



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 B

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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 *"betroth 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.

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 flourish extending to the right.

John