way, He announced the kingdom banquet, of which His last Passover meal was a foretaste. In this way, He claimed victory for the kingdom of God over Satan's reign of darkness.

For sure, Satan and his forces would not give up their efforts to destroy Jesus and the kingdom He was proclaiming. So, they took a more radical step. Satan lured Judas into betraying Jesus and Peter into denying Him three times. These belonged to Jesus' inner circle of disciples. In this concrete attempt of his, Satan aimed to have a greater chance of success! But Jesus saw Satan's plot and revealed it to His disciples: "*Satan has got his wish to sift you all like wheat*" and assured Simon Peter of His prayer that his "*faith would not fail*". Thus, later at

the Mount of Olives, just before Jesus prayed during His agony, He instructed His disciples to *“pray not to be put to the test”*, that is, not to give in to Satan. But they slept right through. At His arrest, He told the men Judas led to arrest Him, *“This is your hour; this is the reign of darkness.”* For the moment, Satan and therefore the kingdom of darkness seemed to be winning the struggle.

Even as Satan appeared to have the upper hand, there were glimmers of victory for the kingdom of God. The first one came in at the cockcrow. *“The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter”* who then *“went outside and wept bitterly”*. Peter wept in utter repentance. Next, at their trial of Jesus, both Pilate and Herod found Him innocent. Pilate made a public declaration of it. However, overcome by cowardice, Pilate *“handed Jesus over”* to those who demanded His crucifixion. Again, a struggle between the kingdom of God and Satan’s reign underlay this trial. The kingdom of God appeared to score points in Peter’s repentance and Pilate’s declaration of Jesus’ innocence; but Satan’s reign seemed to win the fight when Pilate, in his cowardice, surrendered Jesus to His enemies.

The next glimmers of victory for the kingdom of God radiated from the crucifixion scene. Jesus’ prayer to His Father to forgive His enemies showed that He was master of His entire passion and death. Such mastery had already been shown when He revealed Judas’ betrayal and Peter’s denial of Him, when He prayed His Father to spare Him the painful death only in accordance with His (the Father’s) will, and when He allowed Himself to be arrested by His foes. His prayer of forgiveness indicated He had risen above all physical force to freely make a personal decision to accept His passion and death as the way His Father would open the doors of His kingdom to everyone.

The prayer of one of the two criminals crucified with Jesus also offered a glimmer of victory: *“Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”* Jesus’ reply conveyed His certitude of victory: *“Indeed, I promise you, today you will be with Me in paradise.”* The confession of the centurion, *“This was a great and good Man,”* provided the final glimmer of victory.

For sure, after or more accurately, through all His passion and death, Jesus secured the kingdom of God for all, amidst a fierce and persistent struggle from the reign of darkness, Satan’s evil kingdom. Indeed, everyone could now enter the kingdom of God. Jesus’ promise to His disciples, *“You will eat and drink at My table in My kingdom”*, holds true for everyone. But a personal decision to accept it is called for. Peter, the repentant criminal, and the centurion made their decision through their repentance. What about us?

HOLY THURSDAY

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

Would an employer or a “tauokay” run errands for his employees? Generally not, because he has employed them to serve his cause. This is a mentality that has been prevailing since time immemorial. It is tied to status, ranks and class. It is a consequence of an order caused by sin.

In the Gospel reading, this was the underpinning reason for Peter’s protest when Jesus proceeded to wash his feet: *“Never, Lord; you shall never wash my feet.”* Jesus was the Lord and Master; Peter was a disciple of His. The disciple should wash the master’s feet, not the other way around.

Jesus responded to Peter’s protest with two statements. The first is: *“At the moment you do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand.”* By “later” Jesus alluded to the time of His death and resurrection. Then, His entire mission of love and service that He was sent on would be understood.

Washing of feet was the job of a servant and a slave. But Jesus the Lord and Master took it on. For He had come to serve. In the order He set, lordship and servanthood are not contradictory. To be Lord and master is to be a servant. In His gesture of washing the feet of His disciples, Jesus crystallized His entire mission of service carried out in total love for His disciples as well as the people of His time and beyond. That service in love would reach its climax in His death on the cross. Indeed, in the words of the Gospel, *“He had always loved those who were His in the world, but now He showed how perfect His love was.”*

The second statement says, *“No one who has taken a bath needs washing; he is clean all over. You too are clean, though not all of you are.”* In the long-standing tradition of Judaism, cleanliness was insisted on. It took the form of the washing of feet before entering the house and the washing of hands before eating. But over and above this physically hygienic purpose, cleansing took on a religious dimension. Ritual purification was required before entering the presence of God as He was all holy and all pure. External cleansing of the body symbolized internal cleansing of the soul to ensure purity before entering into the presence of God in His holy place.

Pope Benedict XVI in his three-volume book *JESUS OF NAZARETH* (pp. 72-75 of Vol. 2) explains the “bath” in Jesus’ words to Peter in terms of baptism and suggests “washing of feet” to mean confession. Baptism cleanses us totally from

our sins and makes us children of God. So, we receive it only once. But our experience tells us that after baptism we continue to sin. So, confession, symbolized by the washing of feet, is needed, to receive God's forgiveness of our sins. In confession it is Jesus who washes our feet, that is forgives our sins, as He did when He died on the cross for us. He does it through an ordained priest.

After washing their feet, Jesus instructed His disciples: *"If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet."* Jesus wanted His disciples to love and serve one another as He did. They should desire, not the power to dominate, but rather the disposition to serve. In the light of Pope Benedict XVI's link of the washing of feet to forgiveness of sins in confession, Jesus' instruction would include a call to forgive. The call to serve and forgive one another was made to all disciples, including all of us today.

Jesus told Peter: *"If I do not wash you, you can have nothing in common with me."* In other words, Peter could not be in the company of Jesus. He would therefore be excluded from any relationship with Him as well as share in His life and ministry. Only by allowing Jesus to wash his feet would Peter be able to accept Jesus' offer of relationship with Him and share in His works. This held true for the other disciples as well.

Indeed, Jesus offers every one of us a share in His life and relationship with Him. This is a most precious gift from Him, offered to us at His death on the cross followed by His resurrection to life. But He does not force His offer down our throat. He calls for our free decision to accept it. We express our free choice of it by our acceptance of His instruction: *"You too should wash each other's feet"* – that is, love and serve one another, and forgive one another. Peter and his fellow disciples understood this after their experience of the risen Lord.

To serve one another in love, I think, is a lifestyle many of us readily embrace. The degree to which we embrace it may vary. But many find it very difficult to forgive because of the hurt received and felt. Yet, to forgive is not a feeling but a decision. The decision often does not bring about a good feeling because the hurt feeling is often still there. Despite the hurt feeling, the decision is valid and so the forgiveness is real. Over time, the hurt feeling will go off, for the desire to have "something in common with Him" eventually makes one humble like Him.

Love and service to the point of forgiving constitute the order set by Christ. This order treats everyone as God's children with equal dignity. Hopefully, our experience of the risen Christ will embrace fully the order set by Christ.

GOOD FRIDAY

Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12; Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 8:1 – 19:42

Good Friday commemorates the passion and death of the Lord Jesus. The Lord died a sacrificial death out of His sheer unconditional love for all of us. While bearing all this clearly in mind, we will now focus our reflection on the final scene of the long passion narrative: Jesus' body was taken down from the cross and buried in a garden nearby.

Jesus' body was to be taken down urgently because "*it was Preparation Day*", the day on which lambs were slaughtered for the Passover meal. The Gospel underscores the "*special solemnity*" of that particular sabbath in view of the Passover feast. Jesus' body was pierced with a lance and immediately blood and water flowed out from it. Indeed, Jesus was the new and true Passover Lamb, whose blood shed on the cross purified us as it brought us forgiveness of sins.

The scene conveys a sacramental significance. The water that flowed from Jesus' side points to Baptism and the body with its blood to the Eucharist. While Baptism leads a person to participate in the death and resurrection of Christ, the Eucharist is a memorial of Him crucified and risen. All sacraments of the Church belong together as the Church is the fundamental sacrament of Christ; but Baptism and the Eucharist share a very special bond in their grace of effecting an experience of the death and resurrection of Christ. Indeed, it is only the baptized who are empowered to celebrate the Eucharist and experience the presence of Christ crucified and risen in it.

Baptism seals discipleship. The final scene of the passion narrative has two cowardly disciples of Jesus now coming into the open to take down the body of Jesus and bury it. Joseph of Arimathaea had been a secret disciple of Jesus because he was afraid of the Jews. Jesus encountered strong and persistent opposition from the Jews. They had arm-twisted Pilate to allow them to crucify Jesus. Such violent opposition could also be inflicted on His disciples. At Jesus' death, Joseph of Arimathaea plucked up the courage to get Pilate's permission to take down Jesus' body to give it a proper and dignified burial. By this act, he publicly professed his discipleship.

Nicodemus was in a more precarious position than Joseph of Arimathaea. For he was a Pharisee. That was why he went to Jesus at night. The Pharisees were among the Jewish authorities all out to do away with Jesus. Nicodemus' discipleship was sure to draw his colleagues' wrath and violent action on him.

Now, he braved all that to come with a hundred pounds of a mixture of myrrh and aloes with which to wrap Jesus' body in linen cloths for burial in accordance with the Jewish burial custom. Like Joseph, he openly declared his discipleship.

Jesus' death on the cross was a clear manifestation of His love for all fallen humankind to the end. It inspired the two secret and cowardly disciples to come out in the open to declare their discipleship, whatever be the risks they faced. Their open discipleship marked their personal and free acceptance of the salvation Christ brought on all humankind through His death and resurrection. From this viewpoint, they were baptized by the water that flowed from Jesus' side and experienced the saving grace of His body being broken and His blood being shed on the cross, the same grace as the Eucharist effects. For sure, they now belonged to the new family instituted by Christ on the cross when He pronounced on His mother and His beloved disciple: *"Behold your son... behold your mother."*

The final part of the final scene of the passion narrative concerns Jesus' burial in a nearby new tomb in a garden. The mention of the garden at the conclusion of the passion narrative sets a contrast with the first garden at its beginning. In the first garden, Judas, a disciple in Jesus' inner circle, led a cohort to arrest Jesus to have Him crucified. In the second garden, secret and cowardly disciples from outside the inner circle openly showed their devotion and loyalty to Jesus by laying His body to rest.

The two gardens hark back to the Garden of Eden in the creation story. There God placed the man and the woman He had created in His own image and likeness to enjoy all its fruits except that of the knowledge of good and evil. Life in the garden was ecstatic. But the couple's disobedience was a rebellion, an act of hostility; it brought them a serious curse: death. The couple, however, were to be saved from that curse, for God promised a Saviour when He cursed the serpent tempter: *"I will make enemies between you and the woman, your offspring and her offspring. It will crush your head and you will strike its heel"* (Gen. 3:15). Jesus fulfilled God's promise through His death and resurrection.

The garden features contradictory dispositions: hostility and loyalty, curse and blessing. Jesus crucified and risen turned hostility and curse into loyalty and blessing. As He lay buried in the new tomb in the garden, He was awaiting His glorious resurrection to life, whereby He would bring salvation, that is, eternal life, to all fallen humankind. We are called to make a free and personal decision to accept this salvation, like Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus.

EASTER VIGIL

Genesis 1:1 – 2:2; Genesis 22:1-18; Exodus 14:15 – 15:1;

Romans 6:3-11; Luke 24:1-12

The passion narrative ends with Jesus' burial in a new tomb in a garden. That was not the end of His life. For from that tomb He rose to life.

Tonight's liturgy celebrates Jesus' resurrection to life. This glorious event left the tomb empty. The Gospel pays much attention to the empty tomb because it is powerful evidence of the Lord's resurrection. The women who had come with spices, presumably to anoint the Lord's body, were terrified because they saw that *"the stone had been rolled away from the tomb"* and *"the body of the Lord Jesus was not there."* They did not know what to make of their discovery. They badly needed an explanation of what had happened.

Two men in brilliant clothes suddenly appeared to give them the needed explanation. Their opening question was poignant: *"Why look among the dead for someone who is alive?"* Indeed, the tomb was for the dead. Jesus could not remain there as He was now alive. The two men reminded the women of Jesus' prediction of His violent death in the hands of sinful men and His resurrection. Jesus' empty tomb was clear evidence of the fulfillment of His prediction. It also became the place from which the gospel of His death and resurrection was first proclaimed.

Led to believe in Jesus' resurrection, the women left the tomb and returned to the Eleven and all other disciples, to proclaim the good news to them. But that good news *"seemed pure nonsense"* to them. However, Peter ran to the tomb to see things for himself; he was *"amazed at what had happened"*, not knowing what to make of the empty tomb. All the Eleven had to wait till the risen Lord appeared to them with all His wounds in order to believe.

With His resurrection, the garden in which the new tomb where Jesus was buried turned the garden in which He was arrested into a place where God fulfilled His promise to fallen Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. This first couple disobeyed God in the garden of Eden while Judas betrayed Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. In both these cases, the garden became a place of sin and betrayal and turned into a place of death. The crucified Jesus was laid to rest in the new tomb in the garden. He was laid to rest among the dead. But from there He rose to life and made it possible for all the dead to rise to life on the last day. He turned the garden back into a place of life.

The Apostles' creed expresses this reality in terms of Jesus "descending into hell", going down to Hades, the biblical name for the place of the dead. Immediately following that, the creed professes faith in His "resurrection from the dead on the third day". Faith and hope in the resurrection of all who have died and been buried with Christ, first in baptism and then in physical death, constitute the last article of the creed. They are articulated in terms of "the resurrection of the body and life everlasting".

Indeed, God's will for all humankind is that they share in His life. The creation story in tonight's first reading proclaims this will of God when He created the man and the woman "*in His own image and likeness*". In addition, God created the entire universe, the world and every creature therein first, so as to set the stage for the man and the woman to appear in the scene. Over and above that, God entrusted all His creation to them. But not satisfied with all that, they disobeyed God and brought death upon themselves. However, God still came to their rescue by promising them salvation.

The sacrifice of Isaac God demanded of Abraham in the second reading prefigured the way God came to fallen humankind's rescue. Just as Abraham willingly and wholeheartedly obeyed God's command to sacrifice his only and beloved son Isaac, so also God unconditionally responded to humankind's cry for His own and only Son, His beloved Son, to save them from sin and eternal death. He sacrificed His Son and Jesus sacrificed His life that all fallen humankind might live.

The exodus story in the third reading tells of God's wonderful liberation of His people from the cruel and enslaving hands of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. It prefigured God's salvation of all of us from our slavery to Satan and sin through His Son Jesus. By His death and resurrection, He brought us from death to life.

Yes, Jesus died and was buried. But He rose to life on the third day. In this way, He brought life to all of us. The empty tomb proclaims His resurrection. It also assures us that on the last day we will rise from the dead. For Jesus will raise us up and bring us into His kingdom to enjoy eternal life. Tonight, as we celebrate Jesus' glorious resurrection for which the empty tomb serves as evidence, we also express the hope of our own resurrection to life on the last day.

Indeed, the Lord has risen. He has also promised that He will raise us up on the last day.

EASTER SUNDAY

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

Today's Gospel does not give us a spectacular description of the Lord's glorious resurrection, but rather the discovery of the Lord's tomb being empty. The empty tomb meant different things to different disciples of Jesus who saw it.

Mary saw the empty tomb and thought, *"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb."* Her concern was, *"Where have they put Him?"* She had expected to see the dead body of the Lord in the tomb. That expectation of hers closed her mind to any experience or any explanation of the empty tomb other than a natural one: somebody had removed the Lord's body. Her natural response was to run to Simon Peter, the head of the apostles, and the disciple Jesus loved to report the matter to them.

Upon hearing Mary's story, these two disciples lost no time to run to the tomb. Presumably, they intended to see and assess the situation for themselves. When they entered the tomb, they found the situation exactly as reported.

The Gospel does not say anything about Simon Peter's reaction. This leaves us to wonder what he made of his discovery. Was Mary right in thinking that the body had been removed? Or was there something else? Of the disciple Jesus loved, the Gospel says, *"He saw and he believed."* For sure, he *"saw"* what Mary and Peter did. But, what did he believe? The concluding verse of the Gospel clarifies it: *"Till this moment they had failed to understand the teaching of the scripture, that He must rise from the dead."* Jesus' beloved disciple believed that the Lord had risen from the dead. To him, the empty tomb was a sign of the Lord's resurrection. It verified *"the teaching of the scripture"* and kindled his faith.

From these different reactions of the Lord's disciples when they found His tomb empty, we can trace a common journey of faith in Christ. From a natural viewpoint manifested by Mary there is a movement towards a questioning or perhaps even puzzled mind. With the aid of the Scriptures, the journey continues through the experience of signs until it arrives at faith in the risen Lord, as Mary later did when He called her by name. With faith, believers are able to see further signs of the presence of the risen Lord in their lives and even when they encounter tragic events. As a result, tragic events when accepted are accepted in faith and contribute to its deepening.

A striking case took place in November 2015. An Abu Sayyaf group kidnapped a Sarawakian Catholic, Bernard Then, in Sandakan, Sabah. They brought him to Jolo Island (Philippines) and beheaded him there not long after. In very clear terms, John, Bernard's father, forgave the kidnappers and beheader(s). He prayed that Bernard's "sacrificial" death would be a lesson for all to respect the sanctity of life, for authorities to beef up security and peace in the nation and the region, and for the perpetrators to lay down their arms and give up their violence.

Like the empty tomb of Jesus, Bernard's beheading could have triggered different reactions: from John's forgiveness to all-out revenge even if it meant bloodshed. John's response averted all the others. It came from his Christian faith in the Lord's death and resurrection. His faith led his Christian heart to forgive as the Lord forgave. For him, the "empty tomb" was the emptiness he experienced from his son's tragic death, as his life seemed to have come to nought. However, his faith in the Lord's resurrection gave him hope: that the risen Lord would raise his son to life. But he had another hope, this time having to do with the son's captors and murderers: experiencing his forgiveness, they might be led to the faith that the Lord was there calling them to repentance and to His light, and respond positively.

John's faith and forgiveness came from his own encounter with the risen Lord in his life experiences, inspired by the *"teaching of the Scriptures"*. There have been many other cases, though not so tragic, of such unequivocal expressions of the Christian faith rooted in the word of God in the Scriptures. A common pastoral experience of this comes from funeral Masses. It is not rare that entire families have been drawn back to their Christian faith after their encounter with the word of God at the funerals of their departed loved ones. Not a few non-Christians too have asked for instruction and baptism after experiencing Catholic funerals.

Those who are ready to open their hearts and minds to the Scriptures are in a similar position to see signs of the Lord's presence in their lives, even in the midst of ambiguities and sufferings. In the course of this experience, their faith in the Lord deepens and they are led to see that there is only one goal in life that matters: to rise to eternal life with the Lord on the last day. Pursuing this goal leads to the joy of Easter: the joy that comes from the Risen Lord.

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 5:12-16; Apocalypse 1:9-13,17-19; John 20:19-31

Today's Gospel narrates the story of the risen Lord appearing twice to His disciples. They had locked themselves up in a room for fear of the Jews. A significant point in the story comes from the Lord's repeated greeting, *"Peace be with you."* The repetition of the greeting is followed by the mission He entrusted to them, *"As the Father sent Me, so am I sending you."*

These words of the risen Lord in the first part of the Gospel link the peace He offered with the mission He entrusted to His disciples. The link becomes stronger through His articulation of what the mission was going to entail: *"for those whose sins you forgive they are forgiven"*. Forgiveness of sins is the way to peace.

In entrusting it to His disciples, the risen Lord made it very clear that the mission was the same as that His Father had given Him. In other words, He was sharing His own mission with them; that means, they were to continue it. What was that mission? It was clearly forgiveness of sins. For humankind had sinned against Jesus' Father. On the cross, Jesus took the place of all sinful humankind to pay the death penalty due to their sins. In this way, He won for them forgiveness of sins and saved them from the death penalty. Clearly, the forgiveness of sins lay at the heart of Jesus' mission.

Forgiveness of sins led to reconciliation with God. Reconciliation in turn led to a restoration of the relationship with God broken by sin. With this restored relationship, sharing in God's eternal life became possible. All these were stages of grace: forgiveness of sins, restored relationship, and sharing in God's eternal life. They constituted the peace that the risen Lord brought to His disciples in His greeting to them. His repetition of it for sure served to emphasize its importance.

Peace was the mission Jesus had received from the Father. He had achieved it by His death and resurrection. Now that He had risen from the dead, He was going to return to His Father from Whom He had come. From His Father's right hand, He was going to continue His mission through His disciples. He would do this by pouring out His Spirit on them. Empowered by the Spirit they were to go out and offer the forgiveness of sins He had brought about.

The disciples had no way of offering this forgiveness unless they themselves possessed it first. They could not possess it unless the risen Lord gave it to them,

and unless they believed that the Lord Jesus had risen from the dead. The risen Lord's apparition to them was to lead them to faith in Him and offer them peace. The second part of the Gospel brings to the fore the necessity of faith. Because of his disbelief without concrete proofs, the risen Jesus not only showed Thomas His wounds, but invited him to touch them. That elicited faith in the unbelieving disciple: "*My Lord and my God.*" Faith in the risen Lord was indeed a prerequisite for carrying out His mission, which Thomas now qualified to receive.

As forgiveness of sins lay at the heart of the mission, the disciples needed the Holy Spirit to carry it out. For this reason, the risen Lord "*breathed on them*" and said, "*Receive the Holy Spirit.*" This was John the Evangelist's way of presenting the risen Lord pouring out His Spirit. Being the Spirit of the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit would be the risen Lord's new presence among His disciples.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples to carry out the mission the risen Lord entrusted to them constituted them as His Church, the community of Christ's disciples. As a Church, their mission to forgive sins by the power of the Holy Spirit was a continuation of Christ's mission: "*As the Father sent Me, so am I sending you.*" The Church's mission is to bring to all humankind the salvation achieved by Christ through His death and resurrection. She carries out this mission by the power of the Holy Spirit. Or to be more precise, the risen Christ continues His saving mission through the Church empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The sacrament of reconciliation is the *locus par excellence* in which the Church explicitly exercises her mission of forgiving sins. There, Christ's delegated power through the Holy Spirit takes effect: "*Whose sins you forgive they are forgiven.*" With that forgiveness, reconciliation with God takes place and the peace Christ brought to His disciples becomes a personal experience for the penitent.

Outside the sacrament of reconciliation, the Church carries out her mission chiefly through the forgiveness of enemies or offenders. Such forgiveness is part and parcel of Christ's disciples' way of life. He demands it of them and includes it as a condition for receiving the Father's forgiveness in the Lord's prayer: "*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" The logic is simple: addressing God as "*Our Father*" means accepting one another as His children and therefore as sisters and brothers. This calls for good relationship and where it is damaged, repair in the form of reconciliation ought to be sought.

The risen Lord is in our midst with His peace. He is sending us out to foster this peace, even if it calls for reconciliation through forgiveness. Will I do it?

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 5:27-32,40-41; Apocalypse 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

Perhaps at times the choice of leaders for the Church has defied expectations and drawn sharp criticisms. Today's Gospel presents a case in point.

Jesus' appointment of Simon Peter to shepherd His flock seems unwise. For in the first place, he had denied Jesus three times during His trial before the high priest. Then, of the disciples listed in the Gospel, the one Jesus loved would by far be the preferred candidate to look after the Christian community.

The Gospel story presents a stronger case for Simon Peter's disqualification. Despite the risen Lord's earlier apparitions to him and his companions, he influenced some of them to "*go fishing*". A number of them were fishermen before and Jesus had called them from this occupation to be "*fishers of men*" (cf. Mt. 4:18-22; Mk. 1:16-20; Lk. 5:1-11). In the light of their occupation and call, Simon Peter's decision could have two senses. In the literal sense of fishing, he could have intended to go back to his former occupation and influenced the others in the group to do the same. In the metaphorical sense, his decision meant embarking on the mission to which Jesus had called them.

The Gospel provides a significant detail with regard to the disciples' decision: "*They went out and got into the boat but caught nothing that night.*" The word "night" has a symbolic meaning beyond its temporal indication. In John's Gospel, it figures as the realm of Satan and his forces. Thus, when Judas left to betray Jesus, the Gospel asserts, "*Night had fallen,*" (Jn. 13:30) for "*the devil had already put it into the mind of Judas Iscariot son of Simon, to betray Him*" (Jn. 13:2). Whether in the literal or metaphorical sense, the decision to "*go fishing*" was one instigated by the devil. Going back to the former occupation meant giving discipleship up; embarking on the mission Jesus had called them to without Him could have been motivated by a desire for self-glory.

It was after their total failure in the night that the frustrated disciples encountered the risen Jesus without, however, realizing it was He. The Gospel makes it a point to assert, "*It was light by now.*" Again, beyond time indication, the affirmation was of the presence of Jesus, the light of the world. The distance the unsuccessful fishermen were from the shore where Jesus stood has its significance: "*they were only about a hundred yards from land.*" This detail conveys their return to the Lord after their total failure in their venture. In that return, they were abundantly rewarded with a huge catch. All this is captured

by their obedience to Jesus' instruction: *"Throw your net to starboard."* The miraculous catch could only have come from God. Thus, the disciple Jesus loved immediately recognized Him and told Peter: *"It is the Lord."* Indeed, it was only when the risen Lord was with them that the disciples could have a successful mission, even of *"fishing men"* for the kingdom.

The moment he had been led to recognize the Lord, Simon Peter *"wrapped his cloak around him and jumped into the water"*. Evidently, he was making his way to the Lord Jesus standing on the shore. His *"dressing up"* with his cloak would certainly make no sense as it was certain to slow his movement down. It carries a symbolic meaning. The story notes, *"He had practically nothing on."* His near nakedness depicted his unsuitability to meet the Lord whom he had denied three times. His putting on his cloak indicated his willingness to make the necessary amendment.

That amendment comes in in the last part of the story. Before that, however, Simon Peter was given a stark reminder of his triple denial. The *"charcoal fire"* on which fish was cooking recalled that around which Peter sat with some servants in the high priest's palace at his Master's trial. There, the charcoal fire was a place of denial. Here, it was a place of acceptance: the risen Jesus cooked fish on it and invited His disciples to breakfast with Him.

But of course, the breakfast was not just a breakfast. Comprising bread and fish, it harked back to the Eucharist. The reiteration that the disciples *"knew that it was the Lord"* sitting down to a meal with them reflects the experience of the two disciples of Emmaus recognizing the risen Lord at the breaking of bread (cf. Lk. 24). The Eucharist is the Lord's meal of love and forgiveness.

After its celebration, the Lord asked Peter three times: *"Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these others do?"* Peter's response was, *"Yes, Lord. You know I love You."* Peter acknowledged the Lord's knowledge of his love for Him. In the same breath, he also implied that the Lord also knew his lack of courage in the face of a public challenge, as manifested in his triple denial of Him. With this triple affirmation of love, Peter had a chance to redeem himself and the Lord entrusted to him the pastoral care of his flock. In doing so, the Lord was confident that Peter would exercise his leadership always in the consciousness that He was there in the community, especially through the Eucharist. Thus, He predicted *"the kind of death by which Peter would give glory to God"* – his crucifixion in 64 A.D. Indeed, it is the Lord who holds leadership in the Church and exercises it through His appointed leaders. Faith is needed to accept this.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 13:14,43-52; Apocalypse 7:9,14-17; John 10:27-30

“The Lamb who is at the throne will be their shepherd.” This affirmation in the second reading makes sense only in the light of the biblical depiction of Jesus in figurative terms. Figurative depiction opens up to depths of a mystery not discoverable at one go.

The figurative use of *“the Lamb”* harks back to the sacrifices the people of God in the Old Testament offered. Animals were used and among them was the lamb. But only the lamb, or alternatively, a kid (baby goat), was prescribed for the Passover meal (cf. Ex. 12:5) in commemoration of the people’s liberation from Egyptian slavery. While its flesh was to be roasted and eaten, its blood was smeared on the doorposts and lintel of every Israelite house as a sign for the “angel of death” to “pass over” it and spare their firstborn from the tenth plague.

Jesus came to bring about a new and more important liberation – from Satan’s captivity. He did this through His death on the cross, at which His body was sacrificed and His blood poured out for the salvation of all fallen humankind. In this sense, He was the sacrificial Lamb. John’s Gospel in fact times His crucifixion to coincide with the Jewish slaughtering of the Passover lamb, thus depicting Jesus as the new Passover Lamb (Jn. 18:28; 19:31).

At the same time, however, in John’s Gospel, Jesus is depicted as the Good Shepherd, precisely because He laid down His life for His sheep so that they might have life to the full (Jn. 10:10-11). The Good Shepherd sacrificed His own life in order to save His sheep from theft and destruction by Satan. Jesus’ self-sacrifice underlies the use of the lamb figure to depict Him and qualifies Him as the Good Shepherd. Thus, Jesus *“the Lamb”* is also *“the Shepherd”*.

With this figurative depiction of Jesus in place, the second reading harks back to Psalm 23 to present the salvation He brought to His disciples. They are in God’s dwelling place (Ps. 23:6) where *“they stand in front of God’s throne and serve Him day and night in His sanctuary”*. Where could this dwelling place be, but in the kingdom of heaven? What Psalm 23 proclaims finds its total fulfillment here. The lavish banquet and indestructible safety from hostile forces in God’s dwelling place are the reasons for no more hunger, no more outbreak of plague, and no more tears. In the kingdom, there are *“springs of living water”*; this means, there is only eternal life in the kingdom.

Who qualify to enter the kingdom of heaven? Since the second reading comes from the Apocalypse which addresses the persecution of the Christians by Nero, the Roman Emperor, from 54-68 A.D., it presents *“the people who have been through the great persecution.”* But entry into the kingdom is not confined only to these people. On the contrary, it is extended to all those who *“have washed their robes white again in the blood of the Lamb”*. Indeed, qualification for entry into God’s dwelling place does not come from the disciples, but from Jesus who offered His body and shed His blood as the new Passover Lamb for the salvation of all humankind. Every human person is offered this salvation.

The second reading affirms the universality of salvation in clear terms. In his vision of those saved, its author *“saw a large number, impossible to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe and language”*. The first reading reiterates it. For Paul and Barnabas undertook their missionary journey to the Gentile world because the Lord had told them to: *“I have made you a light for the nations, so that My salvation may reach the ends of the earth.”*

Indeed, Jesus the Good Shepherd has come to call and lead all humankind into God’s dwelling place. But, as the Gospel reading asserts, there ought to be a response from the sheep: *“to listen to His voice and follow Him”*. For sure, those who respond positively will follow Him into God’s dwelling place. *“Listening to the voice”* of the Good Shepherd primarily means attentively reading and reflecting on the Scriptures. For they carry His teachings and record His saving deeds. They reveal Him as Lord and Saviour and spell out His discipleship.

John’s Gospel captures the essence of the person of Jesus, the Word of God made flesh to reveal His Father. It presents Jesus saying, *“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through Me. If you know Me, you know My Father too”* (Jn. 14:6). Reading and reflecting on the Scriptures amount to listening to Jesus, knowing who He is, following Him to His Father and sharing in His eternal life.

When we listen to Jesus’ voice and follow Him as our Shepherd, we *“will never be lost”*, as today’s Gospel assures us; neither will we lack anything, as Psalm 23 guarantees. We will reach His Father’s house where we will enjoy a rich banquet, absolute safety and eternal life. This destiny is so valuable and we are so precious that Jesus the Son of God became flesh to be our paschal Lamb to make it available to us. To ensure that we will achieve it, He chose to be our Good Shepherd to lead us there. Indeed, *“the Lamb”* is now our *“Shepherd”*! Will I listen to His voice and follow Him?

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 14:21-27; Apocalypse 21:1-5; John 13:31-35

“Me and my God.” “Me and my Saviour.” These are utterances coming from a mentality that sees religion as a personal affair. While giving importance to the good, that is, the salvation of every individual, Christianity calls for community living. Salvation includes community relationships.

A community operates on mutual respect and acceptance, care and concern, and give and take. These are fundamental components of the attitude members of a community are expected to embrace. They constitute what is called friendship love, which the Greek word *philē* conveys. It sustains countless communities in the world. It is a very positive attitude and undoubtedly contributes to peace and harmony in the community.

Jesus Christ came into our world to bring this friendship love to another level: what the Greek word calls *agapē*; this is the highest level of love. It is totally self-sacrificing and unconditional to the point of being selfless. It moves one to sacrifice one’s self for the other, regardless of who the other is and what happens to oneself. It was out of this selfless and unconditional love that Jesus Christ broke into human history seriously marred by sin to bring salvation to fallen humankind. In this love of His, He emptied Himself of His divinity to become Man and gave up His human life and dignity to bring life to all human persons. Contrary to all expectations, by doing this Jesus achieved His glory.

Today’s Gospel captures Jesus’ act of selfless love by presenting Judas’ departure to betray Him as the hour of His glorification. In Him, God His Father was also glorified. For sure, this glorification was Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. But it also included the salvation of all fallen humankind, comprising the forgiveness of their sins and granting of eternal life to them.

For sure, what Jesus did was totally unheard of. His love was therefore also totally new. He had shown it and made it possible for His disciples to adopt it. On this score, He commanded them to practise it: *“I give you a new commandment: love one another, just as I have loved you.”* The Greek text uses the verb *agapan* for “love”. It is this level of love that marks Jesus’ command as “new”. Those who put it into practice genuinely imitate Jesus and show themselves as His disciples. Thus, Jesus declared: *“By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are My disciples.”*

Jesus' new commandment undergirds all that the first reading records. In whatever towns they preached the Gospel and won disciples for the Lord, Paul and Barnabas established communities of Christian love and "*appointed elders*" to look after them. On top of that, after their missionary journey, these two apostles returned to Antioch. There "*they assembled the church and gave an account of all that God had done with them, and how He had opened the door of faith to the pagans*".

What did all this mean? Antioch was the place where Paul and Barnabas "*had originally been commended to the grace of God*" for their missionary work. That meant the Church there was the sending Church, the "mother Church". The apostles' return to it to give the community there an account of their mission manifested the unity of the different communities, the local Churches, with the mother Church. Together they formed a larger Church, the universal Church. All the local Churches were in communion with one another. Their communion was sustained by the new commandment of love given by Jesus Christ.

As the earthly community of Jesus' disciples, the Church enjoys the presence of the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit. In apocalyptic terms, the second reading announces its relationship with Jesus: "*the new Jerusalem... as beautiful as a bride dressed for her husband*". This marriage bond is none other than love. It is possible for the Church on earth to enjoy this relationship with Jesus the risen Christ because of His loving initiative. There is something divine about the Church because of this relationship: it is "*the new Jerusalem came down from God out of heaven*" and "*here God lives among men*". The divine presence makes the Church "*a holy city*" where all residents are God's people and He is their God.

The second reading takes the earthly Church beyond its terrestrial boundaries to reach the heavenly realm. It blends the earthly community of Jesus' disciples into the kingdom of God, "*the One sitting on the throne*". From this viewpoint, the Church as the earthly community of Jesus' disciples announces and prefigures the kingdom of God, by their life of *agapē*. The new commandment given by Christ is indeed transformative: it will transform the world and the entire creation into "*a new heaven and a new earth*".

The Church proclaims the Gospel of the kingdom of God by word of mouth and reflects it by loving as Jesus Christ did. Life authenticates proclamation. The Church rings out a clarion call to every member: "Practise what you preach." The call is tied to Jesus' commandment: "*Love one another just as I have loved you.*" Its faithful execution will transform the world into a better place.

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 15:1-2,22-29; Apocalypse 21:10-14,22-23; John 14:23-29

How could the Church founded by Jesus Christ more than two thousand years ago still survive and be relevant to contemporary times? Times have changed very radically and the Church still sticks to the gospel that proclaims the crucified and risen Jesus of more than two thousand years ago.

There is only one answer to this question: God and His power. The gospel of Jesus crucified and risen proclaims His twofold identity as Man and God, and also the mystery of His entire mission. For Jesus is indeed God and is eternal existence. But He became Man and broke into human history in order to save all fallen humankind. As Man He was crucified and, in this way, He took the place of all sinful humankind to pay the death penalty due to their sins. By His resurrection from the dead, He showed His divinity.

Jesus, God-made-Man, founded the Church, the community of His disciples. He was physically present among them and personally taught them. With His resurrection and ascension, His presence was no longer physical but through the Holy Spirit, His Spirit as well as the Spirit of His Father. He will continue to teach the Church through the Holy Spirit. Today's Gospel articulates all this thus: *"I have said these things to you while still with you; but the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you."*

Apart from being Jesus' new presence in the Church, the Holy Spirit is depicted to play two other roles: *"to teach you everything"* and *"to remind you of all I have said to you"*. The two roles are interconnected and may be seen as two dimensions of one role, like the two faces of the same coin. *"To teach you everything"* gives the impression that Jesus did not teach everything and that the Holy Spirit would be sent to complete His teaching. This impression is corrected by the reminder part of the Spirit's mission.

For sure, Jesus had taught everything. But not everything He had taught was understood. The Holy Spirit would recall what Jesus had taught and explain its meaning to the disciples. The meaning of Jesus' teaching would surely have to do with its application to the changing times faced by the Church, the community of disciples, living in different generations and different periods of history. Jesus' teaching must always remain the foundation of the Church's life and mission. Fidelity to it ensures the indwelling presence of Christ and His

Father, as He says: *“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.”* From this viewpoint, the Holy Spirit is given to ensure the disciples’ fidelity to Christ’s word in the concrete circumstances of their lives.

The first reading provides a fine example of this role of the Spirit vis-à-vis a particular pastoral situation the early Church faced in her mission. With a growing number of the gentiles embracing the Christian faith, the Jewish Christians insisted on their traditional practice of circumcision being observed by all. The apostles convened a meeting to deliberate on the issue. In their letter to the gentile Church to convey their decision, they affirmed the role of the Holy Spirit in their discernment: *“It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves not to saddle you with any burden beyond these essentials... to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from fornication.”* Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the apostles were led to see that the baptism instituted by Christ replaced circumcision prescribed by the old law. The “essential practices” were intended to prevent the gentile Christians from falling back to their previous way of life, both religious and secular.

The risen Christ and His Father continue to be with the Church through the Holy Spirit. In the different periods of her history, the Church faced different issues, theological, moral, spiritual and pastoral. Without fail, the Holy Spirit empowered her to weather these storms. Closer to our days, the Second Vatican Council, convoked by Pope John XXIII in 1962 and seen through to its completion in 1965 by his successor Pope Paul VI, took the Church into the contemporary world. Its purpose was to proclaim Christ and His word in a way intelligible to and impactful on the modern generation. It resulted in a better understanding and renewal of the Church: theology, liturgy, ministry and mission in the world. The role of the Holy Spirit in that Council was clearly acknowledged.

Today, synodality has been adopted for the area of reflection in the next Synod of Bishops. In a nutshell, it has to do with journeying together as the Church in all areas of the Christian life, ministry and mission. It is what the Church founded by Christ as the community of His disciples is all about: love. The decision to deliberate on the matter will surely contribute to the growth of the Church and can only be a fruit of the Holy Spirit’s power at work in the Church.

The Church has existed and will continue to exist because of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus and His Father. He is the unfailing presence of the risen Christ and His Father in the Church, to preserve and proclaim God’s word to the world.

ASCENSION

Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:17-21; Luke 24:46-53

Anything out of the ordinary in the sky is always spectacular and captivating. Jesus' ascension to heaven undoubtedly captivated His disciples: thus "*they were staring into the sky*", as the first reading says.

But that experience of theirs was tempered with a sense of loss. They had had a similar experience of loss before. Jesus their Lord and Master had been crucified. Then they not only grieved the loss of their Master but were also lost for direction: where would they go from there? In addition, they were also fearful of the enemies of their Master.

In that state of loss and fear, they encountered an unexpected event. Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to them. The apparitions of the risen Lord brought them much joy and encouragement, though on occasions they were overcome with doubts (as in the case of Thomas) or confusion (as in the case of the two disciples of Emmaus).

Now after being lifted up from their deep sense of loss by the risen Lord, they had to go through another experience of it. The risen Jesus was taken away from them at His ascension to heaven, this time for good. Their "*staring into the sky*" depicted a total loss as much as being captivated: physical loss of their Lord and Master, emotional emptiness, and loss of direction. In that frame of mind, they could only experience confusion and uncertainty. The Lord had left them for good.

In that situation of loss, "*two men in white*" appeared to them to offer them an explanation of what was happening: "*Why are you men from Galilee standing here staring into the sky? Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, this same Jesus will come back in the same way as you have seen Him go there.*" They explained where Jesus had gone and promised that He would return. For the disciples who had experienced Him risen from the dead, the promise made sense and filled them with hope. All this is what the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles narrates.

The Acts of the Apostles was written by Luke, the author of today's Gospel as well. In both his narrations, Luke captures the disciples' struggle with their natural experience of the physical loss of their Lord and Master to move into the realm of faith. They were helped by the two men in white to make this move. In

the realm of faith, they were filled with hope and joy. That was why, as the Gospel affirms, *“they went back to Jerusalem full of joy.”* Faith transformed their human confusion and uncertainty into joy and hope.

While Jesus’ return would take place at the end of time, He would meanwhile fulfil His Father’s promise of the Holy Spirit – the power from on high. He would give them the Holy Spirit. Both the first and Gospel readings carry the Father’s promise of the Holy Spirit. From Him, the disciples would receive power. Thus, after the Lord’s ascension, the disciples returned to Jerusalem and stayed there to wait for the fulfilment of the Father’s promise. The Acts of the Apostles narrates the great event of the Holy Spirit’s outpouring on Pentecost Day.

The Holy Spirit was the new presence of the risen Lord with His disciples, until His second coming at the end of time. Empowered by this Spirit the disciples were to carry out the mission the Lord had given them: to *“be His witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth.”*

We know from the Acts of the Apostles how the apostles, after receiving the Holy Spirit, bore witness to Jesus Christ in Jerusalem and beyond. They were no longer at a loss. Nor were they prisoners of fear any longer. They carried out the mission Jesus gave them with the power and courage of the Holy Spirit. In proclaiming Jesus, they were enkindling hope – the hope of the eternal life which Jesus had come into the world to offer and for which He was crucified but rose from the dead.

In their mission, the disciples often suffered persecution. But they rejoiced and praised God for their sufferings because they were consequences of their fidelity to the Lord. In the end, practically all of them were put to death for bearing witness to Christ their Lord. Their martyrdom too brought them great joy for they saw it as their faithful imitation of Jesus their Master. All this courage, zeal and joy undoubtedly came from the Holy Spirit.

In a Bavarian radio broadcast on 16 May, 1985, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) said: *“We cannot ignore the statement about the great joy of those returning to Jerusalem, even though we will never be able to explain it totally... Christ’s victory cannot only touch the understanding, but also make itself felt in the heart, and in so doing become truly meaningful. Only when we experience something of it ourselves have we understood the feast of Christ’s Ascension.”*

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 7:55-60; Apocalypse 22:12-14,16-17,20; John 17:20-26

Christian discipleship is imitating Christ totally. Today's first and Gospel readings touch on at least three areas of imitation: death, communion, and mission.

At His ascension to His Father's right hand, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to His disciples to enable them to live their discipleship to the full. Last Sunday, we heard Jesus spelling out the role of the Holy Spirit: *"to teach you everything"* and *"to remind you of all I have said to you."* One of the fundamental purposes of Jesus' teaching was to make His disciples like Him. He clearly expressed this purpose in His instruction to His disciples after He had washed their feet: *"I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you"* (Jn. 13:15). Following that He articulated the significance of His gesture thus: *"Love one another just as I have loved you"* (Jn. 13:34). Love is an unmistakable mark of Christian discipleship: *"By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are My disciples"* (Jn. 13:38). Love yields communion and communion is an essential part of the mission of Christ and His disciples.

Discipleship involves shaping one's life and even one's identity after the master's. Such moulding of life and identity is possible only with the help and power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' teaching is geared towards the formation of discipleship. The Holy Spirit is given to deepen the disciples' understanding of His teaching and enable them to become more like Christ.

Today's first reading narrates the martyrdom of Stephen, a disciple filled with the Holy Spirit. He was stoned to death for his fidelity to Christ. He embraced his death exactly as Jesus did. Firstly, he prayed: *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."* This prayer reflected Jesus' prayer on the cross: *"Father into Your hands I commit My spirit"* (Lk. 23:46). Secondly, Stephen prayed for the forgiveness of those who stoned him: *"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."* In this way he showed his love for his enemies as Jesus his Master did: *"Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing"* (Lk. 23:34). For sure, it was the Holy Spirit who empowered Stephen to imitate Jesus and identify with Him perfectly. What Stephen did at death, he must have lived it in life. Stephen's forgiveness of his enemies was unmistakable evidence of his love for them.

The Gospel today gives us a section of Jesus' priestly prayer to His Father on the eve of His crucifixion. It reveals one of Jesus' innermost concerns: the unity of His disciples: those of His time and the future ones they were to make. He

prayed thus: *“Father, may they be one in us, as You are in Me and I am in You.”* He wanted their unity to be rooted in and modelled on the Trinity. Through this unity of theirs, they would imitate Him in His perfect relationship with His Father in the Holy Spirit. Throughout His ministry, Jesus took pains to form His disciples into a community of love. At His ascension, He poured out His Holy Spirit to empower them to model their community after the Trinity. In this way, they would strive to imitate Him in His union with His Father in the Spirit.

As a reflection of the Trinity, the communion among the disciples would be their execution of the mission Christ entrusted them. In carrying out this mission, they were also imitating Jesus. In fact, their mission was a continuation of Jesus’ own mission on earth. Jesus’ mission originated from His Father and its goal was to draw people to the Father so as to share in the life and communion of the Trinity. In His priestly prayer, Jesus spelt out the purpose of the unity of His disciples: *“that the world may believe it was You (the Father) who sent Me (Jesus).”* The belief here is faith: faith in Jesus as the one sent leading to faith in the Father who sent Him. Such faith is eternal life, for it leads to the salvation the Father sent Jesus to bring to the world. From this viewpoint, the disciples’ unity signals the achievement of the goal of Christ’s mission: to bring life to the world.

Faith in Christ inserts the believer into the community of His disciples and through it into the Trinitarian communion. In this community on earth, the disciples reflect their participation, even if still imperfect, in the life of love in the Trinity. Beyond that, when they pass from this world, *“they will be where Jesus is”, “see His glory”* as well as possess it.

Together the first and Gospel readings highlight three areas of Christian discipleship. Following Christ means embracing His attitude in life as well as in death in a personal way. His whole life was characterized by love; His death on the cross offered full evidence of it, as He laid down His life that all might have life and have it to the full. He had come for that mission: to offer fullness of life, eternal life, to all fallen humankind. Christian discipleship must necessarily embrace this selfless love and strive towards it. In this way, the disciples constitute a community which is modelled on the Trinity and follow Christ in His relationship to the Father in the Holy Spirit. By their communion, they draw people to Jesus as the one the Father sent for the life of the world and thus continue Jesus’ mission on earth. All this is possible because the risen and ascended Jesus has poured out the Holy Spirit on His disciples.

PENTECOST SUNDAY

Acts 2:1-11; Romans 8:8-17; John 14:15-16,23-26

We have celebrated the paschal mystery – the death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as His ascension. Today, we celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on His disciples on the Day of Pentecost. This brings Eastertide to a close.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was in fulfilment of the promise Jesus made to His disciples in His farewell discourse to them. Today's Gospel reading carries one part of the discourse with this promise: *"I shall ask the Father and He will give you another Advocate."* This *"advocate"* refers to the Holy Spirit. What role would He play? We shall explore this role within the confines of today's Liturgy of the Word.

First of all, Jesus' reference to the Holy Spirit as *"another Advocate"* indicates there was a *"first"* Advocate. He was Jesus Himself, sent by the Father. Jesus now promised He would ask the Father to send the second Advocate, evidently to continue His mission. The first reading from the Acts of the Apostles narrates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in fulfilment of Jesus' promise. It also describes how the Holy Spirit continued the mission of Jesus through the apostles. They proclaimed the good news of salvation which Jesus had achieved by His death and resurrection.

In Jerusalem then many people from all the nations of the known world were gathered. They understood the apostles' proclamation in their own respective languages. That indicated unity in diversity. The Holy Spirit unified the multiple ethnic and national groups around the apostles so that they could understand the good news of salvation and form one body of disciples, the Church.

Going back to Jesus' words in the gospel, we find three other functions exercised by the Holy Spirit. Jesus clarified to His disciples that He was *"to be with you forever."* The Holy Spirit would be the new and eternal presence of Jesus among His disciples. Jesus' ascent to His Father's right hand would have deprived His disciples of His presence if not for the Holy Spirit whom He asked the Father to give them. The Holy Spirit was to be Jesus' new presence among His disciples to empower them to continue His mission. By His death and resurrection, Jesus had won salvation for all fallen humankind; by their proclamation of it, His disciples were to draw their audiences to it.

The next role of the Holy Spirit is given at the end of the gospel: He *“will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you.”* This role has to do with Jesus’ teaching. Jesus had taught the disciples everything but they could not understand it at one go. They would need time to understand the teaching more and more, and to apply it to their changing times. Only with this understanding would they be able to live out Jesus’ teaching and pass it on to others. The Holy Spirit would help them to do all that.

The Holy Spirit is present in the Church, the community of Christ’s disciples, *“forever”*. So, He is with us today. Allow me to share two powerful experiences I had of His active presence. The first was during the Archdiocesan Pastoral Congress in 2012 in Kuching. This was an assembly of 650 delegates from all the parishes in the Archdiocese of Kuching to evaluate the five-year focus on the family which we had just completed and then to chart the next course of pastoral and missionary undertakings. After sharing their very varied experiences of the focus on the family and evaluation in the light of the Gospel of John, the 650 delegates crafted a wonderful vision for the Archdiocese: *“Church as Disciples of the Word (Christ) in Communion for Mission”*. They then identified important areas of the Church’s life and mission to realize this vision. For 650 delegates to achieve this, nothing short of the Holy Spirit’s active presence was at play. I felt His active presence among us.

My second experience came from the Extraordinary Synod on the Family in Rome in 2014. Pope Francis exhorted all Synod Fathers to feel free to express their views honestly. A whole range of views, varied and sometimes even conflicting, were shared. Hearing them, I was left to wonder where the Synod was heading. In his closing address, Pope Francis uttered a voice of unity that took account of the very different and at times dissenting voices of the participating Bishops. Such fruit of unity could only have come from the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is present and unfailingly at work in the Church, not just at the universal and even local levels. He is there in every individual, making them children of God and empowering them to call God *“Abba, Father!”* The second reading affirms this. With His presence, the family of every disciple of the Lord becomes a cell of God’s family, the Church. The family is a domestic Church. Believing in the Holy Spirit’s presence and allowing Him to work, all family members will be held in unity and love, despite their different characters, views and ways of doing things. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is in each family to keep it one in love and respect. The readings today give us an assurance of this.

FEAST OF THE HOLY TRINITY

Proverbs 8:22-31; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

The mystery of the Trinity is an essential part of the Christian faith and unique to it. It eludes all mathematical calculations because it is a divine mystery. Faith in it comes from Christ's revelation of it through words and works.

Today's readings carry this revelation in terms of works or functions. In a nutshell, the first reading attributes creation to God the Father; the Gospel highlights the salvation brought about by Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man; and the second reading touches on the guidance and sanctification work of the Holy Spirit following Jesus' achievement of salvation. While these functions are attributed to them individually, every divine Person is actively involved in the works of the other two, because they are all one God.

The fulness of revelation came with Christ. Before that, the revelation was already given, but in steps, not just through the words of prophets, but also through creation and events. The first reading from the Book of Proverbs affirms the active presence of the "*Wisdom of God*" in God's act of creating nature, from "*the heavens*" to "*the deep*", with "*the earth*" and its "*mountains*" and "*seas*". This "*Wisdom of God*" is said to have been "*created*" by the Lord before all creation, to assert its everlasting existence: "*From everlasting I was firmly set*". It served to set God's "*purpose*" in His entire act of creation. The first reading conveys a profession of faith in God as the Lord of the universe and His Wisdom actively working with Him as He created the universe.

The Gospel of John opens with a loaded Christological hymn revolving around the divine Word made flesh. The divine Word was in existence from and for all eternity and was actively present when God created all existing beings. This hymn identifies the divine Word made flesh as Jesus Christ, the only Son of the Father. His active participation in His Father's act of creation ties Him to the "*Wisdom of God*" in the first reading.

While God created everything good, His human creatures rebelled against Him and tarnished creation with their sin. In His unconditional love, God the Father sent His Son to bring salvation to fallen humankind: forgiveness of sins and eternal life. The second reading from the letter to the Romans asserts this salvific

work of the Son of God made man in Jesus: *“Through our Lord Jesus Christ, by faith, we are judged righteous and at peace with God.”* From this righteousness, *“sufferings”* take on their value and can therefore be *“boasted about”*. This is because Jesus Christ suffered to make us righteous, and was crucified to restore to us the life we had lost through our sins. While it was Jesus Christ who carried out this saving work, His Father was the one who had sent Him.

The second reading roots Jesus’ saving work in *“the love of God”*. The Father’s unconditional love for all His human creatures moved Him to send His Son Jesus to save all fallen humankind. The reading further affirms: *“the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us.”* This affirmation is drawn from Jesus’ words in His farewell discourse to them. The Gospel reading today carries them. Jesus announces the coming of the Holy Spirit and reveals an important function of His: *“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will lead you to the complete truth.”*

The word Jesus used when presenting the role of the Spirit is important: *“lead”* (*hodēgēsei* in the Greek text). It affirms Jesus as the fulness of revelation; this means that in His person, life and teaching, He has revealed the truth to the full. The Holy Spirit is given to help His disciples to grasp the truth gradually until its fulness. This has a lot to do with the significance and relevance of Jesus’ teaching to the changing times faced by the disciples. Jesus’ words, *“He will tell you of the things to come,”* indicate this. In the light of Jesus’ words, the Holy Spirit exercises the function of enlightening the disciples to understand the ever-relevant teaching of Jesus and apply it to their constantly changing times. This qualifies the Holy Spirit’s function as sanctifying, because by living out Jesus’ teaching, the disciples become holy.

While the Holy Spirit carries out His function, Jesus and the Father are actively engaged in this work. For, as Jesus clarifies, *“all that He (the Holy Spirit) tells you will be taken from what is mine. Everything that the Father has is mine.”* This is perfect oneness. In this oneness, the Spirit’s role is also that of the Son Jesus Christ and His Father. The second reading qualifies this Trinitarian role as *“the love of God poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit”*. This role is inevitable because the Trinity is essentially love and love yields oneness. Indeed, the love of God must necessarily exude from the God of love. All creation and all history of salvation are expressions of this love of Trinity who is love!

FEAST OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

Genesis 14:18-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Luke 9:11-15

The feast of the Body and Blood of Christ has obviously to do with the Eucharist. Its solemnity indicates the importance and high regard the Church accords to the Eucharist.

For sure, the Eucharist lies at the heart of the Church, her life and her mission. As a memorial of Christ crucified and risen, it recalls the very foundation of the Church. It binds Christ's disciples into a community that the Church is: the mystical body of Christ. It nourishes their Christian life of faith and love. It keeps their hope of eternal life alive. It spurs them into the mission of proclaiming Christ crucified and risen whom it serves to remember and who is present in the Church.

Today's second reading is taken from 1 Corinthians. It recalls Jesus' institution of the Eucharist at His last supper "*on the same night that He was betrayed*". After thanking God, He transformed the bread into His own body and the wine into His own blood. Following that, He instructed His disciples "*do this as a memorial*" of Him until His second coming. He gave them the Holy Spirit to empower them to celebrate the Eucharist. The Church has been faithfully carrying out Christ's instruction and passing it down from generation to generation to our day.

While such celebration of the Eucharist takes place within the liturgical domain, it exerts an impact on the daily life of the disciples. They live out the salvation Jesus achieved by His death and resurrection, commemorated in the liturgy. At the end of the Eucharist, they are sent forth to proclaim this salvation and they do it through their lives of faith and love.

Love translates into active involvement by the disciples in their neighbourhood and workplaces. Today's Gospel highlights Jesus' desire for His apostles to be involved to meet the needs of people. When it was getting late, the Twelve were for sending the people away so that they could look for their own "*lodging and food*". They were concerned for the hungry crowd, but concern alone was not enough. Sending them away was a pragmatic move, for all they had were five loaves and two fish, far from enough to feed the crowd. But still, Jesus challenged them: "*Give them something to eat yourselves.*" He wanted them to move out of their pragmatic passivity into active involvement in faith.

Their reply, *“unless we are to go ourselves and buy food for these people,”* smacked of a reluctance to be involved. Jesus persisted in His desire for them to feed the crowd: *“Get them to sit down in parties of about fifty.”* They were now called to sacrifice their five loaves and two fish for the people. Quantitatively, the supply was far too little for the big crowd. Two things would need to come into play to make their meagre supply more than enough. The first was the disciples’ willingness to sacrifice the precious little they had in a spirit of sharing in love. The second was Jesus’ intervention: *“He took the five loaves and the two fish, raised His eyes to heaven, and said the blessing over them.”* He invoked His Father’s blessing over the little that His disciples were called to share. The result was spectacular: all had their fill, with twelve baskets of left-over.

The multiplication story here carries the Eucharistic gestures: Jesus *“took”*, *“blessed”*, *“broke”* and *“gave”* the bread (and fish) to the disciples to distribute to the crowd. For sure, the story has Eucharistic overtones. It highlights Jesus’ application of the Eucharist to the life of His disciples: they must not just be concerned about the needs of their fellowmen but also be ready to meet them through sharing and sacrifices in love. Only in this way will their Eucharist be authentic: celebrated in the liturgy and lived out in daily life. Only in this way will they experience God transforming the little they have into occasions of grace for many and an affirmation of their hope of eternal life.

In his autobiography, *Marc Oraison*, a French medical doctor turned priest, shares his vocation story. In his medical profession, he struggled against sickness and death. For sure, he had healed many patients. But he was also confronted with the limitations of medical science and its power. That led him to place death vis-à-vis the Resurrection, that is, to want to celebrate the Eucharist. For the Eucharist ratifies in the body and blood of Jesus Christ His death and victory of love, a victory that brought life. That further led him to the priesthood.

The feast of the body and blood of Christ reaffirms our faith and hope of eternal life and should propel us to love one another as Christ has loved us. In this love, we are ready to share what little we have with one another. Christ will bless and transform our sharing into a *“miraculous feeding of a multitude”* and strengthen our hope of eternal life. In this way, we become what we are by Christ’s death and resurrection: His mystical body.

FEAST OF THE ASSUMPTION

Apocalypse 11:19; 12:1-6,10; 1 Corinthians 15:20-26; Luke 1:39-36

It is natural that when we die, our bodies rot away and return to dust. Of course, a body can be scientifically preserved to prevent this natural process. Bodies of some saints too have been found not to have corrupted; and in our faith, we see this as God's work. But these bodies remain on earth.

In the case of our Blessed Mother, her body was not only incorrupt but taken up into heaven together with her soul. This is the meaning of her assumption into heaven – the feast we celebrate today. Mary's assumption into heaven was defined as a dogma, that is, a point of faith, on 1 November 1950 by Pope Pius XII. Sometimes this mystery is called the "falling asleep" of Mary.

There is no doubt that Mary was given this great privilege because of her holiness. She was conceived without sin; that is the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. She lived a sinless life: she always believed in God and lived her life in total obedience to God's will.

Today's Gospel presents the beautiful story of Mary visiting her old relative Elizabeth. Mary had just received news from Angel Gabriel that God had chosen her to be the mother of His Son-made-man – Jesus. She was also told that Elizabeth, in her old age, had conceived a son – John the Baptist.

Mary made haste to visit Elizabeth. The encounter between the two great women enjoyed the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. As a result, the child in Elizabeth's womb leapt for joy. He and his mother recognised the child in Mary's womb as their Lord. Thus Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, proclaimed: *"Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?"*

Mary's very special privilege came from God who had decided to save the world through His Son Jesus Christ. Like all human beings, Mary was saved by Jesus too. It was through this salvation planned by God and carried out by Jesus Christ that Mary was kept free from original sin. She kept herself free from personal sin as well. She was indeed faithful to God's will at all times and in all circumstances. In other words, she did her part to keep the holiness God bestowed on her intact.

As unique as she was, being chosen to be the mother of her Lord, she was also uniquely assumed body and soul into heaven. This was certainly a fruit of Christ's

work of salvation. Today's second reading (from 1 Corinthians) affirms: *"Just as all men die in Adam, so all men will be brought to life in Christ; but all of them in their proper order: Christ as the first-fruits and then, after the coming of Christ, those who belong to Him."* All fallen men and women who accept the salvation brought about by Christ will rise from the dead and be taken into heaven when Christ comes again at the end of time. But Mary was given the privilege to enjoy this grace even before the second coming of the Lord.

Mary's assumption into heaven serves to assure us of the reality of Christ's work of salvation and His victory over Satan, sin and death. The first reading (from Apocalypse) depicts Satan's determination to destroy Jesus Christ. In symbolic language, Satan is represented by the *"huge red dragon"* who is vested with deadly power in its *"seven heads and ten horns"*, with *"each of the seven heads being crowned with a coronet"*. *"Its tail had already dragged a third of the stars from the sky and dropped them to the earth."*

In symbolic language, Jesus Christ is depicted as being still in the womb of His mother. This is figuratively portrayed in terms of *"a pregnant woman in labour, crying aloud in the pangs of childbirth."* The huge red dragon *"stopped in front of the woman"* waiting to *"eat the child"* at its birth. Indeed, Satan was all out to destroy Jesus Christ. But Jesus overpowered Satan and *"was to rule all the nations with an iron sceptre."*

Jesus Christ will certainly come again at the end of time. We do not know when that exactly will be. But that does not matter. At His second coming He will raise our bodies up from the dust into which they have rotted. He will reunite our bodies with our souls. He will bring us body and soul into heaven where we will share in God's eternal life. That will be our *"assumption"* into heaven.

In order to be sure of entry into heaven, we need to imitate the example of our Blessed Mother: believe in God and be faithful to Him by obeying His will. In order to empower us to do so, Christ has filled us with the Holy Spirit. We should cooperate with the Holy Spirit fully as He empowers us to defend ourselves from the onslaught of Satan and his forces and live our lives totally for Christ and His kingdom.

From heaven, our Blessed Mother is continually drawing us to her Son Jesus Christ as she brought Him to her old relative Elizabeth and John the Baptist her son. Are we ready to encounter Jesus and live our lives for Him?

FEAST OF ALL SAINTS

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

The Feast of All Saints naturally evokes the concept of holy people in heaven. Heaven is commonly thought of as a place where qualified departed ones go. There, they have eternal life and live it in the eternal presence of God.

While this concept is fundamentally correct, its finer notions may require a deeper investigation. The Liturgy of the Word for the feast furnishes elements for a considered attempt to have a better and hopefully more complete grasp of the matter. For a start, the first reading taken from the Apocalypse describes the author's vision of *"a large number, impossible to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe and language, ... standing in front of the Lamb... and worshipping God."* This is a picture of heaven. The gathering there is all-inclusive and in the presence of Jesus (Lamb slain) and His Father. It is made up of people who *"have washed their robes white again in the blood of the Lamb."* This means, therefore, that it is Jesus the Lamb who, by His death, makes these people qualified to gather in His presence to worship His Father.

This ties in with the Gospels' proclamation of the universality of the salvation Jesus achieved with His death and resurrection. Jesus is at the heart of this salvation. Today's Gospel reading proclaims it through the beatitudes Jesus spells out in His sermon on the mount. Each beatitude starts off with a declaration of blessedness: *"Blessed are..."* In his book, *"To look on Christ"*, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (who later became Pope and took the name of Benedict XVI) sees Jesus at the heart of His beatitudes: *"He it is in whom it becomes clear what it means to be 'poor in spirit': it is He who mourns, who is meek, who hungers and thirsts for righteousness, who is merciful. He is pure in heart; He is the peacemaker; He is persecuted for righteousness' sake. All the sayings of the sermon on the mount are flesh and blood in Him"* (page 60).

Cardinal Ratzinger then draws two aspects from his interpretation of the beatitudes. The first is that they summon us to follow Jesus Christ in discipleship. For sure, on our own, we cannot achieve what the beatitudes spell out, but we can and must cling to Him and become His, so that what He has achieved will become ours. The call to discipleship is a call to be in communion with Jesus. Our response takes place in the *"today"* of our lives on earth.

“The second aspect concerns the future hidden in the present” (page 61). This has to do with “conclusive salvation” – fellowship with God. While it will be fully realized in the future, it is already happening in our communion with Jesus in the present. Thus, eternal life is already a present reality today. Experience of it today gives us the hope of its fulness in the future because Jesus has achieved it totally for us by living out all the beatitudes in His life to the point of dying on the cross for us, rising from the dead and returning to His full communion with His Father.

Returning to the vision in the first reading, we note that those washed in Jesus’ blood “*have been through the great persecution*”. Historically, the persecution was the one executed by the Roman Emperor. It fulfilled Jesus’ general prediction in the final beatitude. There is no doubt that the persecuted suffer and in their fidelity to Jesus, they cry out to God for help: they “*mourn*”, as the third beatitude says. God hears their cry and comes down to comfort them with His Kingdom. The saints in heaven are those who when they suffered on earth remained faithful to Jesus and found comfort in God’s descent with His Kingdom. Now they are in that Kingdom and enjoy full communion with Jesus and His Father in the Spirit.

In the light of all this, heaven is not a “place”, that is, a location. It is the definitive and eternal communion with Jesus and His Father in the Spirit, a definitive and eternal participation in the Trinitarian communion. The reality is possible because of Jesus Christ. Of this, the saints in heaven provide unmistakable evidence. Faithful communion with Jesus everyday also gives His disciples on earth an experience and therefore hope of the reality in a personal way.

The Feast of All Saints is not just a day in the Church’s liturgical calendar. It is an expression of the faith in the salvation Jesus brought to the world by His total commitment to His beatitudes to the point of dying on the cross, followed by His resurrection and ascension to His Father’s right hand. In this paschal mission of His, Jesus Christ, God made Man, “has given human existence a place in the existence of God Himself” (Cardinal Ratzinger, “Co-Workers of the Truth”, page 351). The saints in heaven show us where we will be when we live our present in communion with Jesus and intercede for us to be faithful to this communion.

BAPTISM OF THE LORD

Isaiah 42:1-4,6-7; Acts 10:34-38; Luke 3:15-16,21-22

Identity and mission are inseparably tied. Thus, for example, one identified as a medical doctor is expected to treat sick people.

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord touches on the identity and mission of Jesus Christ. Immediately following His baptism by John the Baptist, as He was at prayer, a voice from heaven revealed Jesus' identity: *"You are my Son, the Beloved, my favour rests on you."* The voice was evidently that of God the Father. But immediately before that, the Holy Spirit descended on Him in the form of a dove. What did these extraordinary manifestations convey? Jesus' identity as the Son of God, anointed with the Holy Spirit, and assuming the identity of Christ.

This identity assumed by Jesus defined His mission. Anointed with the Holy Spirit, Jesus the Son of God made Man was sent to bring salvation to the entire fallen humankind. His baptism marked His anointing and inaugurated His saving mission. For this mission, He embraced solidarity with all sinful humankind. To this end, He joined the many people to be baptised by John the Baptist. This gave another significance to His baptism: He had become a real human person to carry out His saving mission. He did it in order to take upon Himself the sins of all fallen humankind and take their place to pay the death penalty due to their sins.

What then was the mission of Jesus that flowed from this identity of His? To capture this, let us draw on the second reading from the Acts of the Apostles which narrates the baptism of a Roman officer, Cornelius, by Peter. In his homily at that baptism, Peter had this to say about Jesus: *"God had anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and because God was with Him, Jesus went about doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the devil."* Peter went back to the scene of Jesus' baptism and saw it as His anointing with the Holy Spirit and with power.

Once anointed, Jesus started His public ministry. He set out to proclaim the kingdom of God, to call people to repent in order to enter it, to heal the sick and even to raise the dead; and to liberate people from the devil's captivity. He came with the power of God to set people free from the power of the devil. That was His mission. It was a mission that God had decided for Him and announced through the prophets of the Old Testament. Without naming Him, the first reading from Isaiah prophesied Jesus' mission thus: *"I have endowed him with*

my spirit that he may bring true justice to the nations... I have appointed you (him) as covenant of the people and light of the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to free captives from prison, and those who live in darkness from the dungeon."

The four Gospels give us extensive accounts of Jesus' very concrete works among the people – proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of heaven, preaching justice and love, pronouncing forgiveness of sins on sinners, showing love to the sick by curing them and even raising the dead to life. The ultimate work of liberation was to save all sinners from the hold of Satan and his forces and bring eternal life to them. To this end, He was crucified whereby He took the place of sinful humanity to pay the death penalty for their sins. In this way, He obtained forgiveness of sins for all men and women. Following His death, He rose to life and brought eternal life to all forgiven humankind. That was Jesus' saving mission and He carried it out with resounding success!

As a result of Jesus' mission, we now have life. At our baptism we received this life personally. The Holy Spirit also came down upon us and made us children of God the Father in Jesus Christ. In this way, we were given a new identity: disciples of Christ and children of His Father, made possible by the Holy Spirit.

Identity defines mission. With the new identity we received at our baptism, we were given a mission: to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of heaven and draw people into it. We do this by living as faithful disciples of Jesus and loving children of God our Father. This means carrying out Christ's command of love: *"Love God with all your heart, mind and soul; and love your neighbour as yourself."*

Some concrete examples serve to illustrate Christian love. Like Christ, we are called to liberate people from oppression – whatever be the form it takes; in particular, our attention should be focused on the poor, the needy and the marginalized. We are called to speak up and speak out against injustice and corruption. We cannot do this unless we ourselves stay clear from unjust and corrupt practices. Christ's call to forgive one another rings loud and clear in the Gospels. As God's children, we ought to respond to this call. Where we have been deeply hurt, our mission as children of God is not to give in to our natural tendency to retaliate; but to forgive instead.

Indeed, our identity as Christ's disciples and children of God undergirds our mission to love another everyday of our lives.

SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 62:1-5; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11; John 2:1-12

The Lord's baptism which was celebrated last Sunday marked the start of His mission. Today's Gospel from John narrates His first work as well as serves to launch His entire mission.

The event was a wedding feast in Cana. The story focuses on the shortage of wine and Jesus' intervention to save the situation. In the Bible, wine is a necessary ingredient for a celebration. Its shortage is therefore critical, as it would either dampen or cut short a celebration.

Jesus' mother noticed the looming crisis and drew His attention to it. His response was shocking on three counts. He addressed His mother as "woman" and this seemed rude. Then He seemed unwilling to be involved: "*Why turn to Me?*" The reason He gave was: "*My hour has not come yet.*" This beat the common expectation that time was never a factor for Him to act.

Jesus' mother was undeterred by His shocking response. For she was confident that He would intervene. So, she proceeded to instruct the bridegroom's servants: "*Do whatever He tells you.*" He did indeed intervene and told these servants: "*Fill the jars with water.*" That was a rather strange order. For what was needed was wine, not water. Beating all the shock and strangeness coming from Jesus was that of the water the servants filled the jars with had turned into wine, and the best wine at that.

That miracle lies at the heart of the story. The author of the story presents it as Jesus' "*first sign*" and clarifies it as a manifestation of His glory to elicit faith. The Gospel of John revolves around Jesus working further signs to draw people to faith in Him and through Him, in His Father. In His prayer to His Father, Jesus affirmed that this faith was eternal life (Jn. 17:3). His mission was to bring eternal life to people.

The miracle in the Cana episode was water being changed into wine. There was a transformation. But it symbolized a more important transformation: faith transforms a person into a disciple of Jesus. All Gospels highlight this point: all disciples of Jesus followed Him because they had come to believe in Him. They were always ready to learn from and obey Him. In the Cana story, the bridegroom's stewards became disciples of Jesus because guided by His mother they listened to and carried out His word to them. That was a transformation.

At Cana, Jesus' sign fulfilled its intended purpose: to elicit faith and make disciples, and thus transform. But there is another episode that brings the transformation to another level. That is the story of Jesus on the cross in Jn. 19:25-27. It bears close parallels with the Cana story which suggest an intended connection with it. At the foot of the cross were Jesus' mother and His disciples who included His beloved disciple and two or three women. Here, Jesus also addressed His mother as "woman". He then gave her and His beloved disciple to each other as mother and son.

There is an easy tendency to see Jesus' gesture as fulfilling a human necessity: He was entrusting His bereft mother to the care of His beloved disciple, a man He could fully trust. But there is a much deeper significance behind the gesture. On the cross and therefore by His death to be followed by His resurrection, Jesus instituted a new family, the family of His Father in heaven. The family was not constituted on flesh and blood, but on faith in and fidelity to Him. His mother was a disciple of His *par excellence* and His beloved disciple was so because of his fidelity. Elsewhere Jesus had said, "*Anyone who does the will of God is My brother and sister and mother*" (Mk. 3:35). The familial terms indicate an intimate relationship within the family of God.

In John's Gospel, Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection are seen as the "*hour of His glory*". Thus, the timing "*My hour*" in His response to His mother the Cana episode was intended to point to His crucifixion. His glory manifested at Cana was only partial and would take its full force in His hour of glory. The power to change water into wine would come into full play when He rose from the dead. By His death and resurrection, He brought eternal life to all, that is, He brought His disciples to share in the life of His Father in heaven, thereby making all of them His children. They formed the new family of God.

In the light of the link between the two episodes, the miracle at Cana symbolizes and highlights the transformation into discipleship while the crucifixion brings it to a higher level: disciples are transformed into children of God. Jesus' entire mission was geared towards bringing about this double transformation: eliciting faith to make disciples and then to turn disciples into His Father's children by empowering them to share in His life which is eternal.

At our baptism, the transformation Jesus brought about took its effect in us. We became children of God and now belong to His family, to the glory of Jesus. We should live in faith and fidelity to God.

THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Nehemiah 8:2-6,8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-30; Luke 1:1-4,14-21

On 30 September 2019, Pope Francis decreed the Third Sunday of every year in Ordinary Time as the Word of God Sunday. His intention was to remind the faithful of the importance of the word of God in the life of the Church and so in the life of every Christian.

The first and Gospel readings for today's Liturgy focus on the word of God as contained in the Scriptures. The first reading taken from Nehemiah narrates Ezra the scribe and priest proclaiming and explaining the word of God in the Book of the Law to the assembly of God's people. That Book of Law was the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. The details surrounding the proclamation highlight the respect for and impact of the word of God.

The day of the proclamation was *"the first day of the seventh month"*, a *"day sacred to the Lord"* and the start of the New Year. All the people old enough to understand, men and women, young and old, children included, assembled to hear the word of God. Ezra stood on a wooden dais in full view of the assembly to proclaim it. Gestures are noted in detail: when Ezra opened the book, the people stood up. Before reading it, Ezra blessed the Lord while the people with raised hands answered *"Amen! Amen!"* and then prostrated themselves.

All these details about time and gestures indicate the sacredness of the word of God and the people's profound respect for it. Its proclamation on the first day of the New Year was intended to motivate the people to live every day of the year in fidelity to the word of God. Though it was Ezra to proclaim and explain it, it was actually God who was speaking to them.

Fidelity to the word of God amounted to obedience to God Himself. This point undergirded the people's careful attention to its proclamation and the seriousness with which they took it. After listening to the word, they wept and mourned in remorse for their failures to keep it. This showed how effective the word of God was. Ezra was sure that their remorse manifested their conversion of heart and renewed determination to be faithful to the word of God. He thus exhorted the assembly to feast, to celebrate the start of the New Year. This was because he was equally sure that their conversion was pleasing to the Lord as he assured them, *"the joy of the Lord is your stronghold."* The word of God was indeed sacred and powerful; it converted the people who heard it.

The Gospel has two parts: the first is taken from the opening four verses of Luke's Gospel, and the second from chapter 4 which records Jesus participating in a sabbath day service in the synagogue in Nazara, His hometown. Both parts revolve around the word of God.

The first part reveals Luke's attitude towards the traditions concerning Jesus Christ. These traditions were sources of the "word" of Jesus Christ that eyewitnesses and ministers had handed down. Luke was so drawn by its value that he felt the urge to share it with a certain *Theophilus* to show "how well-founded the teaching" he had received. The name *Theophilus* means "lover of God" and very likely Luke intended it to refer to anyone who loves God. Luke was sure that such a person would want to hear the word of God. While eager to share it, Luke took care to do thorough research because it was very sacred.

The second part of today's Gospel narrates Jesus Himself proclaiming the word of God as contained in the Scriptures. The passage He chose was from Isaiah. It announced the Messiah, the one God anointed with the Spirit and sent to bring liberty to captives, that is salvation to all sinners. Jesus' interpretation of the passage was confidently categorical: "This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen." He claimed to be Messiah God promised through Isaiah.

Jesus' proclamation and interpretation of Isaiah affirm God's fidelity to His word: God fulfills His every promise. All His promises revolve around the liberation of fallen humankind from Satan's hold, from sin and death. Jesus Christ is the one who brought about this liberation and is therefore the ultimate fulfilment of all God's promises. In fact, He is the Word of God made flesh, the personified Word of God. Thus, His claim at the sabbath day service in the synagogue in Nazara.

God's word is always relevant. Jesus' claim that the passage He proclaimed was fulfilled "today" affirms it. Luke's earnest desire to write his Gospel to share the word reiterates it. His diligent research in order to transmit the word of God faithfully shows his respect for its sacredness.

We are truly privileged to have received the word of God in the Scriptures. Through it, God still speaks to us today. Therefore, the Church proclaims it in every liturgical celebration. We ought to listen to it attentively during the Liturgy of the Word at Mass and other celebrations. At the personal level, we ought to make it a point to read and pray the Scriptures regularly. Very importantly, we ought to let it transform our lives as it did the people in Nehemiah's time and be convinced of its relevance as Jesus asserted and Luke reiterated.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 1:4-5,17-19; 1 Corinthians 12:31 – 13:13; Luke 4:21-30

Last Sunday was “the Word of God Sunday” and today is “Catechetical Sunday”. The sequence is logical because catechesis which is faith formation takes the word of God as its source and basis.

In this regard, it is significant that today’s Gospel passage immediately follows last Sunday’s. In fact, both form a larger unit that serves to introduce Jesus at the start of His public ministry in Luke’s Gospel. The scene was Jesus presiding at a sabbath day service in the synagogue at Nazara, His hometown. Immediately after reading from the scroll from Isaiah, Jesus claimed He was the Messiah, the anointed Saviour, the prophet had announced therein. In line with the introductory intention of the Gospel passage, the audience’s responses to Jesus’ proclamation are a nutshell summary of what Jesus was to encounter in His public ministry.

For sure, some responses were positive, others negative. The positive ones are expressed thus: *“He won the approval of all, and they were astonished by the gracious words that came from His lips.”* The negative ones are reflected in the statement about Jesus’ family background and the violence that follows. These responses have a bearing on catechesis because faith formation attempts to equip believers to respond appropriately to the word of God.

In the Gospel episode, those responding negatively to Jesus’ claim demanded Him to do the same works as those He did in Capernaum. At the surface level, they appeared to be desiring to benefit from Jesus’ ministry no less than the residents of Capernaum. But in reality, they were calling for proof of His claim of Messiahship. They wanted visible signs of His messianic identity before staking their faith in Him. Over and above that, they knew His family too well to believe His claim: *“This is Joseph’s son surely.”* Their familiarity with His humble background was a great obstacle to their faith.

Their inability to transcend human familiarity to believe triggered Jesus’ statement: *“No prophet is ever accepted in his own country.”* To illustrate His point, He took up two cases from the Old Testament where Israelite prophets ministered to gentiles: Elijah worked a miracle to provide an endless supply of food to a widow at Zarephath in the height of a great famine; Elisha healed Naaman a leper from Syria.

Jesus' illustrations propelled His unbelieving townsfolk to violence: *"they sprang to their feet, hustled Jesus out of the town, took Him to the brow of the hill their town was built on, intending to throw Him down the cliff"*. It was violence aimed to kill Jesus. Such violence erupted from a refusal to believe.

Contrary to their unbelieving counterparts, those who were open to the word proclaimed by Jesus marvelled at His gracious words and gave their approval. That amounted to a response of faith. They too knew Jesus was Joseph's son and therefore His humble family background. However, the Gospel passage does not separate them from the unbelievers and thus seems to include them in the violence that followed. Yet, they could not have joined in this violence.

The Gospel reading today offers us a few vital points of consideration regarding catechesis. Faith formation cannot happen in the absence of faith and without the word of God. Faith is a basic virtue that transcends all human knowledge, understanding and reasoning to accept what God reveals. For sure, faith is God's gift and for it to be operative it must be accepted. Faith accepts the Scriptures as the word of God in which He reveals Himself and His will for humankind. God's word became Man in Jesus and found total fulfilment in Him.

In offering His word, God sought to strike a communication and therefore a relationship with humankind. Response from them is called for. In Jesus the Word of God made flesh, the human response was perfect. This means the relationship between God and humankind reached its perfection in Jesus.

Effectively, therefore, in Jesus, our relationship with God, which we have broken through our sins, is restored. He is truly the Messiah, our Saviour. Catechesis aims to help us to understand God's word better and allow it to permeate our lives so that we will grow in our relationship with God. To this end, it draws on the Church's long and inspired understanding of God's word in its magisterial teaching. In this regard, the "Catechism of the Catholic Church" is a valuable magisterial compendium for faith formation.

Catechesis tends to be perceived as teaching a doctrine. But in the final analysis, its aim is to build up the believers' understanding of the word of God and deepen their relationship with Jesus, the Word made flesh, the Saviour of the world. Indeed, the person of Jesus should be the central focus of catechesis, the primary content of faith. In Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are led into a profound relationship with the Father. All this presupposes God's gift of faith and His word. Catechesis equips us to accept it and grow in faith.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

A common reason for declining ministry in the Church is: "I am not worthy." At times it is even more boldly put: "I am too sinful for it."

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of such responses. For no one is without sin and all Church ministries ultimately serve the all-holy God. But, as the first and Gospel readings today illustrate, God still chooses to involve sinful human individuals to offer His salvation to the world. Both are vocation stories.

The first reading narrates Isaiah's vocation, or rather, self-offer to God after his overwhelming experience of His holy presence in the Temple. The divine presence was majestically accompanied by seraphs, that is, heavenly beings. They acclaimed God as the all-holy and glorious Lord of hosts. In this holy and glorious presence of God, Isaiah could only acknowledge his own sinfulness: "*a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips*". In Isaiah's mind, there was an unbridgeable gap between God's holiness and his own sinfulness. Just to be in God's presence was unthinkable and risked death. For this reason, the Old Testament carries the thought that anyone seeing God would die. Perhaps, Isaiah was expecting to die when he remarked: "*My eyes have looked at the King, the Lord of hosts.*"

But God carried out a symbolic gesture through a seraph: He touched Isaiah's lips with a live coal from the altar. In this way, He burned away Isaiah's sins and purified him, as He explained: "*See now, this has touched your lips; your sin is taken away; your iniquity is purged.*" With that purification, Isaiah confidently offered himself to be God's messenger. When God asked, "*Whom shall I send?*" he boldly responded, "*Here I am; send me.*"

Isaiah's story drives home the point that God is not deterred by a human person's sinfulness in His desire to involve him/her in His work. For He is not only all-holy and all-powerful, but also all-merciful. He bridges the gap between His holiness and human sinfulness by removing sins and purifying the persons He calls. The experience of God's merciful act of forgiveness was powerful enough to draw Isaiah to offer himself to God's work.

While sharing common points with Isaiah's story, Simon Peter's call in the second reading reflects important differences as well. For one thing, the event took place not in the Temple but by "*the lake of Gennesaret, with the crowd*

pressing round Him (= Jesus) listening to the word of God". Jesus had left the synagogue of Nazareth and come to the shores of the lake. His presence and proclamation of the word of God turned the crowd into a Church community. That community was the new Temple, the new synagogue. Simon Peter's call took place therein.

After ministering to the Church community, Jesus turned to Simon and instructed him: *"Put out into deep water and pay out your nets for a catch."* After a whole night of hard and empty labour, Simon was still able to respond, *"If you say so, I will pay out the nets."* He took Jesus' word seriously. For it was the word of the same God which He had proclaimed to the Church community on the shores of the lake. It had power and thus, Simon had a big catch in the deep.

Simon's experience pointed to Jesus as the all-powerful and all-holy God. That was why he *"fell at the knees of Jesus"* in worship of Him, and acknowledged: *"I am a sinful man."* Feeling totally unworthy of the presence of the all-powerful and all-holy Lord, he asked Him: *"Leave me, Lord."* Yet, Jesus intended that experience to lead Simon to accept the ministry He wanted him to exercise in the Church community He had come to found. Thus, His words to him: *"Do not be afraid; from now on it is men you will catch."*

In this ministry, much would need to be done with many challenges to be faced. The *"deep water"* Jesus instructed Simon to cast his nets into takes on this significance. But Simon's experience should give him the confidence of the presence and power of the Lord. In that confidence, he would be able to minister to the Church community and bring them safely through the challenges facing them. Over and above that, the community would grow, as more people would be drawn into it. Simon, however, was not to work alone, but together with his *"partners"*, James and John. So, *"they left everything and followed Jesus."* This was in stark contrast to Simon's earlier reaction: *"Leave me, Lord."*

The Lord's all-holy presence undoubtedly sets in bold relief our sinfulness. But the all-holy God is also all-merciful. In His mercy, He forgives us. Paradoxically, in His power, He wants to involve us in His work of drawing men and women to Himself, to make us *"fishers of men"*. But He does not force His will on us. So as in the story of Isaiah, He asks, *"Whom shall I send?"* After experiencing His awesome forgiveness, are we drawn to offer ourselves to Him? If there is still fear lingering in us, does His assurance, *"Do not be afraid"*, give us the confidence to say to Him as Simon did: *"If you say so, I will pay out the nets"?* God's word is powerful for nothing is impossible for Him.

SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 17:5-8; 1 Corinthians 15:12,16-20; Luke 6:17,20-26

A meaningful life is one lived with a goal in mind. This is true for a Christian, but with one significant qualification: the goal is set by Christ and it is the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is so valuable and important that Jesus Christ came into our world not just to preach it but also to inaugurate it on earth. This year, from the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time on, the Gospel episodes, taken from Luke's Gospel, serve to unfold this. In a sabbath day service in the synagogue at Nazara, Jesus proclaimed Himself as the Messiah God promised through Isaiah. He had been *"anointed and sent to bring good news to the poor"*. Isaiah foresaw that that good news would include healing and liberation from oppression. For sure, such miraculous works could only come from God and they marked the coming of His kingdom.

Today's Gospel reading presents Jesus assuring His disciples of the kingdom of God as the source of their happiness. But before that, it underscores Jesus' messianic mission of preaching the good news and healing by noting *"a large gathering of His disciples with a great crowd of people... who had come to hear Him and to be cured of their diseases."* Indeed, Jesus was now carrying out His mission in fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy. His "sermon on the plain" was part of His proclamation of the good news of the kingdom.

In His sermon, Jesus identified four beatitudes followed by four woes. Every beatitude begins with the Greek word *makarioi*, which means "happy". It is to be noted that through the pronoun "you" in the plural, Jesus was applying the happiness to His responsive audience. These comprised the "Twelve" apostles whom He had chosen after a whole night of prayer in the hills (Lk. 6:12-16), the *"large gathering of disciples"* and *"a great crowd of people from all parts of Judaea, Jerusalem and the coastal regions of Tyre and Sidon"*. The last group indicated the gentile population and thus the universal mission of Jesus the Messiah. He had come to open the kingdom of God to all peoples of the earth.

In this context, the "you" in Jesus' sermon referred to anyone who cared to *"come to hear Him and to be cured of their diseases"*. The majority, if not all of these people were materially "poor" as they belonged to the marginalised and exploited class. In their situation, many of them were "hungry" and suffering, for which they "wept".

These people were well disposed to Jesus' proclamation of the good news. That was why they had come to hear Him. Jesus declared them "*happy*" not because they were poor, hungry and suffering, marginalised and exploited, but because they had accepted His teaching and become His disciples. They had come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah and accept the kingdom of God which He had come to announce and inaugurate. In God's kingdom, they had God and God would reverse their current situation, liberate them and meet their needs.

The fourth beatitude had to do with a consequence of their discipleship: persecution. It was bad enough for them to be poor, marginalised and exploited; they would now be expelled from the social and religious communities, abused and denounced as criminals, "*on account of the Son of Man*". They would be persecuted simply because they had become Jesus' disciples. Such persecution was real in the time of Jesus because religious authorities held Him to be a blasphemer while civil authorities were influenced by them to see Him as a cause of civil unrest. They felt the need to impose harsh measures on His disciples to bring them under control. But again, Jesus assured His disciples of a great reward in heaven. So, they ought to "*rejoice and dance for joy*".

From the sequence of events in Luke's Gospel, it was very likely that some Pharisees and scribes and their disciples were present to listen to Jesus' "sermon on the plain". They were all out to find fault with Him. They had been doing this earlier on: they questioned and even condemned Jesus for claiming to forgive the sins of the paralytic (Lk. 5:17-26), eating with tax collectors (5:29-32), not fasting with His disciples (5:33-39), and not observing the sabbath (6:1-11). At their sight, Jesus pronounced the four woes in a reversal of the beatitudes to warn His disciples against following them. In doing so, they would be rejecting God's works in Jesus. Ultimately, they would be excluding themselves from the kingdom of God, in favour of a good life on earth – their goal of life.

The beatitudes in today's Gospel focus not on the poverty and misery of Jesus' disciples but on their favourable disposition towards the kingdom of God and acceptance of it. The kingdom became their goal of life and gave meaning to their lives even though of poverty and misery. That kingdom was not just a future possession but a present experience as they had Jesus in their midst and they had become His disciples, living in communion with Him. It brought them lasting happiness. Indeed, Jesus' words to His disciples in His time on earth should inspire us to make the kingdom of God our goal of life, for we too are His disciples. In doing so, we will find true happiness in life.

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

1 Samuel 26:2,7-9,12-13,22-23; 1 Corinthians 15:45-49; Luke 6:27-38

The call to love and forgive one's enemies, from the human point of view, is sheer foolishness. But Jesus still demands it of His disciples and promises them a great reward for putting it into practice.

Loving and forgiving enemies are considered folly because they go beyond human expectations of love. The Golden Rule seems to be a more reasonable option: *"Treat others as you would like them to treat you."* Love is shown to those who return the love. By the same token, hate yields hate. This rule is universal as it dictates common practice. It has its value insofar as it sustains basic order for peaceful coexistence and perhaps harmony to a certain degree. At best, it comes close to the love expressed by the Greek word *philē* – friendship.

But Christian discipleship transcends human expectations and boundaries. Jesus picks up from the fourth beatitude about persecution to bring love to a heroic degree: *"Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who treat you badly."* Persecutors of Jesus' disciples surely rank among their enemies. The disciples suffer persecution in their hands simply because they follow Jesus as their Master. As Christ's disciples, they are called to forgive. Such a response, by human reckoning, is utter foolishness.

Four verbs define this foolish but Christian response. The first, *"love"*, in the Greek text is *agapē*. It goes beyond the boundaries of natural human relationship upheld by the golden rule; it extends the boundaries from friends to enemies. It is the fundamental disposition necessary for the practice of the other three areas of the Christian response to persecution. For it is only in love that the disciple can return good for evil by *"doing good to those who hate"* them, *"blessing those who curse"* them, and *"praying for those who treat"* them badly. All these are gestures of forgiveness in love.

The Christian response, while foolish to human beings, reflects God's wisdom. 1 Cor. 1:25 says: *"God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom."* The Christian response therefore reflects firstly God the Father's compassion. Jesus commands it in today's Gospel: *"Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate."* Secondly, it marks Jesus' disciples as children of God the Father and Jesus affirms it thus: *"You will be sons (and daughters) of the Most High, for He Himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked."*

God's wisdom undergirds Jesus' call to forgive. It is unfailingly experienced when a positive response is given. Forgiveness sets not just the forgiven but also the forgiver free. To appreciate this, it is useful to consider the negative impact a hurt causes to the parties involved.

In a situation of hostility, a hurt is deliberately intended. The hostile offender seeks to inflict pain and suffering on the offended and takes delight when he/she succeeds. The offender feels superior to the offended and achieves a certain sense of victory over him/her. Unless forgiveness is extended, the offended is gripped by his/her anger and led to take revenge. Unless and until revenge is taken, he/she feels caught in his/her loss to the offender. This is captivity.

In the case of friendship, hurt affects relationship. It restricts and may even paralyze the offended party. In this sense, it imprisons him/her. The hurt adversely impacts not just the relationship but also some areas of personal life. For it imposes a burden which for sure the offended and perhaps the offender will have to carry in whatever they are doing.

Forgiveness liberates one from such restrictions and captivity. When given, it sets the offended above the offender. Where the hurt is intended, the offended does not allow the offence to destroy him/her. He/she reflects an ability superior to that of the enemy. In the case of friendship, forgiveness extended restores whatever is broken. It opens up to continued relationship and frees both parties from all reservations, thus allowing them to move on in life without inhibitions.

The freedom that forgiveness brings about is the "*great reward*" which Jesus assures His disciples of. For, by forgiving, they reflect the same attitude as their heavenly Father and live as His children. Indeed, God the Father unconditionally forgave "*the ungrateful and the wicked*" by sending His Son Jesus to pay the death penalty due to their sins. That forgiveness liberated them from death and restored their broken relationship with the Father. That was total and perfect freedom. Redeemed children of God could now move on in their lives with confidence.

The freedom to move on in life yielded by forgiveness is a great treasure, the "*great reward*" assured by Jesus. The call to forgive one's enemies is therefore not foolish but reflective of God's wisdom. Responding to it corresponds to the disciples' identity as children of God and possession of divine wisdom. This brings them true happiness.

EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ecclesiasticus 27:4-7; 1 Corinthians 15:54-58; Luke 6:39-45

Words are intended to communicate. In the process, it affects relationships either positively or negatively. Indeed, words have power. They can encourage, energize, vitalize, motivate and build up; they can also discourage, demotivate, demoralize and destroy. Their basic power is to reveal.

Today's Liturgy of the Word touches on this power of words to reveal the character of their speakers. The first reading comes from Ecclesiasticus. This book, written around 185 B.C., looks back to past events of Israel's history and picks up from reflections on them offered by the people's sages and teachers. The text that constitutes the first reading has this one point to make: *"Do not praise a man before he has spoken, since this is the test of men."* The underlying reason is clear: the kind of person the speaker is, comes through in his/her words, as *"the test of a man is in his conversation."*

Indeed, in conversation, much is revealed: views, intentions, concerns, desires, emotions, and so forth. All these elements revolve around the characters of the persons involved in the conversation, like whether they are optimistic or pessimistic, strongly opinionated or accommodating, dominating or respectful, rash or prudent, harsh or gentle, narcissistic or altruistic, hard-hearted or compassionate. The character list goes on. For sure, Ecclesiasticus has all this revelation in mind in the two statements quoted above.

Today's Gospel reading makes the same point as Ecclesiasticus. It is the third part of Jesus' "Sermon on the Plain" – the first part consists of the four beatitudes and four woes declared by Jesus, while the second is His command to love one's enemies. From the variety of themes it presents, this third part is likely a collection of Jesus' teachings on different occasions; but Luke the author sees their unity in the final statement in today's Gospel passage: *"For a man's words flow out of what fills his heart."*

The first part of the Gospel reading employs the word *"hypocrite"*, a term Jesus used of the Pharisees whom He condemned for their very strict teaching about the Law and traditions of human making while often not observing them themselves. The use of the term, supported by their contents, suggests that Jesus' teachings in the first part of the Gospel reading were originally directed at the Pharisees. Their hypocrisy qualified them as blind teachers of the Law leading others to *"fall into a pit"* with them. It also gave rise to their tendency to

judge others, *“taking out the splinter”* in their eyes, without ever *“noticing the plank in their own.”* Their hypocrisy shone through their words in their strict teaching of the Law and demands to observe human traditions and their own non-compliance. Inserted into Jesus’ *“Sermon on the Plain”*, Jesus’ criticism of the hypocritical conduct of the Pharisees is a general warning to all His disciples. Their words must flow from an honest and authentic heart.

The second part of the Gospel reading introduces the theme of *“a tree being told by its own fruit”*: a *“sound tree”* producing *“sound fruit”* while a *“rotten tree rotten fruit”*. Surely, this theme reiterates the fact that one’s true self is revealed by one’s words. Thus, at the end of the reading, Jesus asserts: *“A man’s words flow out of what fills his heart.”* This assertion highlights the need for authenticity and its inevitable disclosure. For, even if one tries to hide one’s true self behind one’s words, the audience will eventually see through it.

Sound fruit in Jesus’ teaching clearly crystallizes the positive effects of words: to encourage, motivate, energize, vitalize, build up – in short, to give life. A person who promotes that is a sound tree. It marks true Christian discipleship. For Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. The Prologue in John’s Gospel affirms that He was *“in the bosom (heart) of His Father”* (Jn. 1:18). He had come from there to *“make His dwelling among us”* (Jn. 1:14) and *“make Him (the Father) known”* to us (Jn. 1:18). In His prayer to His Father, Jesus affirmed, *“Eternal life is this, to know You (Father), the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent”* (Jn. 17:3). Clearly, the incarnation was intended to reveal the Father and His Son in order to give life to all fallen humankind. In other words, as the Word of the Father, Jesus revealed Him to sinful humankind and made it possible for them to enter into a profound relationship with them. This relationship is conveyed by the term *“know”* in both the Prologue and Jesus’ prayer. An essential part of this relationship is sharing in the eternal life of the Father and the Son.

The Word of God that Jesus is, is life-giving. All those who accept Him become His disciples and possess life. We are among them. As disciples, we are expected to imitate Jesus and be life-giving to others. This obliges us to speak words that are positively impactful: encouraging, energizing, vitalizing, motivating and building up. This is part of our Christian mission. St. Paul in today’s second reading exhorts us to *“keep on working at the Lord’s work always, knowing that, in the Lord, we cannot be labouring in vain.”* In other words, our positive and constructive words will eventually build up a good relationship – with God and among ourselves. They are testimony to our being the *“sound tree that produces good fruit”*, that is, faithful disciples of Jesus the Word of God made flesh.

NINTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

1 Kings 8:41-43; Galatians 1:1-2,6-10; Luke 7:1-10

A google search provides these statistics: the world's population is 7.9 billion of which 31.2% are Christians. These figures are likely to raise questions about the common Christian understanding of salvation by Jesus Christ.

The Gospels are clear and explicit that Jesus is the Saviour of the world (cf. Jn. 4:42; also Lk. 2:11) and that in love, God had sent Him into the world to bring salvation (cf. Jn. 3:16-17). They also uphold that faith in Jesus is necessary for salvation. Such faith makes one a disciple of Jesus – that is, a Christian. A logical conclusion from the Gospel declarations tends to uphold the salvation by Jesus Christ as benefiting only the Christians. It then begs the question: can the all-loving God leave the great majority of the world's population to perdition? If so, how can He be all-loving and His love be unconditional? Isn't the salvation for which He sent Jesus meant to be universal? If not, then how do we understand this salvation? What happens to the non-Christians?

Today's first and Gospel readings offer us elements for an understanding of the universality of God's salvation. In the first place, they make room for the gentile population. The first reading presents King Solomon's prayer as he dedicated to the Lord the Temple he had just finished building. The king had no qualms imploring the Lord to hear the prayers of foreigners, that is, those not belonging to the covenantal people of God, to *"come and pray in this Temple"*. The purpose stated by the king was to draw them to *"know Your (God's) name and revere You (God)."* Indeed, while acknowledging God's choice of the Israelites as His people in the covenant, the prayer asked Him to extend His relationship to other peoples. In the Bible, the word *"know"* conveys the idea of relationship while God's *"name"* stands for God Himself. With King Solomon and his people, God struck a relationship through the covenant. But in His infinite wisdom, He would have other ways to relate to people. Solomon's prayer acknowledged this almighty wisdom of God and appealed to Him to work things out for the gentiles.

The Gospel narrates the story of a Roman centurion asking Jesus to cure his favourite servant of a terminal illness. A few details are significant. Firstly, he did not personally approach Jesus but *"sent some Jewish elders"* to Him. Secondly, these elders *"pleaded earnestly with Him"* because he (the centurion) was *"friendly towards our (their) people... and built the synagogue."* These first two details underscore an open, respectful and trusting attitude at the heart of a harmonious relationship between the Jews and the Roman centurion. They

could trust themselves into helping each other: while he attended to their needs, they were now also attending to his need. Race and religion did not stand in the way of a peaceful and harmonious relationship.

The third detail concerns the centurion's faith and humility. He felt unworthy to meet Jesus personally: that was why in the first place, he did not "*presume to come (himself) to Him*" and now to have Jesus come to his house. He believed that all that Jesus needed to do was to "*give the word*" and his servant would be healed. The fourth detail is Jesus' praise of the centurion in surprising terms: "*I tell you, not even in Israel have I found faith like this.*" The nature and quality of the centurion's faith exceeded that of the chosen people. Jesus' praise of him acknowledges the possibility of a profound faith in God and therefore a genuine relationship with Him among peoples outside the covenant.

God's love is universal and unconditional. His salvation comes from this love of His and is meant for all humankind. For sure, He sent His Son Jesus to bring this salvation to all humankind. From the first reading, the point is inferred that God, in His infinite wisdom and power, has His different ways of extending this salvation to non-Christians. The Gospel story depicts one way: through some Jewish elders who pleaded with Jesus. That indicates the intercessory dimension of the community of the chosen people. God chose the people of Israel not just for themselves but for the nations. The intercessory function also applies to the Church, the community of Christians. Even as we intercede for others, it is important to keep in mind Jesus' remark about the centurion, for their faith may be greater than ours! Humility is called for; and humility opens our hearts to acknowledge that God has His ways of offering to all humankind, regardless of race and religion, the salvation He sent Jesus to bring to the fallen world. No one, no group, no religion can and should monopolize this salvation.

Acceptance of the salvation God sent Jesus to bring to the world calls for mutual acceptance by all citizens, ethnic and religious groups, as well as nations in the world. Undergirding this call is human fraternity. On February 4, 2019, Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Abu Dhabi, jointly signed a declaration on human fraternity. One statement in this declaration affirms, "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. This divine wisdom is the source from which the right to freedom of belief and the freedom to be different derives." Such is the wisdom of God. Infinitely surpassing all human wisdom, it extends the salvation brought by Jesus to all humankind in unexpected ways.

TENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

1 Kings 17:17-24; Galatians 1:11-19; Luke 7:11-17

Death is an inescapable reality. No one has power over it. When it comes after a reasonably long life, it is readily accepted, though not without grief. But its early or premature occurrence in a young person is generally resented, at times with anger and in not a few cases with superstitious beliefs.

Today's first and Gospel readings revolve around the death of a young man. The first reading hints at some superstitious elements. Prophet Elijah was the guest of a widow. Her son suddenly fell seriously ill and eventually died. Her superstitious mind took the better of her to question the prophet: *"What quarrel have you with me, man of God? Have you come here to bring my sins home to me and to kill my son?"* Her superstition tied her son's death to her past sins. The presence of the holy man of God made her recall these sins of hers. She felt guilty and probably found her guilt harder to bear than her son's death.

Against this superstitious background, the tragedy had a strong message to offer. The prophet carried the dead boy upstairs. The story gives a curious detail: the prophet brought the boy into the room where he stayed and laid him on his own bed. The detail would seem to highlight the prophet's belief in God as the authority behind his mission and his care to put the boy under this divine authority. His belief stood in stark contrast with the widow's superstition and set God over all powers she might entertain. All this emerged quite clearly from the prophet's question to God: *"Lord my God, do You mean to bring grief to the widow who is looking after me by killing her son?"* The prophet attributed the boy's death to God's doing and dissociated it from his mother's sins.

Following that, Elijah prayed God to restore the boy's life. God answered his prayer. The prophet gave the resurrected boy to his mother. She reiterated his status as *"a man of God"* and acknowledged the power of God's word he uttered. The message of the story is clear: God is the source of life. He has the power to give it or take it away, for His purpose. On that particular occasion, His purpose was to lead the widow out of her superstitions to total faith in Him. Her good deed of generously offering hospitality to Elijah should be motivated solely by her faith in God and not by superstitious beliefs.

The Gospel narrates another story of the death of a young son, the son of a widow. Jesus, accompanied by His disciples and a crowd, encountered his funeral procession on His way to Nain. Moved with compassion for the widow,

Jesus raised the young man to life and gave him to his mother. A number of details in the story are significant.

First of all, the young man was the only son of his widowed mother. Bereft of her husband, she would have to rely on her son for her old age. Her future, in this sense, was adversely affected, if not totally shattered. Her grief was therefore twofold: loss of a son and loss of a stable future. That moved Jesus to have compassion for her and raise her son to life. Its significance was clear: Jesus ensured her future.

All that was behind another detail: *“Do not cry.”* These words of Jesus touched the depth of the widow’s grief over the loss of her son and worry about her uncertain future. Jesus followed His words up with action: *“Then He went up and put His hand on the bier.”* He turned His attention to the dead son and touched the carrier of his corpse. He commanded him, *“Young man, I tell you to get up.”* He exercised His divine power to give life and the dead young man rose to life. Now alive, the young man began to talk and could surely get off the bier and walk to his mother. But no; the story makes this point: *“Jesus gave him to his mother.”* The point conveys the significance that Jesus not just raised the dead young man to life but also restored a stable future to his mother. In this way, His instruction to her not to cry was an assurance of a stable future for her.

The reaction from the people around carried something expected and a surprise. The expected element was, *“Everyone was filled with awe and praised God.”* The surprising part was that they praised God not for bringing the young man to life, but for placing *“a great prophet”* in their midst. The entire miracle assured them, *“God has visited us”* in order to give them life.

This reaction from the people is a detail with its own significance. It points to God’s visitation of His people, a visitation that gives life to them. Indeed, humankind has no power over death and will remain in death unless God comes into the scene. Death is an inescapable reality. But with God, it becomes a transition to life. God enters human history through Jesus. With His coming, the powers of death come to a standstill, waiting to be defeated. The story conveys this point through the detail it furnishes: *“the bearers stood still”* when Jesus *“put His hand on the bier”*.

Indeed, bodily death is an inescapable reality. But by His own death and resurrection, Jesus has transformed it into a transition to eternal life. Therein lies our future!

ELEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

2 Samuel 12:7-10,13; Galatians 2:16,19-21; Luke 7:36 – 8:3

Man's general tendency is to cover up what is disgraceful and scandalous. Experience tells us that covering up which, in effect amounts to secrecy, leads to further sin. On the contrary, repentance leads to an honest and humble admission of guilt and wins forgiveness from God and likely from others too.

The first and Gospel readings of today's Mass underscore God's forgiveness. In the first reading taken from 2 Samuel, the great King David was consumed by his passion to commit adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, an officer in his army. Informed of her pregnancy, the king attempted a cover-up: he ordered the return of Uriah from a military campaign in the hope that the latter would spend the night with his wife. Out of his sense of solidarity with his soldiers still in the battlefield, Uriah decided not to enjoy the comfort of his home. In dismay, David had him sent back to the battlefield with a clear order to his army general that he be placed in the frontline of the battle. David achieved his purpose: Uriah was killed and the king conveniently took Bathsheba as his wife.

David's attempt to cover up his sin of adultery with Bathsheba led him to have Uriah, her husband, killed. One sin led to another. It was at this point that Nathan the prophet was sent to David to confront him of his sin. The prophet first reminded the king of the Lord's abundant blessings on him, then denounced his sins of adultery and murder, and announced the punishment to befall him. David then confessed, *"I have sinned against the Lord"*. Following David's confession and repentance, Nathan pronounced the Lord's forgiveness on him.

The Gospel picks up the same theme of repentance and forgiveness in its story about a repentant woman. She was identified not by any personal name, but by a negative depiction: she *"had a bad name in the town"*. She was infamous for her bad deeds – whatever these might be. In effect, she was known to be a sinner. There was no cover-up possible for her anymore since she was well known for her sins. Society had judged and condemned her.

Her saving factor was her honesty – her acknowledgment of the reality she was: one *"with a bad name"*. She had come to terms with this public identification of her; she honestly felt she deserved the bad name because of her own misconduct. In that honesty, she boldly turned up at a dinner hosted for Jesus by Simon who by virtue of his being a Pharisee was a person of social standing.

The woman's behaviour broke all etiquette and was shockingly scandalous. Her bad name badly dented the good name of Simon the Pharisee. She *"waited behind Jesus at His feet."* In the eyes of the distinguished guests, she was defiling Jesus the Rabbi. She was weeping and *"her tears fell on His feet and she wiped them with her hair"*. For this, she had to loosen her hair. Loose hair would be unkempt and signal disrespect. Through this scandalizing gesture of hers, she would be perceived to be insulting Jesus.

For sure, that was Simon's perception. His soliloquy articulated it: *"If this man were a prophet, he would know who this man is that is touching Him and what a bad name she has."* For sure, Jesus knew the bad name of the woman. But He was not adversely affected by the woman's gesture. For He saw beyond the public perception of it and looked at the person of the woman. She was not being disrespectful and insulting; rather, she was repentant.

Through a parable of two men in debt of different amounts being forgiven, Jesus shared His perception with Simon who was then able to affirm: *"The man who was pardoned more was the one who loved more."* The woman was totally herself, very honestly and unashamedly acknowledging her sinful state in public, when she performed a gesture that went against all social etiquette. Wetting Jesus' feet with her tears and drying them with her hair, she was expressing her sorrow as well as love for Jesus. In the depth of her heart, she was hoping for forgiveness. By contrast, Simon was dictated by exact social correctness – playing host to Jesus and nothing more than that.

Jesus saw the woman on the road to sainthood – because she was well disposed to God's total forgiveness of her sins. Thus, He said to her, *"Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."* She could now leave in peace for Jesus had pronounced forgiveness for *"her sins, her many sins"*. In this way, her past was no longer a matter for regret. She had now been unburdened of it by God's forgiveness and could live in the knowledge that she had been forgiven and was now loved. Her hope was fulfilled and she was on the path to salvation.

What the woman in our Gospel story experienced from Christ is also within the reach of every sinner. God's forgiveness sets the sinner free from the burden of the past so that he/she can now live in peace and be on the path to sainthood. The story of David in the first reading brings to the fore an important point: while God's forgiveness is always there, a humble and honest admission of sins followed by genuine repentance is called for, in order to receive it.

TWELFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Zechariah 12:10-11; Galatian 3:26-29; Luke 9:18-24

“Who do you say I am?” Jesus’ disciples might have been taken aback by this question their master put to them. For they had been following Him for quite some time already. Did they still not know Him?

Peter answered, supposedly on behalf of his fellow disciples, *“The Christ of God.”* The word “Christ” simply means “the anointed One” – the Messiah whom the people of Israel were waiting for. While Peter gave the correct response, his understanding of the Messiah most likely corresponded to popular expectation. Generally, the people of Jesus’ day expected the Messiah to be a political liberator, one who would set them free from foreign domination. From His authoritative teaching, His marvelous deeds, and courageous and consistent criticism of the Jewish authorities, He would certainly fit the Messiah the people were expecting.

Popular views at the time when Jesus asked His disciples about His identity had not come to take Him as the Messiah. But still, they generally identified Him with great figures of the past: *“John the Baptist”, “Elijah”* and *“one of the ancient prophets come back to life.”* These views could only have been shaped by what they had experienced of Jesus: His authoritative teaching, His miraculous deeds, and courageous stand against the Jewish authorities.

But the disciples saw beyond these great historical figures and identified Him as *“the Christ of God”*. Against the backdrop of Jesus’ impressive ministry, they were confident that He was the political liberator the people of Israel had been expecting. This popular expectation had developed despite some prophetic declarations about the suffering Messiah. One such declaration came from Zechariah in the first reading. It prophesied that the people would *“pierce and mourn for the Messiah as people would weep for a first-born child.”* Indeed, the Messiah would be a suffering servant of God.

If not checked, the popular expectation of the Messiah might lead to a complete rejection of Jesus by His disciples when they encountered His crucifixion. Thus, immediately following Peter’s reply, Jesus provided clarification on His identity. Thus, He predicted His passion and death to pre-empt undesirable reactions from His disciples. From His terrible tragedy, however, there would be a positive outcome: He would be *“raised up on the third day”*. By this death and resurrection of His, He would bring salvation to the world.

Salvation has two components. The first is forgiveness of sins. At His passion and death on the cross, Jesus took our place to pay the death penalty for our sins. As a result of that, we received forgiveness of sins from God. On the cross, Jesus both satisfied the justice of God and brought God's mercy on us.

Now that we have been forgiven of our sins, we are properly disposed to receive the second part of salvation – eternal life. By His resurrection, Jesus brought life to us. This life is a share in God's own life – eternal life. This is God's unconditional love for all of us. In sharing His life with us, God draws us into His loving embrace so that we can intimately relate with Him forever in His kingdom.

The kind of Christ Jesus was defined His discipleship. Since His "Christhood" entailed the way of the cross, all His followers would also have to walk the same way. On this score, He declared: *"If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me."* True disciples of the Christ of God are those who live their lives for Jesus. Since many attitudes and trends of the world go against Jesus' values, these disciples must expect to face a lot of challenges in their lives on earth. They will often suffer in the hands of the Lord's enemies – that is, people who are opposed to Christ and go after His followers as well.

It is a fact that many Christians are suffering persecution in different parts of the world just because they profess faith in Christ and choose to follow Him. These disciples are living martyrs in that they bear true witness to Christ by their fidelity to Him. Indeed, they brave violent opposition and are prepared to suffer and even die for Christ. By dying for Christ, they *"lose their lives"* for His sake here on earth, but *"save"* their eternal life in heaven.

The decision to follow Christ to the cross comes from one's experience of His unqualified love. The experience strongly draws one to Him in love. This is a response of love to the love of Christ. In this love, nothing else matters except being in close relationship with Christ and sharing in His life, which is in fact God's eternal life.

We are Catholic Christians, many of us for a long time. But do we know who Jesus truly is? What is our answer to His question: *"Who do you say I am?"* Do we really know the kind of Christ that He is, and understand what it means to follow Him? Are we prepared to embrace His discipleship?

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

1 Kings 19:16,19-21; Galatians 5:1,13-18; Luke 9:51-62

Today's liturgy of the word focuses on vocation – the vocation of Elisha (1st reading), the Christian vocation presented by Paul (second reading), and the vocation of Jesus and of three other persons (Gospel). It is in the vocation of Jesus that all the others have meaning.

The Gospel presents Jesus moving resolutely towards Jerusalem *“as the time drew near for Him to be taken up to heaven.”* Jerusalem, with its Temple, was considered God's dwelling place on earth. Jesus' resolute journey to it marked His commitment to His Father's will to save all fallen humankind. For, in Jerusalem, He was to suffer and be put to death on the cross to bring life to all humankind. His death marked His completion of this mission. His resurrection and ascension following it signaled His return to the Father. In light of these considerations, Jesus' journey to Jerusalem was His execution of the mission to which His Father had called Him.

The call to discipleship is a call to follow Jesus. His call must therefore have a bearing on it. Today's Gospel illustrates this through three instances of the call to discipleship. The first concerns a man Jesus met on His way to Jerusalem. That man told Him: *“I will follow You wherever You go.”* Jesus did not reject him, but told him in no uncertain terms that *“foxes have holes, the birds of the air their nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.”* Following Jesus meant being ready to move on wherever Jesus' mission would take Him and whatever hardship it might involve.

The second call came from Christ Himself: *“Come follow me.”* The one called felt he had to bury his father before following Christ. Surely, that was a case of filial piety. It made Jesus' response surprising at face value: *“Let the dead bury the dead; your duty is to go and spread the news of the kingdom of God!”* But, in the light of His mission, Jesus' advice made total sense. He had come to bring eternal life and He would do it through His death and resurrection. Physical death is the end of physical life, but the transition to eternal life. Following Jesus is therefore

about eternal life. The dead have transitioned to it and there is no need to worry about them. There is an urgency, however, to draw the living to possess it.

The third person was keen to follow Jesus: *"I will follow You,"* but felt he had to bid goodbye to his folks at home. Jesus responded: *"Once the hand is laid on the plough, no one who looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."* Jesus was not objecting to the man's courteous gesture, but cautioning him against a change of mind. For, his homelike might discourage him on grounds of the mounting opposition Jesus was encountering.

Against the backdrop of Jesus' resolute journey to Jerusalem, these three vocation episodes touch on different but interrelated aspects of discipleship. As in Jerusalem, Jesus was to meet His tragic death, so His disciples must expect persecution even to the point of martyrdom. As Jesus did not give up but was determined to face His sufferings and tragic death so as to complete His mission, so His disciples must not *"look back"* to avoid persecution but move on to the end. As Jesus was to draw people to God's kingdom to possess eternal life, so His disciples must set the kingdom as the object of their mission.

Jesus' call to mission and His instructions about discipleship in today's Gospel have a bearing on the significance of Elisha's prophetic call in the first reading. After going back home to *"kiss his father and mother"* and cook a farewell meal for his men, he left his family and farming life for good. He was committed to his call to succeed Elijah as God's prophet and went wherever his ministry took him, without looking back.

The second reading applies the Gospel's vocation message to all Christians as it exhorts them to *"live in accordance with the spirit"* and not *"yield to the cravings of the flesh."* In actual reality, Christian life is a vocation. It is a call that comes from God to enter His kingdom and enjoy eternal life. The call is extended to all states of life: priesthood, religious, married and single. Fidelity to it at all cost is what counts!

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 66:10-14; Galatians 6:14-18; Luke 10:1-12,17-20

What is success and how do we gauge it? The world has its standards. Jesus has His. Today's Gospel, an immediate sequel to last Sunday's Gospel passage, spells out their fundamental difference.

Last Sunday, we heard the story of Jesus resolutely making His way to Jerusalem where He would be condemned to death on the cross. By the world's standards, this fate marked Jesus' life and mission as a total failure. Yet, as the Scriptures announced and Jesus Himself predicted, His death was to lead to His resurrection to life. In this way, He was to achieve the salvation His Father had sent Him to the world for. That meant, by His death and resurrection, He would open to all fallen humankind the doors of the kingdom of God where they would enjoy eternal life.

Jesus knew that the paradox of His death to bring life was difficult to accept. Thus, on His way to Jerusalem, He sent messengers ahead of Him to a Samaritan village to make preparations for His own visit. His purpose was to affirm to the Samaritans that the paradox was for real. Unfortunately, they would make Him no welcome.

While this negative response angered James and John, Jesus was not affected by it. Today's Gospel presents Him going to another village, as He continued His journey. This time, He sent seventy-two other disciples out *"ahead of Him, in pairs, to all the towns and places He Himself was to visit."* That meant, He involved more disciples. Many people in different places needed to hear the good news of the kingdom of God. Jesus affirmed this in His words, *"The harvest is plenty, but the labourers are few."*

Indeed, because the harvest was plenty the mission was urgent. The instructions Jesus gave the seventy-two disciples were intended to meet this urgency. So, first of all, He commanded them, *"Start off now."* Secondly, He asked them to travel light, *"carry no haversack"*, and not to waste time, *"salute no one on the road."* Finally, they were to trust in divine providence; to this end He instructed them: *"carry no purse", "stay in the house"* which offers welcome, and *"eat what is set before you."* Trust in divine providence overrode undue concerns.

Transcending all these earthly concerns, Jesus' disciples would be able to focus on their mission wholeheartedly. That mission was to proclaim, *"Peace to this*

house” and *“The kingdom of God is very near you.”* Even in the face of rejection, they were still to proclaim the imminence of the kingdom, although they were to *“wipe off from their feet the dust of the town”* that rejected the good news. Rejection of the good news was a failure not of the proclamation of the good news by the seventy-two disciples, but rather of the audience’s response.

Carrying out the mission Jesus had given them and following all His instructions, the seventy-two disciples came back with a resounding success story. They were filled with joy and reported to Jesus: *“even the devils submit to us when we use Your name.”* Jesus confirmed their success story, *“I watched Satan fall like lightning from heaven.”* But He pointed out, *“Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you; rejoice rather that your names are written in heaven.”*

Jesus’ correction of the seventy-two’s reaction crosses a very important point about success. Victory over Satan by eradicating His evil works symbolized by *“serpents, scorpions and the whole strength of the enemy”* does not constitute success. It is only a sign of the kingdom and the kingdom is the end-all of mission. Success, for Jesus, is entry into the kingdom, signalled by having one’s *“name written in heaven”*. He articulates it very clearly in His first prediction of His passion and death in Jerusalem: *“Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for My sake, that man will save it. What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but loses his own soul?”* (Lk. 9:25). Gaining the whole world is success by worldly standards. But in Jesus’ eyes, it is possessing eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. For this, one needs to follow Jesus faithfully, even if it means suffering and failure by the world’s standards, as was the case for Jesus in Jerusalem.

My conclusion in last Sunday’s homily was, *“Fidelity to it (= God’s call) at all cost is what counts.”* I see today’s Gospel presenting the end goal of this fidelity: to have our names written in heaven. That is the success by Jesus’ standard. It is indeed the only true success.

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Deuteronomy 30:10-14; Colossians 1:15-20; Luke 10:25-37

A scheming mind tends to seek personal advantages. To this end, if need be, this tendency may call up fine prints or make fine distinctions.

Today's Gospel reading presents a case in point. It narrates a lawyer attempting to "*disconcert*" Jesus. This was after the seventy-two disciples Jesus sent out to proclaim the kingdom of God had come back with reports of great success (Gospel of last Sunday). They were rejoicing because devils had submitted to them. Jesus checked their thinking, for they were rejoicing for the wrong reason. They should rejoice because their names were written in heaven. For that meant, they had found entry into the kingdom of God and inherited eternal life.

The lawyer probably followed this declaration of Jesus up to satisfy his own anxiety. For he was not among the seventy-two Jesus had sent out on mission. In His declaration to the seventy-two disciples, Jesus seemed to perceive eternal life in terms of mission: proclaiming the imminence of the kingdom of God. How then was he to inherit eternal life? Thus, he asked, "*Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*"

Jesus drew his attention to the "Law": "*What is written in the Law?*" The "Law" is the law God gave His people through Moses. It is all found in the first five books of the Scriptures, often called the "Law of Moses" or the "Book of Moses". True to form, the lawyer called out the two greatest commandments: loving God with one's whole heart, mind and soul (cf. Dt. 6:5), and loving neighbour as oneself (cf. Lev. 19:18). They capture and constitute the spirit of all the concrete laws stipulated in the "Law". For sure, the lawyer answered correctly and Jesus affirmed it as the way to inherit eternal life.

From there, the lawyer sought to "*justify himself*". He asked, "*And who is my neighbour?*" In the eyes of the "Law", a neighbour is a fellow Jew; its extension at best makes room for a non-Jew who, by virtue of being a servant of a Jew, is considered as part of the master's family. But in His ministry, Jesus' care and concern often went beyond the Jewish circle. For example, earlier on, He had sent His first group of disciples to a Samaritan village (Gospel of two Sundays ago) which He intended to visit. In his attempt to "*disconcert*" Jesus, the lawyer might likely have intended to challenge His mindset and conduct. Jesus responded with the famous parable of the good Samaritan.

Jesus depicted the Samaritan in favourable light, despite a couple of factors. Firstly, Samaritans and Jews had been enemies for centuries. Secondly, the Samaritans He had intended to visit rejected Him, because He was set for Jerusalem (Gospel of two Sundays ago). The goodness of the Samaritan stands out even more strongly against the negative responses of the priest and the Levite to the victim of robbery and violence. From the context and tone of the story, this victim in Jesus' mind was a Jew. The two religious officials came upon the man and "*passed by on the other side*". On the contrary, against all expectations, the Samaritan who saw the man was moved with compassion. He then did all that it took to nurse the wounded man and brought him to an inn before proceeding to attend to his personal affairs. He pledged to the innkeeper to cover all expenses incurred in attending to the victim upon his return.

In the story, all hostility was set aside. The compassion of the Samaritan led him to undertake all necessary action because the Jewish victim was in need of help and care. The story goes beyond the concept of neighbour in the "Law" and applies it to anyone in need. That is clear. But Jesus' question to the lawyer brought in another dimension: "*Which one of these three, do you think, proved himself a neighbour to the man who fell into the brigands' hands?*" He amended the lawyer's question, "*Who is my neighbour?*" to "*Who proves himself a neighbour?*" In effect, it amounts to: how am I to be neighbour to others?

The lawyer responded: "*The one who took pity on him.*" Why did he not say: "the Samaritan"? Perhaps, because he was ashamed or felt uneasy to implicate his religious officials. But more importantly, because Jesus' concept of "neighbour" transcended all racial and religious boundaries to reach the fundamental level of the human person. It involved initiative and action flowing from a heart of compassion. Such a concept has universal application. Ultimately, then, a true neighbour is one who loves and is ever ready to serve. It is in doing so that a person manifests his/her love for God. Thus, Jesus told the lawyer: "*Go and do likewise.*" Jesus took the lawyer back to the two greatest commandments of the Law which he had rattled off in his effort to disconcert Jesus. Putting them into practice was the way to inherit eternal life.

In the context of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of heaven, inheriting eternal life means entering it. To do that, one needs to be a true neighbour to all, especially those in need. In the final analysis, it calls for good and caring attitude towards others, much in the same way as towards oneself.

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Genesis 18:1-10; Colossians 1:24-28; Luke 10:38-42

Life on earth is flooded with all kinds of cares and concerns and can be disrupted by them. To keep life in reasonable control, many have set their priorities with a view of handling these cares and concerns with a certain degree of success.

In His visit to Mary and Martha which today's Gospel narrates, Jesus singled out just one concern that really mattered. He pointed out to Martha, *"You worry and fret about so many things, and yet few are needed, indeed only one. It is Mary who has chosen the better part."* What was that *"better part"*, in fact, the *"only one"* needed?

From the story itself, the *"better part"* Mary had chosen was to *"sit down at the Lord's feet and listen to Him speaking."* Humanly speaking, that choice made a lot of sense. For Jesus visited the two sisters to relax and relate with them, and enjoy their company. Martha was concerned about *"serving"* and annoyed because her sister had left her to do all that by herself. In all probability, the serving meant cooking a meal for Jesus. While this would be a sign of warm hospitality, as the first reading narrates about Abraham serving his three unfamiliar visitors, it would take Martha away from Jesus' company. Jesus did not say Martha's concern was wrong; He affirmed that Mary had chosen the *"better part"*. Being with Jesus and listening to Him allowed engaging in a conversation with Him, which He had primarily come for.

But the *"better part"* had a deeper significance. For Mary *"sat down at Jesus' feet"* and *"listened"* to Him. This gesture of hers indicated a student learning from a teacher. Mary was now ready to *"listen"* to Jesus and learn from Him. For sure, Jesus taught only things that mattered in life. In contrast to what Martha was doing - serving material food - Jesus was offering the food for life, the word of God.

Martha's worries were about material food and therefore earthly concerns. Notwithstanding her good intention of serving Jesus a meal, she failed to grasp the *"better part"* in at least two senses. Firstly, by busying herself with *"serving"*, she betrayed her thinking that she could satisfy Jesus' need with her efforts. She was missing the point that in fact, she was the one in need and Jesus had come to satisfy it. She must make room for the Lord to do that. Secondly, she let her material concerns take away her opportunity to receive spiritual food. Yet, the

latter was far more important; it was the *“better part”* which her sister had chosen.

Jesus’ visit to the two sisters takes on another significance when it is read together with the preceding episode: His encounter with a lawyer who asked Him a poignant question, *“Who is my neighbour?”* Through the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus led the lawyer to see that he had asked a wrong question; he should have asked how he could be neighbour to all, especially those in need. In the light of Jesus’ correction of the lawyer, His visit to Mary and Martha reflected His role of being a good neighbour to them. He visited them to meet their very important and fundamental need for the word of God.

This further significance of Jesus’ visit to the two sisters unravels the full meaning of the *“better part”* which Martha had chosen. Sitting down at Jesus’ feet and listening to Him meant learning to imitate Jesus in life: how to be neighbour to others. In the larger context of His journey to Jerusalem (in which the Gospels over the past few Sundays are set), Jesus could now be seen as forming Mary and Martha much as what He was doing for His disciples. The entire formation revolved around His passion and death in Jerusalem followed by His resurrection. But its focus was on eternal life.

Eternal life was so important that Jesus was prepared to lay down His life to achieve it for all. Prior to His death in Jerusalem, He sent His disciples out to different towns and villages to proclaim this salvation. Indeed, eternal life was the greatest and only need that mattered for all fallen humankind. Jesus had come to fulfil it and offer it to one and all. In this, He was neighbour *par excellence* to one and all, to the point of becoming the Saviour of the world.

Everyone would have to make a personal decision to accept Jesus’ offer of eternal life. In the story of today’s Gospel, Mary decided to *“sit down at Jesus’ feet and listen to Him speaking”* the word of life. That was her acceptance of Jesus’ offer. Martha, however, was still too concerned about earthly needs to fully realize that that was the *“better part”*. What about me – what do I think and what is my choice?

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Genesis 18:20-32; Colossians 2:12-24; Luke 11:1-13

The general trend when praying is to make requests of God. Does He not know what we need? If so, do we need to ask? Do we really need to pray?

Prayer, in essence, goes much deeper than asking God for one's needs. In a nutshell, prayer has to do with relationship. For this reason, as today's Gospel records, Jesus Himself *"was in a certain place praying"*. In that prayer of His, He was surely focusing on His Father and thus His relationship with Him. Inspired by His example, one of His disciples requested, *"Lord, teach us to pray."* Somehow, this disciple felt the need to pray as well.

Jesus taught His disciples the "Lord's prayer". It consists of two interdependent parts. The opening address to God belongs to the essence of prayer which is a conversation with Him. The specific title *"Father"* for God in this opening address is an acknowledgement that we are His children. This defines the "Lord's prayer" as sustaining a children-Father relationship. If Jesus highlighted this relationship, it could be safely assumed that in His own prayer He must Himself have focused on His own relationship with His Father.

The relationship conveyed by *"Father"* sets a bearing on all the petitions in the "Lord's prayer". They cover various aspects of relationship: with God in the first part and with His children in the second. Neither of these parts can do without the other. For, addressing God as Father means acknowledging one another as His children. As in a family, relationship with parents flows into relationship among siblings. Only then will the family stand.

The relationship with the Father in the first part of the prayer is articulated in two petitions which reflect two aspects. The first petition adopts an ancient feature of Jewish prayer: *"May Your name be held holy."* It professes the uniqueness of God. "Name" stands for the person bearing it; so *"Your name"* simply means *"You (Father)"*. The word *"holy"* in the Jewish Scriptures denotes a separation. Used of God, it conveys His separation, His being apart, from all created things, and therefore His absolute uniqueness. The grammatically passive form conveying the petition (*"may be held holy"*) places its fulfillment on the shoulders of the child(ren) who pray(s). In other words, they are to uphold God's absolute uniqueness in every way, including now His position as Father. They can do this only by genuinely relating to Him as children to Father.

The second petition, *"Your kingdom come,"* draws attention to the rule of God which is none other than His will. It expresses a desire for God's will to be done. Here again, the responsibility falls on the children; for they are the ones to do the will of God the Father. The two aspects are in fact tied to each other: God's children will genuinely uphold His unique position as Father only when they are faithful to His will.

However, there is another level of significance that the word *"kingdom"* takes on when viewed in the light of the kingdom of God that the Gospel readings of the previous several Sundays proclaim. It has to do with eternal life which is in essence a share in God's own life. Clearly, this touches the heart of the relationship with God: to be a child of God is to share in His life.

Relationship with God the Father, to be authentic, must include that with all His children as in family. The second part of the *"Lord's prayer"* brings this to the fore through its use of the first person pronoun in its plural form: *"we"*, *"us"* and *"our"*. While this literary feature indicates the prayer for community use, it also makes room for its use by an individual. At both levels, relationship among God's children is upheld. Thus, when an individual person prays the *"Lord's prayer"*, (s)he does so as a child of God's family in relationship with the other children.

The petitions in the second part of the prayer bear in mind this family relationship. The prayer for *"our daily bread"* is for God to meet the daily needs of everyone in His family. The petition for God's forgiveness of sins is tied to one's forgiveness of one's *"debtors"*. In effect, it means that restoration by God of a broken relationship with Him calls for the children's reconciliation with one another. The final petition, *"Do not put us to the test"*, expresses the faith that God is in control of all events. It amounts to asking God to keep His children in faithful relationship with Him and with one another. Vis-à-vis the first part of the prayer, it amounts to asking God to enable His children to make *"His name holy"* and make *"His kingdom come"* through their good relationship with one another.

Jesus prayed because prayer was a necessity for Him. It was part of His unfailing relationship with His Father. That sustained His mission. Prayer is also a basic necessity for us as God has made us His children. We pray primarily to sustain our relationship with God throughout our earthly lives in the hope of enjoying it fully in His kingdom in heaven.

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ecclesiasticus 1:2; 2:21-23; Colossians 3:1-5,9-11; Luke 12:13-21

“Vanity of vanities. All is vanity!” The preacher in the first reading makes this poignant observation of life. A person seems to be born into the world for a life of hard work. But this life will eventually end in death and all the hard work will end in emptiness which the preacher calls “vanity”.

This proclamation is true of a life lived without God. Such a life is usually self-centred. The parable Jesus gives in today’s Gospel underscores the vanity of this kind of life. The farmer who has had a good harvest from his land talks to himself: *“My soul, you have plenty of good things laid by for many years to come; eat, drink, have a good time.”*

By all counts, from a solely human point of view, this farmer is totally successful. For sure, he has worked hard and done the right things. This is why he has reaped a rich harvest. With this abundant yield, he has to embark on another plan and seems once again to plan well: build bigger barns to store the rich harvest. In this way he is ensuring himself a secure and pleasurable future.

But for all that right planning of his, the farmer is guilty of a serious failure: he fails to acknowledge that his rich harvest was due to the conducive climate that allowed the crops to grow well. The right climatic conditions came from God. From this standpoint, his sustenance and therefore his entire life depend on God. In fact, his life is a gift from God and his sustenance a blessing from Him. A total disregard for God leads him to see his success as his own achievement and take it all for himself. It does not cross his mind to share that blessing with others – not even his family members, much less his friends and neighbours, or the poor and needy.

God comes to confront the farmer. He calls him *“Fool!”* because he disregards God and those around him. He is a fool because he does not factor death in his planning. Death comes his way when God confronts him: *“This very night the demand will be made for your soul; and this hoard of yours whose will it be then?”* Indeed, life and death are in God’s hands. No plan, however good, can ensure a lasting security if it disregards God. Jesus affirms this in His conclusion to the parable, *“So it is when a man stores up treasure for himself in place of making himself rich in the sight of God.”*

Making oneself *“rich in the sight of God”* means first of all acknowledging that He is the master of one’s life and source of everything one needs for subsistence, and therefore of all blessings. On this score, account must be taken of God in all decisions in life. Dependence on God and gratitude to Him for His blessings must undergird *“being rich in His sight”*.

Secondly, gratitude to God finds genuine expression in sharing His blessings with others. This means thinking of the welfare of neighbours, especially the poor and the needy. Indeed, anyone who is grateful to God for His blessings will share them with others. Such a person is undoubtedly making himself/herself *“rich in the sight of God”*.

A point of central importance about being made *“rich in the sight of God”* is what the second reading from Paul’s letter to the Colossians calls, *“a life hidden with Christ in God”*. When Christ is revealed at the end of time, everyone who lives this hidden life with Him will be revealed in all their glory with Him. For *“Christ is everything and He is in everything”*.

No life lived for God and for neighbour is vanity. On the contrary, it leads to eternal life in Christ in the kingdom of heaven. Indeed, the kingdom of heaven is the goal of our life on earth. At the moment of death, a person leaves this world; but Christ comes to lead him/her into the kingdom of heaven. But we do not have to wait until death to experience life in the kingdom; we can experience it on earth if we live our *“life hidden with Christ in God”* by loving God and neighbour.

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Wisdom 18:6-9; Hebrews 11:1-2,8-19; Luke 12:32-48

Experience bears testimony to the truth of Christ's statement in today's Gospel: *"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."* For treasure is what one's heart values most.

Generally, one's treasure is earthly. But earthly treasures can never be permanent, because they will perish and in any case, because their owners will lose possession of them at death. There is only one lasting treasure. Jesus identifies it in the Gospel: the kingdom. It comes from the Father: *"It has pleased the Father to give you the kingdom"*. The kingdom is indeed God's gift to us. Is this statement from Jesus true? Of course, it is!

But we need to believe it because we do not see it with our physical eyes. We need to have faith to experience it. Faith is what today's second reading (taken from the Letter to the Hebrews) underscores. The patriarchs of old, namely, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, showed profound faith in God and obtained great treasures from the Lord. Abraham and his wife, Sarah, received the great gift of a son, Isaac, in their old age. In addition, they possessed the land God promised to give the patriarch and his descendants from Isaac.

Faith calls for faithfulness, especially to God's will. The second reading also highlights Abraham's faithfulness to God flowing from his life of faith in Him. It recalls Abraham's response to God's call for him to depart for the country He promised to give him for an inheritance. The patriarch manifested striking faithfulness when he obeyed God's demand to sacrifice Isaac, the son of his old age. For his faith and faithfulness, Isaac was restored intact to Abraham.

The second reading sees Isaac's restoration as his resurrection to life. In praising Abraham for his obedience, it says: *"He was confident that God had the power even to raise the dead; and so, figuratively speaking, he was given back Isaac from the dead."* In this wonderful story of Abraham's faith and faithfulness, Isaac prefigured Christ – the only Son of God the Father whose life we sinners demanded to be sacrificed. Unlike Isaac, Christ was sacrificed, but He rose from the dead.

With His death and resurrection, Christ opened the doors of the kingdom of God to all of us and offered us eternal life in it. We now have to ask ourselves: Do we believe this? Do we take this eternal life in the kingdom as our treasure? Do we

live our lives on earth for this treasure in heaven? In short, does our faith lead us to live a life of faithfulness to God's offer and will?

Even if all our answers are positive, one question that may still pop up in our minds is: when will we enter the kingdom and enjoy the eternal life awaiting us there? Jesus gives us the answer in today's Gospel: at the coming of the Son of Man. But we may ask further: Didn't He come already? Yes, He did, more than 2000 years ago. But He will come again at the end of time; and before that, He will come at the end of our lives on earth.

When will that be? Again, His answer is clear: *"The Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."* No one knows and no one can even guess when. So, what should we do then? Well, always be prepared for it; Jesus teaches us: *"See that you are dressed for action and have your lamps lit... Happy those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes."*

Hearing this response from Jesus, Peter asked Him: *"Lord, do you mean this parable for us, or for everyone?"* Peter's question seemed to betray a certain attitude of complacency. He felt he and his companions were doing well since they were Jesus' disciples and might well be considered to be ready for His coming.

Jesus did not give Peter a straight answer. Instead, He gave another parable that carried the same message as the first one. For the lesson it offers is: *"Happy that servant if his master's arrival finds him at this employment."* It is a call to be always prepared for the master's return by being faithful to one's duties.

What is the significance of all this for all of us? For sure, none of us should be complacent or take things for granted. We are called to believe in the kingdom of heaven. We must take it as our treasure and set our hearts on it. This means, we must do whatever it takes to enter it: be detached from earthly possessions and give alms. In this way, when Jesus comes to lead us into the kingdom, we will be ever ready for it.

TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 38:4-6,8-10; Hebrews 12:1-4; Luke 12:49-53

In today's Gospel, Jesus seems to proclaim that He has come to bring violence and division to the world, including the family. His two words, "fire" and "division", deepen the impression and spring a frightening surprise.

Drawing on the Gospel of Luke, from which today's Gospel passage is taken, a fundamental point comes to the fore. In the infancy narrative, Zechariah, at the birth of his son John the Baptist, proclaimed Jesus "the rising Sun" coming to "guide our feet into the way of peace" (cf. Lk. 1:79). When the birth of Jesus was announced to shepherds watching their flocks at night, a heavenly host praised God singing: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to men who enjoy His favour" (cf. Lk. 2:14). Jesus' pronouncement of "fire" and "division", fortified by His denial of His mission as one of "peace", starkly contradicts this double declaration. It also contradicts what the Christian faith upholds about the salvation which Jesus Christ the Saviour was sent to bring to the world: *shalom*, which is commonly translated as "peace" and denotes the total well-being of a person.

For sure, the Christian faith cannot accept such a fundamental contradiction. On top of that, Jesus Himself cannot be self-contradictory. His words in today's Gospel must have a meaning beyond what they convey at the surface level. The four keywords, "fire", "baptism", "peace" and "division", beg a brief exploration to unwrap their significance and show that Jesus is not self-contradictory.

This brief exploration must again go back to the infancy narrative in Luke's Gospel, to the old prophet Simeon's encounter with the infant Jesus when His parents presented Him in the Temple. While prompted by the Spirit Simeon came to know that with this encounter his time had come "to go in peace" (Lk. 2:29), he also prophesied that the child was "designed for the fall and the rising of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is rejected" (Lk. 2:34). "Fall and rising" were seen in terms of "rejection" and pointed to "division". In effect, Simeon prophesied that Jesus would be accepted by some and rejected by others. For sure, He had come to bring "peace" in the sense of salvation, as Simeon himself had been led by the Spirit to accept. But division would set in, between those accepting it and those rejecting it.

The division would be as radical as the acceptance or rejection of Jesus, so much so that it could even affect family relationships in a household. Jesus pointed

this out. Indeed, acceptance of Jesus as Saviour is a fundamental life decision; it must transform one's life, as the second reading calls for: *"Let us not lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection."* Jesus did this by *"enduring the cross"* and *"now taking His place at the right of God's throne"*.

The second keyword, *"baptism"*, in Jesus' declaration refers to His death on the cross. He was condemned to it because He was totally committed to bringing *"shalom"*, salvation, to the whole world and there were people who were adamantly rejecting it. Jesus' total commitment made no room for compromise even if that meant violent death. Similarly, those who choose to follow Jesus must, in the words of the second reading, *"keep fighting to the point of death"*.

It is not surprising that those rejecting Jesus will oppose and even inflict violence on His disciples. Jesus' judgement on the former will come, not in the lifetime of His disciples, but on the last day. In this regard, the first keyword, *"fire"*, sheds a significant light. It harks back to John the Baptist's declaration about Jesus: *"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fan is in His hand to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn, but the chaff He will burn in a fire that will never go out"* (Lk. 3:16-17).

Two meanings of the keyword, *"fire"*, emerge from John's declaration. The first has to do with the Holy Spirit and the second with Jesus' judgement on the last day. For sure, these two meanings are intrinsically linked. Those who choose to follow Jesus in a radical way receive His baptism with the Holy Spirit. They are radically transformed by the Holy Spirit into faithful disciples of Jesus. Many of them will encounter strong and violent opposition from those rejecting Jesus, often throughout their lives on earth. But on the last day, that is, at His second coming, Jesus will judge all and this is the *"fire"* *"that will burn the chaff"*. This judgement on the last day will be the definitive separation that seals the radical *"division"* on earth between Jesus' faithful disciples and His hardcore enemies.

Far from contradicting Jesus' mission of peace, today's Gospel reiterates His achievement of it through His baptism, that is, His death on the cross. The reference to division within a household serves to highlight the radicality of this salvation won by Jesus. Accepting it is a radical decision and calls for following Jesus *"to the point of death"*. For that following leads to the joy of His kingdom.

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 66:18-21; Hebrews 12:5-7,11-13; Luke 13:22-30

The possibility of being shut out of God's kingdom is frightening and at the same time faith threatening.

Today's Gospel addresses the issue through the question someone posed to Jesus: *"Sir, will there be only a few saved?"* Clearly, the question concerns salvation. The point is relevant but restricting it to the number of people saved seems somewhat strange. To grasp its significance, it is helpful to note the opening statement which provides the context for the question: *"Through towns and villages Jesus went teaching, making His way to Jerusalem."*

This opening statement recalls Lk. 9:51: *"Now as the time drew near for Him to be taken up to heaven, He resolutely took the road for Jerusalem"* (cf. Gospel of 13th Sunday). In Jerusalem, Jesus would return to His Father. That return would mark His completion of the mission that the Father had given Him. That mission was to bring salvation to all fallen humankind, that is, to open the kingdom to them. He would do this by His death on the cross followed by His resurrection.

Jesus took the opportunity of His way to Jerusalem to teach His disciples about the kingdom and the way to enter it. The Gospels over the last several Sundays presented important points of His teachings. He underscored the kingdom as the goal of life on earth. Entering it would surpass any worldly success as a reason to rejoice (cf. Lk. 10:17-20: Gospel of 14th Sunday).

The way to the kingdom, however, was the way of the cross. Jesus exhorted His disciples: *"Take up your cross and follow Me."* (Cf. Lk. 9:18-24: Gospel of 12th Sunday). This call by Jesus made one wonder how many people would respond to Him. Thus, the question in today's Gospel. Jesus did not answer it, but called for efforts to *"enter by the narrow door."* He then clarified, *"Many will try to enter and will not succeed."* The *"narrow door"* reaffirmed the *"cross"* He asked His disciples to carry to follow Him into the kingdom.

In His earlier teachings *"on His way to Jerusalem"*, Jesus had singled out important aspects of the cross and therefore of discipleship. On the top of the list is love underscored by the parable of the good Samaritan (cf. Lk. 10:25-37: Gospel of 15th Sunday). In love, the question is not, *"Who is my neighbour?"*, but *"How am I to be a true neighbour?"* In that parable, the priest and the Levite who came upon a robbed and wounded fellow Jew passed him by *"on the other*

side". A Samaritan, considered a traditional enemy of the Jews, did all it took to nurse the victim of armed robbery.

These contradictory responses in the parable undergird Jesus' metaphorical statement: *"The master of the house has locked the door."* The ones locked out call him to open the door and claim, *"We once ate and drank in your company; you taught in our streets."* Indeed, the priest and the Levite in the parable are likely candidates to make such claims. For, priests and Levites, together with the scribes and Pharisees, were often found at meals to which Jesus had been invited. They had been keenly following His teachings. But their primary intention was to find fault with Him. Jesus hit out at their attitude, including that of imposing burden on people which they would not lift a finger to offload. Over and above that, they were responsible for the division Jesus, in last Sunday's Gospel, saw among people, even in the same household.

Locked out of *"the kingdom of God"*, these Jewish leaders and officials would *"weep and grind their teeth"*, in total regret and despair, as they saw in it *"Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets"* *"and men from east and west, from north and south"*. While it would be within their expectation to see their patriarchs and prophets in the kingdom, the sight of Gentiles and even their enemies, including Samaritans, there would be a great shock to them.

Love is an indispensable criterion for entry into the kingdom. Love disregards skin and colour, race and religion, class and status. Love sees in every person the image of God and seeks to be a true neighbour to him or her. In a world where ethnic and religious hostilities, financial and class distinctions dominate, the practice of love can be misconstrued, as proselytization or patronization, for example. Under such an unhealthy climate, it is resented and can even draw persecution. This is one sense of *"the narrow door"* of the kingdom. Entering through it requires a readiness to *"carry the cross"* to follow Jesus to Jerusalem.

God's salvation is for all, both Jews and Gentiles. He wants all to enter His kingdom. It is so important that He sent His Son Jesus to lay down His life for all. To this end, Jesus resolutely set His mind to go to Jerusalem. Despite His radical undertaking to achieve salvation, every person is free to accept or reject it. Inclusion in or exclusion from the kingdom depends on the person's decision, while God's will is all-inclusive.

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ecclesiasticus 3:17-29,28-29; Hebrews 12:18-19,22-24; Luke 14:7,2-14

Honour and public recognition are human cravings. They normally determine seating arrangements in gatherings in different spheres and at different levels.

Jesus' time was no exception. Leaders, and in particular, the scribes and Pharisees, were pretty insistent on seating arrangements, like at banquets, for example. Over and above that, there was the general tendency for the highest ranking to arrive last for a function. Jesus, at one meal a leading Pharisee invited Him to, noticed both these phenomena. He then took the opportunity of what He saw to drive home an important attitude before God in His heavenly banquet.

Before considering Jesus' teaching, two points are worthy of note: the meal was hosted on "*a sabbath day*"; and: "*they watched Him closely.*" In this statement, "*they*" in all probability refers to the scribes and Pharisees, expected guests of the leading Pharisee. In practically all cases in the Gospels, where scribes and Pharisees were found in the company of Jesus on a sabbath day, they sought to confront Him. In our Gospel reading, the opening statement alludes to this intention of theirs. Immediately following the statement is the story of Jesus healing a man with dropsy. Very likely, the scribes and Pharisees had deliberately brought in the man to challenge Jesus. He broke free of their trap and manifested His love for the sick man by healing him. Today's Gospel reading skips the story to move on to Jesus' teaching on the importance of reaching out to the poor and disabled. For such conduct, humility is a prerequisite.

While Jesus' opponents were watching Him closely to find fault with Him, He too was observing how they were "*picking the places of honour*" at the meal. That led Him to give a parable to cross home to all guests the importance of the virtue of humility: "*For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the man who humbles himself will be exalted.*" The parable was about how a guest taking a seat of honour at a wedding feast. He ran the risk of being required, to his embarrassment, to vacate his seat for "*a more distinguished person*". The lesson from the parable was for a guest to take "*the lowest place*" so that the host might "*move him/her higher*" in public view.

The lesson may give rise to a possible act of hypocrisy. A guest could display false humility in the hope of being honoured in public. What an honour that would indeed be! But such hypocrisy was far from Jesus' mind. For He was not talking about an earthly wedding feast, but rather the eschatological banquet – the

heavenly feast. The heavenly Father is the host. He cannot be deceived. He exalts the humble and humbles the self-exalted, as Mary's "*Magnificat*" proclaims.

In the second part of the Gospel, Jesus addressed His host, the leading Pharisee. He exhorted the host not to seek any return for his invitation and to this end, to "*invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind*". Their inability to repay the host would mean he was "*fortunate*". The word "*fortunate*" translates the Greek word: *makarios*. This Greek word begins every beatitude in Lk. 6:20-23. It expresses the happiness that comes from possessing the kingdom of God, as affirmed in the first and the last beatitudes. In the parable of the wedding feast that immediately follows Jesus' address to the host, the four groups of marginalised and disabled people are featured as guests. As the wedding feast signifies the heavenly banquet, they are God's guests.

This depiction is in line with the Old Testament concept of God favouring especially the poor and the needy, often represented by widows and orphans. While society looks down on them, God has a soft spot for them. Jesus' intention in his address to His host was to draw him to have regard and respect for those whom society looked down upon because of their special place in God's heart. Treating them with respect and looking after their needs were tantamount to imitating God's humility in reaching out to them to make them guests of His banquet in heaven. For this, the host would be pleasing to God and granted entry into His kingdom, "*when the righteous rise again*", that is, on the last day. There, he would surely be *makarios*, that is, blessed.

The Gospel reading today presents genuine humility as greatness in God's eyes. Such humility treats everybody, including, or especially, the poor, the disabled and the marginalized, with great respect. It has no place for hypocrisy. Rather than falsely denying one's talents, it gratefully acknowledges them as God's gifts. In this gratitude, the person is drawn to use his/her talents to serve others, especially the poor and the needy. In this way, he/she strives to imitate God and is exalted by Him.

Exaltation by God is the highest honour. It eliminates any need or desire for honour and public recognition by humankind. Social positions do not matter at all anymore, for respect for others characterizes the exalted person's interior attitude and love marks his/her way of life.

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 9:13-18; Philemon 9-10,12-17; Luke 14:25-33

Strategic planning is very much a part and parcel of life. Indeed, from the womb to the tomb, the lives of many people have been planned. Many parents plan the future of their children already from infancy.

Planning involves setting a target or a goal and working out the means to achieve it. A lot of things are foreseeable but many are unforeseeable. These latter are often factored in the calculation of one's ability to achieve the goal, with rough estimates as well as with risks.

The two illustrations Jesus gives in today's Gospel are about the need for strategic planning – the first involves the building of a tower and the second defence in war. Through these parables, He seeks to teach about following Him into the kingdom of heaven. One needs to calculate the cost of this discipleship before undertaking it, for it involves radical decisions. Jesus spells out three such decisions.

The first calls for *"hating one's father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, and indeed one's own life"*. Isn't this a stark contradiction to Jesus' teaching about loving one's neighbour as oneself? Also, to the fourth commandment: "Honour your father and mother"?

To understand the meaning of Jesus' demand in today's Gospel, we need to take into account the relative sense of the word *"hate"*. In relation to God, it means loving family members less than God. Love of God relativizes as well as gives value to all human relationships, including those in the family. For sure, this is in line with the first commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." And when the disciple focuses total attention on God the Father and loves Him wholeheartedly, God leads him/her to also love his/her neighbour as himself/herself. This means, loving especially one's family members and loving oneself as well, but placing it lower than God.

The second radical decision involves *"carrying one's cross"*. The cross refers to suffering and everyone wishing to be a disciple must expect it because Jesus Himself was on His way to Jerusalem to be put to death on the cross. The cross could come from persecution by Jesus' opponents and enemies. But it would surely involve sacrifices the disciple would have to make in life to follow Jesus. The sacrifices constitute the cross.

The third decision has to do with “*giving up all possessions*”. Oftentimes, possessions are placed as a higher priority than relationship with people, including dear ones. For, they constitute a person’s treasure and that is where his/her heart is. To part with this treasure calls for a radical sacrifice. It brings suffering and is thus also a cross a disciple is required to carry.

Indeed, discipleship in the sense of following Jesus and the cross are intrinsically tied at least on two grounds. Firstly, Jesus Himself was crucified. Secondly, the decision to follow Him calls for sacrifices. But the end makes the cross worth carrying. For it is eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. Eternal life is so precious and important that God too was prepared to sacrifice Jesus His Son for all of us. In turn, Jesus readily carried His cross and laid down His life on it that we might have eternal life.

But because the cross brings sufferings, Jesus in today’s Gospel stresses the need to plan adequately in order to follow Him to the end, that is, to His kingdom. Half-hearted commitment will not work. Full commitment is a radical decision that submits all values of life to the supreme value of life in the kingdom. In the final analysis, discipleship is a choice for God in Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, with whom one desires a faithful relationship.

While that relationship could be and is enjoyed on earth, it is definitively sealed in the kingdom. Indeed, we human beings can plan from the cradle to the grave; but beyond the grave, we need God to plan for us. In His love, God has planned a dwelling place for us in His kingdom, where we will live in His presence forever. A radical decision to follow Jesus has this dwelling place for its destination. A committed disciple will do what it takes to reach this destination, including carrying his/her cross.

In effect, Christian discipleship shapes the life of a person and directs it to the kingdom. It calls for radical choices for Christ and this is bound to the cross.

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Exodus 32:7-11,13-14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-32

Religion is sometimes seen as a curbing of one's freedom. Does breaking loose from God give us true freedom and security? Today's liturgy of the word gives us elements for an answer.

The first reading taken from the Book of Exodus narrates one incident in which the people of Israel tried to break loose from YHWH their covenant God. They got Aaron, Moses' elder brother, to mould for them a golden calf and transferred to it an exclusively divine title: "*Your God who brought you from the land of Egypt*". Indeed, YHWH God had liberated His people from Egyptian slavery through Moses. Tired of life in the wilderness under God's guidance and providence, they sought to break free from His control. Worshipping the golden calf, a product of their own hands, amounted to being gods unto themselves, and ultimately, to being free to live their lives as they wished.

If YHWH God had not alerted Moses to their apostasy, the prophet would not have interceded for His forgiveness. As a result, the people would have experienced what the prodigal son in today's Gospel is depicted to suffer after he has broken loose from his father's guidance and providence. Tired of living what he thinks is a restricted life, the young and brash son seeks what he perceives to be a good life out there. As if wishing his father dead, he demands a share of his inheritance.

The father's love for the prodigal son borders on foolishness by human reckoning. He prematurely signs off to his pleasure-seeking son his share of his inheritance. By doing that, he can be construed to be endorsing his selfish and self-centred boy's treatment of him as dead, for only in death does a person's last will take effect. On top of that, he must have been well aware that his immature son will squander his wealth.

True enough, the prodigal boy spends all his wealth "*on a life of debauchery*". Left with nothing, he is forced to seek employment and takes up one that breaches his Jewish dignity: to look after pigs. He cannot even feed on the fodder he serves to the unclean animals. He has hit rock bottom in life which ultimately means at death's doorstep. It is only then that he comes to his senses and decides to return to his father.

At the sight of his return from afar, his father displays another bout of foolishness. To be sure, his father has been anxiously waiting for his return. As if this was not foolish enough, he unashamedly displays rash and undignified gestures: he runs to the boy and puts on him *“the best robe, a ring and sandals”*. These symbolic gestures express restoration of sonship to the boy. He had virtually wished his father dead. Isn't it foolishness to accept him back into the family? In addition, he throws a sumptuous banquet, with the *“fatted calf”* for its main course. Will all these overboard gestures not lead the returning rascal to his antics?

For sure, such thoughts are playing in the elder son's mind. He expresses them in no uncertain terms to his father as well as his utter displeasure with him. He passes a very strong judgment on him: for all his hard and faithful work for him, he has *“never”* received from his father even *“so much as a kid to celebrate with his friends”*. What injustice indeed!

Despite all these negative impressions, the father's overboard welcome of the returning prodigal son has its own wisdom. For it springs from his heart of love. In that love, he views the younger son's return differently from the elder son: *“he was dead and has come back to life.”* That life calls for a restoration of sonship and a grand celebration.

The parable of the prodigal son crosses an important message: only in the father's house is there true freedom because there, there is life. That is because the father loves and he loves to the point even of appearing to be foolish. In love he gives in to the demands of his irresponsible younger son. In love he lets his judgemental elder son condemn him. In his heart of love, both sons are still sons and continue to be free to enjoy his inheritance. In this way, they have fulness of life with full security.

The message relates well to the experience of the people of Israel in the first reading. With God's forgiveness, they continued to live in relationship with God and enjoyed His presence, protection and providence as they journeyed through the wilderness into the Promised Land. There, they grew as a people and became a sovereign nation with full freedom. The message is equally relevant for all of us, believers and children of God: remain with God and we have life to the full!

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Amos 8:4-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-8; Luke 16:1-13

Unscrupulous exploitation of people and manipulation of the economic system to get rich are commonplace not just today but also in the distant past. This mentality is the red thread running through today's first reading and Gospel passage.

The first reading carries the prophet Amos' condemnation of this mentality. Amos worked as a prophet eight centuries before Christ. In those days, those propelled by greed for money were only waiting for their "*feasts and sabbaths to be over*" so that they could do business. Feasts and sabbaths were days when work and therefore business were not allowed. And when businessmen traded, they cheated, by lowering the bushel and raising the shekel. In other words, they sought to make unjust profits by tampering with the scales and raising prices. As a result, while they became filthily rich, many people were forced into dire poverty, to the point that some had even to sell themselves just for a pair of sandals, that is, for basic needs. Through Amos God took these greedy and ruthless business people to task.

Did they listen to God? Apparently not, because the mentality of becoming rich at all cost, including the exploitation of the poor, persisted till the time of Christ, and even beyond. Faced with such a trend, Christ challenged His disciples to make a choice between money and God. He told them in no uncertain terms: "*You cannot be the slave both of God and of money.*" Those propelled by greed for money continued to exploit others for their own wealth and thus make money their god.

Jesus used a parable to illustrate His point: the parable of a shrewd steward. Realizing that he would be fired from his job on account of his dishonesty, the steward worked out a way to win friends who would welcome him to their homes once he had lost his job. He reduced the debts of all his master's debtors. The morality of the action of this man may be disturbing. Some scholars try to iron it out by suggesting that the amount by which the debt was reduced was actually the amount due to the steward as his commission.

But this particular point of morality was not the concern of Jesus in the parable. His primary concern is expressed in the statement in the parable: "*The master praised the dishonest steward for his astuteness.*" The steward's astuteness lay in his use of money, not people, to buy him welcome by his master's debtors the

moment he was sacked. He used money as his slave. That was the point that Jesus sought to underscore. And He followed that up with a call to them to “*use money, tainted as it is, to win friends who would welcome them into the tents of eternity.*” No one would ever think of eternity without acknowledging God; and no one who acknowledges God would not accept Him as master. So, the point of the parable lends weight to Jesus’ challenge to His disciples to use money as their slave in order to serve God their master. This challenge is to use money to meet the needs of fellowmen and in this way to serve God.

Money is needed to live in our world. By all means, let us earn in order to live. But we must bear in mind the purpose of life on earth. Our catechism teaches us that God created us to love and serve Him in this world and to be happy with Him forever in the next. This puts all priorities in perspective: earn money in order to live; and live in order to love and serve God; love and serve God in order to be happy with Him forever in heaven, “*the tents of eternity*”.

To be a slave of God is a way of life that includes “*winning friends who will welcome you into the tents of eternity*”. It clearly advises embracing neighbours as friends. This advice touches on the command of love – love of God and love of neighbour. Good relationship with God necessarily leads to friendship with all His children and coming to the aid of those in need.

Jesus’ teaching through the parable of the shrewd steward has thus to do with the purpose of life on earth: to ensure a place in God’s kingdom. To this end, we are to steer clear of exploiting people and manipulating systems for our selfish ends. On the contrary, we are called to use all our resources to love one another and help especially the needy. This amounts to serving God genuinely.

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Amos 6:1,4-7; 1 Timothy 6:11-16; Luke 16:19-31

Once, a very committed Catholic lady shared with me her wish that a deceased relative would come back to tell her what life was after death. That wish resonated with that of the rich man in the parable Jesus gives in today's Gospel.

In the parable, the rich man used to wear the finest and most expensive clothes and feast most sumptuously every day. He totally ignored Lazarus, the poor man, who sat at his gate, *"covered with sores and longing to fill himself with the scraps that fell from his table."* Though they lived opposite kinds of life on earth, their end was the same: death. Lazarus died of his sores and hunger. The rich man might have died of overeating and overindulgence. Death does not discriminate.

In their life after death, the situations of the two men were reversed. Lazarus was received into *"the bosom of Abraham"* – that is, the eternal bliss in heaven. The rich man suffered *"torment in Hades"* and *"agony in flames"* – so much so that he longed for even a drop of water to *"cool his tongue"*. That was the kind of suffering he received in hellfire. Not wanting his five brothers to land up in hell, he requested Abraham to send Lazarus to them to give them a warning.

What was Abraham's answer? *"If they will not listen either to Moses or to the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead."* Moses and the prophets spoke God's word to the people. The rich man himself had not listened to Moses and the prophets. If his brothers were like him, they would not heed Lazarus at all, even if he rose from the dead.

We Christians have the advantage of further assurance from Christ Himself. He taught about eternal life in the kingdom of heaven and promised to raise His faithful disciples to life on the last day. He Himself had indeed risen from the dead and appeared to His disciples. His apparitions are recorded in the Gospels. His resurrection was clear proof of the reality of eternal life in the kingdom.

In today's second reading, St. Paul expresses his faith in the risen Lord: *"Jesus Christ is immortal, the only Ruler of all, King of kings and Lord of lords."* He will come again not just at the end of time but at the end of the life of every person. His coming is to bring His faithful disciples to eternal life in His kingdom. Death is a transition from our lives on earth to eternal life in heaven.

Motivated by this faith of his, St. Paul gives this very strong exhortation: *“Fight the good fight of the faith and win for yourself the eternal life to which you were called when you made your profession.”* The profession here refers to baptism. The good fight of the faith is the struggle to be faithful to Christ in life.

The first and Gospel readings explain what the struggle on earth is. Every person is naturally attracted to good and luxurious life on earth. It is all right to enjoy life on earth provided one keeps God in focus and the poor in sight. Focusing on God inevitably leads to paying attention to neighbour, especially the poor and the needy. The bliss of Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom underscores the biblical concept of God having a soft spot for the poor and the needy.

But a luxurious life easily leads a person to look inwards and focus on the self. This naturally draws him/her away from God. He/she is not bothered about the poor and the needy. This was what happened in the time of Amos, as the first reading describes. The rich and opulent people were so self-indulgent that they *“did not care about the ruin of Joseph”* – that is, the destruction of their nation. As a result, they would be *“the first to be exiled”* – the first to be punished.

Today’s liturgy of the word drives home a very important message. Death is inevitable and does not discriminate. What happens after death? The parable Jesus gives in today’s Gospel gives us an inkling of the answer to this question. Depending on how we live our lives on earth, we will after death be either in *“bosom of Abraham”* – that is enjoy eternal life in heaven, or be cast into *“Hades”* – that is suffer in hell for all eternity.

How must we live our lives on earth? *“Fight the good fight of faith”*, St. Paul tells us. That means, be faithful to Jesus Christ who is our Saviour, our Ruler, our King, our Lord. He wants us to love one another as He has loved us – that is, to live in good relationship with one another, to share our lives with one another, to share our wealth with the poor and the needy. This is very clearly expressed in His commandment: *“Love one another as I have loved you”*; and Jesus loved us to the point of laying down His life for us on the cross so that we might live. He identified Himself with the poor and the needy in this very categorical statement of His: *“Whatever you do to the least of these brothers of mine, you do it unto Me.”* At the end of our lives on earth, we eagerly hope to hear Him say to us: *“Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world”* (Mt. 25:34).

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4; 2 Timothy 1:6-8,13-14; Luke 17:5-10

It is not uncommon to hear this statement, “God does not listen to my prayers.” Perhaps, we have at times also said the same thing.

The opening question in the first reading articulates the same discontentment: *“How long, Lord, am I to cry for help while You will not listen?”* In spite of this persistent cry, the situation remains the same: one of “outrage and violence, contention and discord.” God whom the discontented petitioner accuses of not answering his/her prayer, now gives a response. He says, *“See how he/she flags, he/she whose soul is not at rights; but the upright person will live by his/her faithfulness.”*

God’s response goes right to the heart of the petitioner’s problem: his/her wavering attitude and conduct. He/she needs to change his/her mindset and lifestyle to experience God’s answer to his/her prayer. God contrasts the petitioner’s unsteady behaviour with that of an upright person: *“The upright man/woman will live by his/her righteousness.”* God’s intention here is to lend weight to His call for a change of heart and for faithfulness in the petitioner.

Faithfulness is fidelity to one’s faith. It means being faithful to the God one believes in. God is almighty, all-powerful, all-loving and all-caring. Genuine faith in God does not question but embraces this reality about God. It does not demand God to work miracles to show His existence, power, love and care; on the contrary, it sees a miracle in every experience in life. In other words, genuine faith sees God present with His power, love and care, every single moment of life. In this view, prayer becomes an intimate conversation and relationship with God.

This vision of faith underlies Jesus’ bold declaration in today’s Gospel: *“Were your faith the size of a mustard seed you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”* Jesus makes this declaration in response to the apostles’ request: *“Increase our faith.”* They make this request after Jesus instructs His disciples, a larger group than the apostles, to take care not to lead the “little ones” astray through scandals (Lk. 17:1-3). He follows that up with a call to forgive a repeated offender (Lk. 17:4).

The apostles sense that Jesus is grooming them to lead His larger group of disciples. His call to the disciples must therefore feature in their leadership which is a ministry of faith. Thus, their request: *“Increase our faith.”* In His response, Jesus takes the word “increase” in the sense of the dynamic quality of

faith. His analogy of the mustard seed for faith recalls His parable where He observes that the smallest seed grows into the biggest shrub (cf. Lk. 13:18-19). Faith, however small it may be, can make the Christian community great. Here, it can move *“a mulberry tree”* into the sea. As leaders, the apostles are to have faith and let it empower their ministry and make the community of Jesus’ disciples grow.

Faith yields the certitude of God’s unfailing and unceasing presence with His power, love and care. It counts on this presence of God and leads to a trusting relationship with Him. His presence gives one the confidence to face whatever situation one is in and the power to weather it. In daily living, the believer’s relationship with God permeates his/her activities and responsibilities. He/she conforms every act to His will. This is fidelity to God. True faith in God translates into fidelity to Him in life.

This is the point Jesus means to drive home to His apostles in the second part of today’s Gospel. Anyone rooted in this faith-filled life will possess the same spirit as the faithful servants reflected in the concluding words of today’s Gospel, *“We are merely servants; we have done no more than our duty.”* Vis-à-vis faith in and fidelity to God, these words acknowledge the supreme authority of God. From this standpoint, ministry is deemed merely as a dutiful service to Him through His people.

Though addressed to apostles as distinct from disciples, Jesus’ teaching in today’s Gospel is offered to all of us as well. For, every one of us is entrusted with responsibilities and has therefore a ministry to exercise. To this end, God has gifted us with talents. Jesus is calling us today to be faith-filled and faithful in our life and ministry, like the righteous person in the first reading. In this way, our faith will be the power that transforms our life into a consistent and intimate relationship with God as well as a ministry to others.

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

2 Kings 5:14-17; 2 Timothy 2:8-13; Luke 17:11-19

“Thank you” is generally expressed for a gift received or a favour done. But when what is received or done is perceived as a right entitled to, its recipient may think it is not necessary to express it. The story of the cure of the ten lepers in today’s Gospel touches on these two types of mentality.

Of these ten lepers, the Gospel explicitly identifies one as a Samaritan and further affirms that he is a foreigner. He knows very well that as a foreigner, he has no right to a cure from Jesus, the Jewish Master; nor does he deserve it. He deeply appreciates his cure as a totally gratuitous gift from Jesus. The Gospel describes him bursting into joy and gratitude: *“he turns back praising God and throws himself at the feet of Jesus to thank Him.”* He not only thanks Jesus but he praises God. He acknowledges God’s hand at work behind Jesus’ act of healing him. His healing by Jesus has led him to God.

The explicit identification of the Samaritan leper implies that the other nine are Jews. After their cure, they do not bother to thank Jesus. Perhaps, they take it for granted that as a fellow Jew Jesus will help them. Or, they may even think that Jesus, for all the power that He is known to possess, is duty-bound to cure them and they have a right to expect this of Him. Such thinking has no place for gratitude.

Yet, the way the story evolves construes the attitude of the nine cured Jewish lepers as basically flawed. First of all, when Jesus enters the village, all of them call out to Him, *“Jesus! Master! Take pity on us.”* Their plea to Jesus depicts their situation as one to be pitied. Undoubtedly, leprosy is a pitiable condition of the body and requires its sufferers to be completely ostracised, that is, cut off from the community. There is even a thinking that it makes the leper unclean, not just physically but in all other respects as well. He is to be excluded from worship, implying that he is not worthy to come into God’s presence. No Rabbi or Jewish Master, is duty-bound to do anything for him.

Jesus breaks off from all this common attitude towards leprosy. When approached by the ten lepers, He cures them all. He confidently asks them to show themselves to the priests to certify that they are cured. When the Samaritan returns to thank Him, Jesus asks, *“Were not all ten made clean? The other nine, where are they?”* He is absolutely certain that all ten have been cured. His statement following his questions is revealing: *“It seems that no one has*

come back to give praise to God, except this foreigner.” Here, Jesus endorses the healed Samaritan leper’s act of praising God, as it attributes the cure to God. If the Jewish lepers think that they have a right to demand Jesus to have pity on them, they clearly fail to appreciate that the cure comes from God. Or even worse, they ignore God altogether. They should have known better than the Samaritan. Yet he alone returns to thank Jesus and praise God.

What is the consequence of this Samaritan’s heart of gratitude? Salvation. Jesus tells him, *“Stand up and go on your way. Your faith has saved you.”* In the Greek text of the story, Jesus says, *“Rise up,”* which is the same word for the resurrection. Coupled with the word *“save”*, Jesus’ words to the cured Samaritan leper amount to pronouncing salvation on him, the salvation Jesus will bring about through His death and resurrection. It is for this salvation that Jesus is resolutely making His way to Jerusalem, as Luke’s Gospel (9:51; 13:22) states. The Samaritan is restored to life not just physically but also spiritually. He will one day rise to eternal life.

The nine cured Jewish lepers miss out on this proclamation of salvation by Jesus. Nothing is said of their salvation. It is pointless to speculate what will happen to them. What is sure of them is their failure to appreciate the significance of what they have received, which is the lesson offered by the cured Samaritan leper: God’s hand is at work behind Jesus’ act of healing. They fail to acknowledge God’s gratuitous cure of them.

It is indeed important to realize that life and all that sustains it are precious gifts from God. For sure, everything is a free gift from God: all that one is and all that one has. No one deserves anything from God and He is indebted to no one. Life and all that sustains life are God’s gratuitous gifts. Everyone should be thankful to God for them.

Gratitude to God is a fundamental attitude needed to live one’s life for the right purpose: salvation. For, the gift of earthly life is oriented towards the gift of eternal life Jesus came to bring to all humankind. Gratitude opens one’s heart to the ultimate gift of eternal life. That gift constitutes salvation and is definitively given in the resurrection. Jesus’ declaration to the grateful Samaritan leper, *“Rise up; your faith has saved you,”* is uttered to all who have gratitude in their hearts. The question each one needs to ask is: Am I truly grateful to God for all that I am and have?

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Exodus 17:8-13; 2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:2; Luke 18:1-8

At times, God may appear to be not answering one's prayer. In such an experience, one may feel that one is just too little or insignificant to merit God's attention and may give up praying altogether.

Jesus in today's Gospel affirms the need to pray continually and never to lose heart. He gives a parable to drive home His point. The parable is about a widow who keeps pestering an unwilling judge until she gets him to do her justice against her enemy. The parable is usually interpreted to assure that God will answer the prayers of His chosen ones: if an unwilling judge grants the widow her annoying request, how much more will the loving God respond to a believer's prayer? While accepting this meaning of the parable, I would like to look at it from the perspective of the widow.

In the Old Testament, widows and orphans are listed among the powerless whose rights God makes it a point to protect (cf. Ex. 22:22; Dt. 10:18). God will therefore not hesitate to intervene in their favour (cf. Mal. 3:5). The widow in the parable is presumed to know this special privilege of hers before God. She must have prayed to God to manifest His favour for her. And so, though powerless, she confidently approaches and pesters the powerful but unwilling judge to do justice for her against her enemy. In the end, she gets what she wants, though the judge grants it to her not out of a sense of justice but out of a desire not to be "*worried to death*" by her annoying persistence.

The widow's attitude and conduct of course illustrate Jesus' point about praying continually and not losing heart. Prayer presupposes faith. In other words, it is only when there is faith that one is drawn to pray. In prayer, the believer enters into a dialogue with God and strikes a relationship with Him. In that dialogue, he/she at times petitions God for particular needs. In response, God desires to engage the petitioner to play his/her part to secure what he/she is praying for.

Going back to the parable, we see the widow playing her role. Armed with confidence that God favours her in a special way, she keeps on pestering the powerful and unwilling judge until he acts. She would have had to continue suffering the injustice done to her if she had remained passive. In that case, her prayers would have remained unanswered.

The first reading from the Book of Exodus narrates another case of how God involved petitioners to answer their own prayers. Moses prayed for his people to win a war against the Amalekites. To this end, the prophet kept his arms raised. In his tiredness, he had Aaron and Hur to support his arms. He was engaged not physically in battle but in prayer for God's continuous help. The army of his people played their part in the fighting. That was how God engaged Moses and the army to secure victory over the Amalekites.

It is not just the widow or Moses who is guaranteed God's protection. Everyone is given the same guarantee. For everyone is precious to God. None of us is too little or insignificant for Him not to pay attention to. For sure, He answers everyone's prayers. But in His response, He often wishes to engage us to achieve what we pray for. Indeed, we need to play our part.

Thus, if at times God does not seem to answer our prayers, one serious reason is our own inertia or passivity. We expect God to put all our requested favours on a silver platter before us without our doing anything. Inertia could be due to laziness, unwillingness to do the needful or giving in to a feeling of being powerless.

There is a need to change such a mindset. For example, in the case of a habitual drunkard, however hard he prays for deliverance from his sinful habit, he will not see results unless he is prepared to put in the necessary effort to kick off his bad habit. A refusal to change underlies sloth and reluctance. It also gives rise to this repeated excuse: "I want to give up my bad habit but I am powerless!" Worse still, the blame may ultimately be put on God: "I have been praying hard to get out of this habit, but God does not answer my prayer."

For sure, God will answer our prayers. Jesus affirms this in His rhetorical question: "*Now will not God see justice done to His chosen who cry to Him day and night even when He delays to help them?*" But persevering and active faith is needed to experience God answering our prayers. In other words, we need to believe that God is there for us when we pray. We also need to take the necessary steps to achieve what we pray for. When we do not get immediate results, we must not lose heart and give up. For, doing our part is a discipline that takes time to cultivate. We need faith to sustain our efforts. Above, all God's grace is always there to help us persevere in our efforts.

THIRTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ecclesiasticus 35:12-14,16-19; 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18; Luke 18:9-14

Pride and prejudice are generally interconnected. The proud think highly of themselves and look down on others, often with great prejudices.

The parable in today's Gospel addresses this issue of pride and prejudice. We are told Jesus gave it to *"some people who prided themselves on being virtuous and despised everyone else."* They reflected the attitude of the Pharisees. Thus, the parable figures a Pharisee in his self-pride and self-righteousness. It sets this negative attitude in great relief by contrasting it to a tax collector's humble acknowledgement of his sinfulness. The parable has both these men go to the Temple to pray at the same time.

The Pharisee thanks God that he is *"not grasping, unjust and adulterous"*. There is nothing wrong with this self-evaluation if it comes from a sincere acknowledgement of God's grace. But the Pharisee's uncalled-for self-contrast with *"the rest of mankind, particularly with this tax collector here"* betrays his self-pride and underscores his prejudice. He claims he is not like them and adds, *"I fast twice a week; I pay tithes on all I get."* He blatantly and sweepingly assumes that all the rest of mankind and the tax collector do not carry out these religious duties. That's outright prejudice to the core.

The Pharisee's *"Thank you, God"* as he begins his prayer is clearly and totally insincere. Far from acknowledging God as the source of his righteousness, he proudly trumpets his own achievement and takes this as his grounds for making prejudicial judgements on others. In effect, he may be putting himself on par with God who alone has the prerogative to judge.

Indeed, God the sole Judge takes over. In the parable, Jesus affirms this in His statement about the tax collector: *"This man, I tell you, went home at rights with God; the other did not."* To be at rights with God means receiving a favourable judgement from God. This judgement from God is clearly the opposite of that pronounced by the Pharisee. The great irony in the parable is that this self-appointed and self-assessed righteous judge finds himself unfavourably judged by God.

Jesus' concluding statement on the parable calls for humility. Flowing from humility is sincerity. These two virtues are very clearly reflected in the tax collector's prayer. He sincerely acknowledges that he is a sinner and so very humbly prays: *"God, be merciful to me, a sinner."*

From the parable Jesus gives in today's Gospel, two attitudes come to the fore as regards prayer: one to be avoided and the other to be adopted. A judgemental attitude arising from a proud sense of self-righteousness makes a mockery of prayer. For it betrays the pray-er's false self-esteem and perhaps even a tendency to play God. In this tendency, he/she does not need God and his/her prayer is reduced to an act of compliance with public expectation or a public show. It is clear that such an attitude is to be avoided at all cost.

The other attitude is to be adopted. It comprises humility and honesty. For sure, these are important dispositions for genuine prayer. We are humble when we very honestly admit the state we are in. In our prayers, we approach God as we truly are – in our weakness and sinfulness. It is only His judgment of us that matters. For He alone is the sole and true Judge. But above all that, He is our Father for we became His children at baptism.

As Father, God's judgement is tempered with or perhaps even bypassed by His love and mercy. The well-known parable of the Prodigal Son (cf. Lk. 15) lends support to this thought. The younger son's premature demand for his share of the father's property and squandering of it in loose living did not deter the father from unconditionally welcoming him home when he returned. That love of the father in the parable reflects God the Father's love for us – totally unconditional, free from all judgement.

Whatever be our situations or however rotten they may be, let us not be afraid to come into God the Father's presence and say, "*God, be merciful to me a sinner.*" We can be sure of His overwhelming love. Indeed, God looks at us as His children more than at our sins. Our return to Him brings Him great joy and us total restoration of our divine childhood.

It is this faith in our merciful Father and this confidence in His love that make us turn to Him in prayer. Our acute awareness of our sinfulness and need for His mercy steer us away from a judgmental attitude as we approach Him in prayer. For we are no better than the ones we may tend to judge. The Lord's love and mercy are universal – shown to all.

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 11:22 – 12:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:11 – 2:2; Luke 19:1-10

Conversion is necessary for salvation. It is a lifelong process. It requires the first concrete step to start off.

The story of Zacchaeus in today's Gospel offers a fine example of conversion. Zacchaeus was a wealthy man because he was a senior tax collector. He had become rich probably because he had been exploiting his senior position to profit from the taxes he was collecting.

Zacchaeus had heard a lot about Jesus and become curious to see Him. But we are told that he was short of stature and on hearing that Jesus was passing he climbed a tree to catch sight of Him. Zacchaeus' stature and gesture in the story have symbolic significance. His obsession with wealth had blocked his view of Jesus the divine Master. Climbing a tree may signify rising above all his obsession in order just to catch a glimpse of Jesus. But for sure, this gesture subjected him to great ridicule and humiliation. For the sight of a short man climbing a tree would have been in itself comical.

In addition, Zacchaeus was a tax collector, The Jews hated tax collectors because they were collecting taxes from them for the Romans. The sight of Zacchaeus climbing a tree was likely to draw nasty and cynical remarks from the Jewish crowd. Zacchaeus' readiness to accept all the cynical and nasty remarks, the ridicule and humiliation from the crowd was evidence of his sincere and eager desire to see Jesus and his openness to Him.

Jesus noticed him and paid particular attention to him: *"Zacchaeus, come down. Hurry, because I must stay at your house today."* Zacchaeus must have been totally overwhelmed by this attention from Jesus. Perhaps, for the first time in his life, a Jew accepted him and was prepared to go to his house – and not just a Jew but a teacher, and not just a teacher but Jesus Himself. Yes, because Zacchaeus was really keen to see Jesus, Jesus reached out to him, and offered him beyond what he had hoped for. So, Zacchaeus hurried down and welcomed Jesus enthusiastically.

In the face of an adverse reaction from the crowd, Zacchaeus experienced Jesus' concern and acceptance of him. His public reputation as a sinner underpinned his rejection by the Jewish public but acceptance by Jesus. That was an overwhelming experience for him. Thus, when the crowd questioned Jesus'

decision, Zacchaeus stood his ground. He pledged to Jesus, *“Look, sir, I am going to give half my property to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody I will pay him back four times the amount.”*

Overwhelmed by the powerful grace of Jesus’ attention and acceptance, Zacchaeus took the first concrete step towards a change of heart. That change translated into concrete multiple decisions. More than restoring just the amount he had cheated, he was going to do it fourfold. Over and above that, he was going to look after the poor; these included people he did not know or have dealings with; they were too poor to pay taxes. Commitment to the poor was naturally going to be a long-term affair.

Zacchaeus took a very radical step towards conversion with all seriousness. The fourfold restoration of what he had cheated and the commitment to share half of his property with the poor meant he had risen above his obsession with material wealth. This obsession had blocked his encounter with Jesus. It had stunted his spiritual growth. His story begins with his climbing a sycamore tree to catch sight of the divine Master. This gesture signals Zacchaeus’ willingness to do what it would take to convert. The possibility and process of conversion had now started.

For his positive response, Zacchaeus received Jesus’ pronouncement of salvation: *“Today, salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham, for the Son of Man has come to seek out and save what was lost.”* As a son of Abraham, Zacchaeus was entitled to the salvation Jesus had come to bring to the world. His repentance was his acceptance of this salvation. The salvation for his house was immediate – it took place “today”.

What Jesus declared for Zacchaeus is valid for any sinner who, like Zacchaeus, is open to receiving what Jesus is offering. But sincere and radical conversion is called for. That conversion is possible by the grace of Jesus *“coming into the sinner’s house”*.

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

2 Maccabees 7:1-2,9-14; 2 Thessalonians 2:16 – 3:5; Luke 20:27-38

In the Apostles' Creed, we profess: "I believe in the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting." This article of the creed is solidly anchored on Christ's assurance and His own resurrection to life.

Even before Christ's coming there was a belief in the resurrection. The first reading today narrates the story of how seven Maccabean brothers chose violent and gruesome deaths at the hands of a very wicked king by the name of Antiochus rather than abandoning their religion. This king was all out to promote his pagan religion by forcing his subjects to practise it. The decision of the Maccabean brothers was motivated by their faith in the resurrection which they professed in their reply to the wicked king.

The Gospel today focuses on the same theme of the resurrection. It engages a story also about seven brothers, this time in relation to marriage. The out-of-real-life story concocted by the Sadducees was intended to confront Jesus about the resurrection. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection at all. They wanted to prove their position correct.

The story the Sadducees made up revolved around the levirate law of Moses. This law came from Dt. 25:5, that is, the Book of Deuteronomy, one of the five books of the Pentateuch. This collection attributed to Moses is called "the Law of Moses". The Sadducees accepted it as their Scriptures. According to that law, a man was obliged to marry his brother's wife, if his brother died leaving her childless. The idea behind this law was to beget children for the deceased brother. In the case brought to Jesus by the Sadducees, seven brothers had the most unlikely misfortune of dying one after another, after marrying the same wife, without begetting any children. The question posed was: "*Now, at the resurrection, to which of them will she be wife since she had been married to all seven?*"

Not only was the story out of real life, but the question that followed was also cynical. The Sadducees were making a mockery of faith in the resurrection. But Jesus remained calm. Without being vengeful, He gave the Sadducees a response based on their Scriptures. He took up the story of the burning bush where Moses called "*the Lord the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God*

of Jacob” (cf. Ex. 3:6,15). Jesus then drew the conclusion: “Now He is God, not of the dead, but of the living; for to Him all men are in fact alive.”

Jesus’ conclusion tied the patriarchal era comprising Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to Moses’ experience of the Lord’s self-revelation in the burning bush. By human reckoning, the patriarchs were long gone, dead a long time ago. But by God’s self-revelation as their God, they were in actual reality alive because God was *“God of the living”*. That means, they had risen from the dead. That was the force of Jesus’ argument from the episode of the burning bush narrated in the Scriptures.

Jesus also clarified that *“those judged worthy of a place in the other world and in the resurrection from the dead do not marry because they no longer die... and they are the children of God.”* Here, Jesus pointed out that once risen from the dead, the *“children of God”* were no longer subjected to the conditions of their earthly life. Earthly beings and realities are bound to come to an end; human beings seek perpetuation through propagation, that is, begetting children in marriage. There is therefore a need for marriage on earth, but not in the kingdom of heaven.

The resurrection is to eternal life in God’s kingdom. It, therefore, dispenses with marriage. In the very beginning, God created human beings in His own image, precisely to share in His eternal life in paradise. But human beings fell and lost that life. God, however, promised them salvation. He fulfilled His promise by sending His Son Jesus into their world to restore their lost life through His death and resurrection. All who accept this salvation by Jesus will rise to eternal life on the last day.

We are now called to make a choice: to be like the Sadducees coming to Jesus with a cynical intention to ridicule Him; or to be like the Maccabean brothers taking the resurrection with such great conviction as to be ready to lose their earthly lives on account of it. For sure, the goal of life on earth is eternal life in the kingdom of God. It must shape and direct our lives on earth!

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Malachi 3:19-20; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-12; Luke 21:5-19

The beautiful Notre Dame Cathedral of Paris suffered severe burning on 15 April 2019. Not only the French but also many people around the world were saddened by it. For sure the Cathedral stood for centuries as the pride of France. It had drawn millions of pilgrims and tourists and captured their admiration. Funds to restore it were very quickly raised.

The sentiments elicited by the Notre Dame Cathedral must have also been similar to those shown over the Temple of Jerusalem. Today's Gospel records the people's admiration for it: *"how it was adorned with fine stonework and votive offerings."* Regardless of its beauty and the amount of time, effort and money put into building it, Jesus was very clear in His mind that the Temple would be *"destroyed and not a single stone would be left on another."* Its destruction happened during the Roman-Jewish war in 70 A.D.

The immediate response to Jesus' prediction was: *"Master, when will this then happen, and what sign will there be that this is about to take place?"* Very likely, Jesus' audience was overcome by great sadness and anxiety regarding the destruction of the Temple. Knowing ahead of time when it would happen might help them to take the necessary steps to prevent the disaster. Their esteem for and pride over the Temple were so high that they would certainly do all that it was going to take to protect it from destruction. Most likely it was these sentiments and zeal that gave rise to their question to the Master.

But Jesus drew them away from their immediate and temporal concerns to the only one that really mattered: the end-time. For the end-time had to do with salvation, that is, eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus cautioned them *"not to be deceived"* for there would be a lot of fake news and false claims based on experiences of international battles and wars as well as natural calamities. For these were the apocalyptic signs commonly associated with the end-time. Indeed, many false prophets and preachers of the end-time would come. Their false claims and teachings would bring fear and false direction to the people.

Jesus had no illusion about wars and natural calamities. They would come and inflict pains and sufferings on people. His disciples would have another source of afflictions: their persecution by their enemies and even betrayal by their own families. Jesus exhorted them to remain steadfast in their faith in Him and fidelity to Him. He would come to their defence in mysterious ways. He gave

them this assurance: *“Not a hair of your head will be lost. Your endurance will win you your lives.”*

The way forward for the disciples of Jesus would be to be detached from earthly bonds and legacies in order to be fully attached to Him. For He was the true Temple in the sense of God’s dwelling and presence among men. The earthly Temple of Jerusalem would be destroyed; Jesus too would be put to death on the cross but He would rise on the third day. With His resurrection, Jesus the true Temple of God would stand forever. That means God’s presence with His faithful ones would be everlasting.

God’s everlasting presence is in His kingdom, the kingdom of heaven. By His death and resurrection, Jesus opened the doors of the kingdom to all fallen humankind. In the kingdom, life is everlasting and is lived in the eternal presence of God. By His death and resurrection, Jesus brought eternal life to all fallen humankind. A personal decision to accept it is called for. That decision translates into a life of fidelity to Jesus. In that fidelity, disciples will experience Jesus coming to their defence and standing by them as well as for them. This does not necessarily mean that they will be put to death; it means Jesus will lead them into the kingdom of God: *“Your endurance will win you your lives.”*

It is important to get our bearings correct and set our priorities right. There is no denying that everyone is given one life to live on earth. It is not wrong to strive for achievements for self-fulfilment. There is almost an innate desire to leave legacies so as to be remembered by the next and future generations. However commendable, all achievements and legacies must not be allowed to dominate one’s efforts to the point of obscuring or even doing away with the goal God has set for our earthly lives – eternal life in His kingdom. Losing this is losing the only thing that matters. Then, life on earth, despite all achievements and impressive legacies, amounts to nought and thus failure.

Assessment or judgement is made at the end-time. It will be carried out by Jesus at His second coming. The physical Temple of Jerusalem and one’s earthly achievements will not count. It is one’s life of relationship with God, whose presence the Temple symbolizes, that matters. True and authentic worship in the Temple flows from this relationship. Jesus is now the new Temple, for He is the real presence of God among men. In Him, relationship with God is real and worship of Him is true. Unfailing faith in Jesus and unswerving fidelity to Him will guarantee eternal life in God’s eternal presence in His kingdom. This is the only Temple that matters: it is most magnificent and everlasting.

CHRIST THE KING

2 Samuel 5:1-3; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:35-43

What do people generally associate kingship with? The highest position in a country with supreme authority and power over all its subjects. Jesus Christ is King of the universe because He is the Saviour or Messiah of the world. However, His kingship is not according to popular conception, but according to God's plan and revelation.

Over the head of Jesus on the cross, the inscription "*The King of the Jews*" was affixed. It drew disbelief from the soldiers and bystanders. They, therefore, started to mock Him. How could Jesus be the King of the Jews when He was hanging helplessly on the cross? How could He be the Messiah when, as challenged, He could not even save Himself? The Jews were expecting their Messiah to be a political liberator, one who would set them free from foreign rule, and be therefore their King. In their eyes, the crucified Jesus could not be their Saviour; neither could He be their King. He had made false claims about Himself and therefore deserved His violent death.

Yet, however, precisely because He had been made to suffer and die a violent death, He was truly the Messiah that God had revealed. Through OT prophets like Isaiah, God had made it known that the Messiah was going to be His suffering Servant. God's ways are indeed not man's ways. His plan for the Messiah and therefore for the King, not just of the Jews but of all humankind, was that He would serve and not be served, and that He would lay down His life so that others might have life and have it abundantly.

Jesus was that Christ, that Messiah. He died in order to bring life to all fallen humankind. By His sufferings and violent death on the cross, He "*took us out of the power of darkness*" and won for us "*our freedom, the forgiveness of our sins*", as the second reading affirms. Faith is needed to see and accept this.

The repentant criminal had this faith when he recognised Jesus as the Messiah and therefore as the King of the Universe. He was even brave enough to rebuke his companion who had mocked Jesus. He was confident enough to make this request: *“Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”* Jesus’ response to him was categorical: *“Indeed, I promise you, today you will be with Me in paradise.”* Jesus was absolutely conscious of what His Kingship and Messiahship were about: selfless love, mercy and service. Although He was put to death on the cross, in actual reality He had willingly laid down His life so that all of us would have life and have it to the full.

In this willing self-sacrifice of His, Jesus manifested the love and mercy of His Father for all of us. In this way, as the second reading asserts, He is *“the image of the unseen God”* who *“wanted all things to be reconciled through Him and for Him... by His death on the cross.”* Jesus was King and Messiah through His fidelity to His Father’s will of salvation for all fallen humankind. His death on the cross did not end His mission. He rose from the dead and thus manifested His power and authority over *“Thrones, Dominations, Sovereignities, Powers”* – that is, all earthly and spiritual powers. He is King of kings – the universal King.

On the last day, Christ the King of the universe, the Saviour of the world, will come again. This time, He will judge the living and the dead. He will bring all those judged worthy into His Kingdom. Like the repentant criminal, let our continuous prayer be: *“Lord, remember me in Your Kingdom.”* To be authentic, our prayer must be accompanied by our efforts to repent and live in fidelity to the Lord’s will which is that we love one another as Christ has loved us, that is, selflessly. Our earnest hope is that we will hear Jesus Christ our King say to us, *“Come, you that are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world... Truly, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of Mine, you did it to Me.”*

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 bottom of the signature.

John