



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 C

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHRISTMAS DAY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY

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

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

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

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

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

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

Today's Gospel story therefore reveals the double family to which Jesus belonged: the Holy Family of Nazareth, with Mary and Joseph as His parents; and the divine family with God as His Father with whom He was one through the Holy Spirit. He stayed back home in His Father's house for this relationship. After

being found, He went back to Nazareth with Mary and Joseph. These provided Him the care and formation He needed as a human person. At the same time, He also drew wisdom from His Father through the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Gospel story ends with this affirmation: *“Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and men.”*

As a human person, Jesus grew up in the family of Nazareth. His earthly parents Mary and Joseph conscientiously did their best to bring Jesus up as a good and God-fearing Man. For sure, they provided Him His human formation as well as formation in faith. Once a year they brought Him to the Temple of Jerusalem for the Passover feast. Luke’s Gospel reports Him exercising His ministry in a Sabbath day service in the synagogue of Nazareth. There, He read from the scroll of Isaiah and preached. This is evidence of His religious upbringing in the Nazareth family.

The fifth joyful mystery of the Rosary interprets today’s Gospel story as Jesus being lost and found in the Temple. While humanly this is correct, the point the Gospel aims to emphasise is Jesus’ deliberate decision to stay behind in His Father’s house for His Father’s affairs. Setting aside Jesus’ decision, the idea of loss of a child comes strongly across to us.

Losing a child physically is a terrible tragedy, but losing a child spiritually is an even greater tragedy. A child is spiritually lost when he/she loses God. For losing God or not having Him at all is the greatest tragedy. Without God, life is devoid of real meaning. It is therefore vital to take every step to ensure that we do not lose God at all. This requires us to do all that is necessary for every one of our children to get to know God and put Him at the centre of their lives.

On this point, the Holy Family of Nazareth offers us an important lesson. Jesus’ focus on His heavenly Father came from His religious upbringing in Nazareth. His submission to His earthly parents was due to His human formation. Both aspects of His upbringing undergirded His life and ministry. His mother Mary’s response when she failed to understand Him was to *“store all these things in her heart”*. That was a response of faith, leaving everything to God.

It is important to bring children up in good relationship with God. For this, family prayers and participation in the Eucharist on Sundays are important. Catechism classes are necessary. Parents would do well to imitate Mary to have a heart of faith and trust in God as they relate and dialogue with their children. A holistic upbringing of children will put them in good stead for their life and work.

FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY

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

On this Feast of the Epiphany, we celebrate the manifestation of the Infant Jesus to the Gentile world, represented by wise men from the East. The event fulfilled the prophecy given by Isaiah: *“Camels in throngs will cover you, and dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; everyone in Sheba will come, bringing gold and incense and singing the praise of the Lord.”*

The story of the wise men from the East being led by a star to Bethlehem to encounter the baby Jesus is fascinating. It is often featured in Christmas cards and cribs – and rightly so. But we must go beyond the emotional and sentimental fascination of the story to reach its theological and spiritual significance which is even more fascinating.

In the first place, the story reveals the identity of the baby the wise men were led by a star to search for. To these wise men, the infant was more than *“the king of the Jews”*; He was God. So, they *“had come to do him homage”*, that is, to worship Him.

On the other hand, there was Herod. He felt threatened. For to him, a rival *“king of the Jews”* had been born. So, he consulted *“all the chief priests and scribes of the people”* regarding this child. These were the religious and scripture experts of the day. From them Herod learnt the truth about the child: He was *“the Christ”* – that is, *“the anointed one”*; and He was to be born at Bethlehem in Judaea. Another aspect of the child’s identity came to be revealed.

Apart from the child’s identity, the Gospel story unfolds how the wise men eventually found the infant king of the Jews. They were led by a star. Very likely they were astronomers – scientists engaged in the study of stars. Their study of the stars had led them to a humble and honest acknowledgement of the Creator of the stars and the universe. But even if they were not astronomers, the universe and all its wonders, that is, creation still spoke to them very strongly about the Creator God.

Nature and creation for sure do proclaim God. But their revelation is only partial. It needs to be supplemented by the scriptures. In Jerusalem, the wise men learned from the scriptures that the child was born *“at Bethlehem in Judaea”*.

Their natural and historical knowledge was thus supplemented with the revelation God gave through His prophets.

With that revelation they were able to continue their journey in the right direction and arrive at the place where the child was. They offered Him gifts which acknowledged the child's identity. Gold was fit for the infant as King of the Jews. Frankincense used in worship pointed to the Godhead of the infant. Myrrh, offered to Jesus with wine just before His crucifixion (Mk. 15:23) and used as part of a mixture for His burial (Jn. 19:39), indicated that the infant Jesus was the suffering Christ destined to be put to death by the chief priests and elders of the people. Through these gifts the wise men expressed their faith in the threefold identity of the infant: King, God and Christ.

Science enriched by faith led the wise men to recognize God in the baby Jesus and submit themselves to His will. They then followed the instruction they received in a dream to *"return to their own country by a different way."* In the context of the story, that change of direction was to thwart Herod's plan to kill the child. But spiritually, it indicated a life course charted according to God's will.

The Gospel story is of great relevance to us today. It assures us that the infinite and all-holy God chose to become finite Man to dwell among sinful human creatures. His purpose was to save them from sin and eternal death. The Creator God is truly present in creation and actively intervening in human history to bring salvation not just to the Jews but to the entire humankind. Nature and its sciences, complemented by sacred scriptures, testify to God dwelling among us and saving us with unconditional love.

We who have accepted this revelation of God must, like the wise men from the East, follow a different way – that is, the way of God. Our lives must be lived no longer according to our own wills but to the will of the God and the Saviour we have met and worship. In our encounter with Him, we receive His light. We must let it shine in our dark world to lead others to the Christ, our God and King.

Today, as we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany, we can only be filled with gratitude to the Lord. For He cared to become Man to dwell among us and within us, to intervene in our history and our personal lives, to save us from sin and give us life. We thank Him for the revelation He has given us of this great mystery of the Incarnation geared towards our salvation. Our best and most fitting gifts to Him are the gifts of ourselves and our lives to Him as we recognise Him in our neighbours and love Him by loving them.

ASH WEDNESDAY

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

The season of Lent begins today – Ash Wednesday. This name comes from the Church’s traditional and liturgical practice of imposing ashes on the faithful. The question is: why do we receive ashes?

Lent is a penitential season. The imposition of ashes follows a long-standing penitential practice in the Old Testament. It marks repentance from sin and a desire to turn back to God. In addition, it serves as a clear reminder that God created His human creatures from the dust of the earth. These two points undergird the Church’s two alternative formulas uttered during the imposition of ashes: “Remember you are dust, and unto dust you shall return”, and “Turn away from sin, and believe the Gospel.”

The first formula goes back to the creation story in Genesis. The story describes God fashioning man *“from the dust of the ground”*. He then *“breathed into his nostrils the breath of life”* (Gen. 2:7) and *“the man became a living being”* (Gen. 2:8). From the rib of the man, God fashioned a woman whom He gave to him to be his wife. Unfortunately, this first couple sinned against God. When God took them to task for their sin, He told the man saying: *“You are dust and unto dust you shall return”* (Gen. 3:19). This was a declaration of death as a punishment for their sin.

But while declaring death, God also promised the fallen man and his wife salvation. He did it when He cursed the serpent which had tempted the man and his wife to sin. He said to the serpent: *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you shall strike his heel”* (Gen. 3:15). The Church interprets these words to mean the Blessed Virgin Mary and her Son Jesus Christ.

The creation story is about life and death as well as salvation – which is restoration to life. It was not just the first man and woman who had sinned and thus landed in death; the entire humankind as their descendants too met with the same destiny. God’s promise of salvation was thus not just for the first fallen human couple but for all fallen humankind. Jesus came in fulfillment of God’s promise of salvation. His mission was to deliver all fallen humankind from the pit of eternal death by taking unto Himself their sins to destroy them. The second reading from 2 Corinthians affirms, *“God has made the sinless one into sin, so that in Him we might become the goodness of God.”*

We know from the Scriptures that Jesus brought this salvation by His own death on the cross and resurrection. This saving event constituted the core Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection are facts of history. The salvation He brought thereby is a reality. It consists of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. It is there for everyone to receive. But a personal decision to accept it is called for. The call is articulated in the second formula: "Turn away from sin, and believe the gospel." The call is primarily to accept Jesus Christ and the life God sent Him to bring to all of us. The reception of ashes is an expression of the positive response to this call.

Our response must go beyond the liturgy and translate into life. The three traditional practices of almsgiving, prayer and fasting constitute a holistic way of living out the response. They touch on every aspect of our life: relationship with God, relationship with neighbour, and relationship with our own inner self. For in prayer, we focus on God and give Him the centre-place in our life. His presence and providence are necessary for life. Prayer sustains our relationship with God and revolves our life around Him. Almsgiving which is primarily but not exclusively giving monetary or material aid turns attention to our neighbours, especially those in need. It builds up relationship with neighbours, which a genuine relationship with God necessarily leads to. Fasting is a self-discipline to gear us towards a purposeful life in terms of good relationship with God and with neighbour.

In His teaching on these three traditional practices, Jesus is very mindful of a possible unhealthy intention: to carry them out for show in order to draw public attention to oneself. Such an intention takes the value off these practices as it turns them into hypocritical acts. Public recognition is what is sought and when achieved, it becomes the reward for the pious practices. The real reward, however, comes from the heavenly Father. He sees and rewards these practices even when they are carried out in secret.

Prayerfully in this season of Lent we will carry out these practices in genuine and faithful response to Jesus' call to believe and accept Him. We pray that in this way in the coming Easter we will truly experience the new life Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead to achieve and offer us. Let our reception of ashes today be an authentic expression of our decision to turn away from sin and accept God's offer of salvation achieved by His Son Jesus Christ.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Deuteronomy 26:4-10; Romans 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13

Advancement in science and technology has, to a great extent, resulted in a loss of the sense of God as well as focus on Him. Faith in technology and its power to advance human life and society has replaced faith in God and His power. All this is because the former produces visible and tangible effects, while God remains invisible and His presence, providence and power require faith, blind faith if need be, to accept. Even then, faith still does not seem to fully guarantee a steady and sustained fidelity to God, as the experience of temptations testifies.

Today's first and Gospel readings give us an important guide to keep our faith in God and focus on Him. The first reading from Deuteronomy stipulates the offering of the first fruits of the land to the Lord. The rite is accompanied by a formula of faith. In the Promised Land, the people of God were envisaged to encounter serious temptations. For, the sedentary population had a culture and way of life superior to theirs, since they had been slaves in Egypt and wanderers in the wilderness for forty years. These were likely to attract them and perhaps gradually dragged them into embracing the polytheism and idolatry of the local people.

To help them ward off these temptations, through Moses, God marked out certain days of the year as important feast-days. On these days they were to observe certain rituals and make certain offerings to God to focus on and worship Him. One such day was the offering of the first fruits of the land. The formula of faith, called the "historical credo", articulated all God's wonderful interventions for them in their history. Starting with their "*father, a wandering Aramaean*" (Abraham), God led His people to the "*land where milk and honey flowed*". Offering to Him the first fruits of the land was a liturgical act that acknowledged and reminded the people of God's gift of the land to them, preceded by His marvelous interventions in their favour.

The Gospel narrates the story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness before His public ministry. Jesus was filled with the Spirit and led by Him into the wilderness where He fasted for forty days. In this experience of His, Jesus identified Himself with His people in the wilderness and prepared Himself for His public ministry throughout which He would encounter many temptations from the devil through His opponents. In the desert, just like His people in the past, Jesus had only His Father to count on as He faced the tempter.

At the end of His fast, Jesus was hungry. The devil approached Him and tempted Him: *"If You are the Son of God, tell this stone into a loaf."* Jesus' hunger represented all human needs. He was tempted to exploit the power He had as the Son of God to satisfy all these needs. The second temptation exploited human desires for power and glory to possess *"all the kingdoms of the world"*. The final temptation went back again to Jesus' divine Sonship, to exploit all the prerogatives of this status to meet the human yearning for fame and name.

Underlying all these temptations was a common double denominator: the devil sought to shift Jesus' attention away from God, that is, from His Father, to His own self and His own glory; ultimately the devil sought to be God as he made clear in his words to Jesus in the second temptation: *"worship me."* But Jesus was very focused in His handling of all three temptations. He quoted the scriptures, which were God's word. His entire life and ministry revolved around His Father's word and will. As a result, His opponents could not tempt Him to budge from His Father's will.

The devil's failure led him to leave Jesus for the time being; but he would *"return at the appointed time"* – that is, during Jesus' agony in the garden, passion and crucifixion. There, the devil made use of leaders and soldiers to tempt Jesus. A cohort led by Judas arrested Jesus. The chief priests led the people to demand His crucifixion. He was challenged to come down from the cross and save Himself (Lk. 23:35-38). Jesus did not give in to all these temptations at all, however great a pain He suffered. Just before His last breath on the cross, He said, *"Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit"* (Lk. 23:46). In this way, He reiterated His response to the devil in the second temptation: *"You must worship the Lord your God."*

Calling God His Father, He affirmed He was the *"Son of God"* and asserted His fidelity to His Father's will. In this way, He inaugurated the Father's kingdom in the world – different from *"all the kingdoms of the earth"*. These seek political and financial powers, fame and glory. God's kingdom, as the Lord's Prayer confesses, is: *"Thy will be done."*

Faith in God and fidelity to His will are our best weapons against the tempter.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Genesis 15:5-12,17-18; Philippians 3:17 – 4:1; Luke 9:28-36

Life has a goal. Its pursuit of the goal is hardly ever plain sailing. There are ups and downs, often more downs than ups. The experience of the ups, even if rare, strengthens the determination to continue pursuing the goal, even or especially in the midst of the downs.

The patriarch Abram and his wife Sarai were childless. That would have been a great part of their downs. In their old age, God made the patriarch a promise of a great reward and a son (Gen. 15:2,4). Humanly speaking, the promise of a son seemed far-fetched and impossible. Thus, Abram proposed to God a realistic and feasible “succession plan”: through his senior-most steward (Gen. 15:3). In response, to kindle the patriarch’s faith, God “*took Abram outside*” and asked him to “*count the stars if he could.*” Following that, God promised him descendants as many as the stars as well as the land of Canaan.

God’s action of taking Abram “*outside*” had a triple purpose: (i) to give the patriarch convincing evidence of His power to fulfill whatever promises He made: the stars were His creation and manifested as well as assured His power; (ii) to give him a visible idea of how many descendants God would grant him; and (iii) to take him out of his inward-looking response to God to look “*outside*” himself so as to have a wider perspective of life. God’s action achieved its purpose, as “*Abram put his faith in the Lord*”.

God carried out another action. He ordered Abram to take a heifer, a goat and a ram, cut them into two halves each and line them up in two rows with a passage in between. He then caused Abram to fall into a “*deep sleep*”. Then when darkness had fallen, He made “*a smoking furnace and fire-brand*” pass “*between the halves*” of the cut animals. This was a drastic action taken by God. Its significance is furnished by two Old Testament texts. Ex. 19:16 records God’s theophany at Sinai through lightning flashes and dense clouds. With their semblance to these natural phenomena, the smoking furnace and fire-brand signalled God’s presence and hinted that it was He who passed between the parts of the animals. The second text is Jer. 34:18-20 which enunciates the significance of passing between the two parts of a cut animal. By passing between the parts of the animal, parties to a covenant agreed to be cut like the animal. This covenant ritual underlined God’s absolute commitment to His promises to Abram of descendants and land.

We note here the interplay between light and darkness. The stars are bodies of light clearly visible in the dark sky. The fire-brand is a body of light and its passage between the halves of the animals was a spectacular sight in the darkness that had enveloped Abram in his deep sleep. For sure, the promises of a son, countless descendants and land accompanied by the brilliant stars in the sky and spectacular covenant ritual constituted a high point in the patriarch's life. They shone a spectacular light on the darkness he had been experiencing, especially in childlessness. With God's promises and commitment to fulfill them, Abram could now move on in life towards the goal set by God for him: the fulfilment of His promises. These promises far exceeded all expectations Abram with his inward-looking and narrow mindset could ever have entertained. His life would be confidently geared towards their fulfilment.

The story of Jesus' transfiguration reflects parallels with Abram's experience of God's intervention. Light and glory contributed to the magnificent event: *"the aspect of Jesus' face was changed, and His clothing became brilliant as lightning"*. Jesus' companions, Peter, James and John, *"were heavy with sleep"* and in their struggle to keep awake, *"they saw His glory"*. That glory unfolded in a few steps, with the first being Jesus' glorious transfiguration. The next was the appearance *"in glory"* of Moses and Elijah, two great Old Testament prophets. The third was the enveloping of Jesus and His disciples by a cloud from which the Father's voice was heard: *"This is My Son, the Chosen One. Listen to Him."*

The event was of course a high point for Jesus. It was His foretaste of His glorious resurrection, the point of His return to His glory at His Father's right hand. But before that, He had to bring His mission to completion, which would be by His death on the cross in Jerusalem. That was *"His passing"* about which Moses and Elijah were speaking to Him. While Peter proposed to *"build three tents"* and remain in the state of bliss on the mountain, Jesus was determined to descend from it to face the painful end of His life and complete His mission.

Jesus had only one goal as He lived His life and carried out His mission. In the words of the second reading, it was to *"transfigure these wretched bodies of ours into copies of His glorious body"* and bring us to *"heaven, our homeland"*. Jesus' goal is now our goal in life. His call to us is: *"Do not give way but remain faithful in the Lord."* On occasions, God gives us experiences of a high. Let these experiences not draw us to remain there and thus, pause, but rather motivate, energize and make us determined to *"listen to Him"*, that is, by faithfully following Jesus the beloved Son of God to our heavenly home.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Exodus 3:1-8,13-15; 1 Corinthians 10:1-6,10-12; Luke 13:1-9

In the face of a serious sickness or huge challenge in life, the cry to God for help is often met with silence and apparent inaction from Him. This experience begs questions like: “God, where are you? Are you there? Do you not care?”

The perceived lack of response from God may give rise to doubts about His presence or His care, or even about His very existence. Or, an explanation may be drawn from a common thinking that God is transcendent, far beyond human reach and experience, because He is infinitely the Most High. Human situations and problems are too trivial for Him.

Today’s first reading dispels all such human thinking. It affirms both the transcendence and immanence of God. While infinite and beyond the reach of human beings, He cares for and reaches out to them. The story the reading narrates is God’s call of Moses to set the people of Israel free from their slavery in Egypt. At the same time, it carries God’s self-revelation to Moses to authenticate his call and mission. Moses could go to the Pharaoh with God’s mandate to negotiate for the liberation of the Israelites.

At Horeb, the mountain of God, an angel of the Lord appeared to Moses “*in the image of a flame of fire coming from the middle*” of a burning bush and thus drew his attention to the bush burning but not burnt up. All these details indicate Moses being in the presence of the transcendent God: the mountain conveys the place of the Most High God; the angel is God’s envoy to human beings; fire is often an element that accompanies a theophany, that is, a manifestation of God. The divine presence made the place a “*holy ground*” and Moses had therefore to “*take off (his) shoes*”. In the light of its significance in Ruth 4:7, by taking his shoes off, Moses was discarding his right to possession and his liberty. That was the right disposition in the holy presence of the transcendent God. An important point the story drives home is the accessibility of the all-transcendent God, at least to Moses for the moment.

Accessibility to the transcendent God would not be possible except allowed by Him. The story in the first reading presents more than God allowing access to Him. It revolves around God Himself reaching out to Moses to appoint him to reach out to the people of Israel in slavery. It recalls God intervening in the history of the people’s ancestors, for which He came to be called “*the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.*” Indeed, He had been actively present in the

history of the people since the time of their fathers. Now that He had *“seen their miserable state... and heard their appeal to be free of their slave-drivers”*, He decided *“to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians and bring them out of the land to a land rich and broad, where milk and honey flowed.”* The transcendent God is truly the God of history, actively present with His people. He is as immanent as He is transcendent.

The enigmatic name God revealed to Moses at the latter’s request affirms His transcendence as well as His immanence: *“I Am Who I Am.”* By it, God identified Himself as “Eternal Existence” and as such, as the “Cause of all existence”, that is, the Creator of everything that exists. Vis-à-vis the mission He was entrusting to Moses, God was assuring him of His supreme authority and almighty power behind it. In other words, authorized by God, Moses would have the power to bring about the liberation of his suffering people from the harsh slavery in Egypt. The all-transcendent God is equally all-immanent. As much as He is *“I Am Who I Am”*, He is also *“the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob”* – His *“name for all time... to be invoked for all generations to come.”*

Jesus is the transcendent God immanent in the life of every human person. He has come to restore humankind’s broken relationship with God. What is awaited is response – the response from everyone of us. The response takes the form of repentance which the two events recalled in the first of the Gospel articulate, in negative terms: refusal to repent will land a person up in the same predicament as *“the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with that of their sacrifices”* and *“the eighteen on whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them”*.

Through the parable of the fig tree, Jesus highlights God’s patient waiting for our repentance. He not only lets us take our time, but gives us His grace to enable us to repent and *“bear fruit”*. He does what it takes to ensure we respond. But He also allows us whatever time we need to give the right response.

Yes, God is transcendent; but He is also actively present in our midst. Often, it is our own inordinate dispositions and inadequate response that block our experience of His immanence. Often, we tend to turn to Him only in times of serious challenges, crises or despair, while daily we either forget or ignore Him altogether. It is important to be aware that our daily “smooth sailing” is due to His active presence with us, in order to be assured of His care for us in times of hardship. The *“burning bush that was not burnt up”* signals the unfading presence of the transcendent God in our midst. He is never tired of us and never gives up on us. On the contrary, He patiently waits for our return to Him!

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Joshua 5:9-12; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3,11-32

A mother of four remarked, “All my four children came from the same mould, but are very different.” God instituted the family. He also created human beings, all with their unique characters.

The parable of the prodigal son Jesus gives in today’s Gospel is loaded: it is rich in significance and manifold in applications. In the context in which it is given, in response to the complaint against Jesus by the Pharisees and scribes, it sought to check their self-righteous attitude. In its use in the liturgy especially in Lent, it is taken as a lesson for repentance. In reflections on the family, its relevance is striking, for the story revolves around the father’s relationship with his two sons and their attitudes behind the responses of the two sons. It is this family significance that this homily singles out for reflection.

The story starts off with the rash demand of the younger son: “*Father, let me have the share of the estate that would come to me.*” That demand has to do with the execution of the father’s last will. It is premature as the father is still alive. In effect, it is tantamount to considering the father already dead. For sure, the younger son is impetuously led by his desire for a good life to make his demand; but his words reflect his awareness that his demand is premature and has hurtful implications on the father.

The young man is self-centred. He seeks his own enjoyment without regard for the family. He does not seem to consider how hard his father and elder brother have worked to pile up whatever wealth the family has. He wants his share and prematurely at that, as if he had the right to it. On top of that, he leaves the family “*for a distant country*” – to be as far away as possible from the family. For him, the family is an obstacle to his happiness, and life in the family is an unbearable burden. Even if this thought were not explicitly on his mind, his departure conveys its impression.

In his quest for a good life, the young man has no sense of the value of what he has demanded of his father. He has also no inkling of what will eventually happen to him. He spends lavishly on himself without financial management and has eventually to hire himself to look after pigs, unclean animals in the eyes of the Jews. What is worse, the pigs he tends have food, and his father’s servants have food, but he is starving. He is hitting rock bottom – and wakes up to his own foolishness. He makes a decision to go back to his father to ask to be treated

no longer as a son because he has treated his father as if dead, but as a servant. But his confession formula betrays his hypocrisy, for he still calls his father, "Father." He is fully aware he can never lose his sonship.

Let us now consider the elder son. He is not happy with his father's welcome of the younger son: restoring him to his position in the family and "*slaughtering the fattened calf*" for a party. His words to his father betray more than jealousy; they express his harsh judgment of his father. Primarily, his father has been unfair to him for he has never offered him even a small animal to celebrate with his friends. There are innuendoes in his words. The father has been foolish enough to be conned by the younger son and does not seem to have learnt his lesson by welcoming him back so lavishly. When referring to his younger brother as "*this son of yours*" he is dissociating himself from the family and thus leaving it, though not physically. His hard work all these years amounts to the work of a "*slave*" rather than a son. In a word, the elder son has put himself above his father in many respects, but in particular from the viewpoint of fairness.

The father knows the characters of his two sons very well. He loves them both equally but approaches them differently. With his impetuous and rash younger son, his love transcends his hurt in giving in to his premature demands. Foreseeing the rock bottom the young man will face, his love underpins his daily watch for his return, and the unconditional and lavish welcome he gives the miserable returnee. Though doubted by the elder son, his love for him is as deep and unconditional as that for the younger son. Knowing the elder son to be a hardworking and rational character, he steps out of the house to reason things out with him. His opening words to him are lovingly reassuring: "*My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours.*" He has been treating him as a son, not a slave as he has perceived, and been concerned about his well-being all along. He will make sure not to sign off the remaining share of his property to his carefree and careless brother. Following this he reaches out to the elder son to accept his younger brother back: "*Your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found.*" These are words that not only appeal to reason but move the heart as well. They are words of love, embracing both the sons.

The story has a strong bearing on family relationships and offers useful lessons on them. Love, unconditional and forgiving love, is the operating force of every family. It moves its members, with their different characters, to respect and accept one another. It also makes room for different approaches when treating one another. It seeks reconciliation where there are hurts and rejoices when that is achieved.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Isaiah 45:16-21; Philippians 3:8-14; John 8:1-11

A common remark on judging is: for an accusing finger, there are three fingers pointing to the self. Today's well-known and favourite Gospel story supports the remark and goes beyond it.

Short though it is, the story of how Jesus handled the serious case of a woman caught in the act of adultery and brought to Him by the scribes and Pharisees is loaded with lessons. So, every detail counts and should not be missed. It is, therefore, necessary to consider it.

The first detail concerns the setting. Jesus was in the Temple and taught "*all the people who came to Him*". The Temple was His Father's house and therefore His home. Through His teaching, He drew people to it. In the symbolic language of John the Evangelist, this detail conveys a very important point: Jesus, the Word of God, was from all eternity in His Father's bosom, but had come in human flesh into the created world to reveal His Father (cf. Jn. 1:1-18). His mission was to draw people to Himself and in the process to His Father, so as to share in His eternal life. That mission was one of love (cf. Jn. 3:16-17). Therefore, love provided the setting for today's episode.

There was a sudden shift of attention: from Jesus to the group of scribes and Pharisees who had brought along the adulterous woman, very likely with great commotion. They made her "*stand in full view of everybody*". This act was deliberate: it was to shame her. It was also clearly an act of judgment: to the scribes and Pharisees, the woman had committed a serious sin. By the law of Moses, she ought to be stoned to death. This public act of judgment betrayed the accusers' deep-seated attitude of self-righteousness.

Their words to Jesus as they cast the woman in full view of everybody affirmed objectivity of the case: she was "*caught in the very act of committing adultery*". Their appeal to the Law of Moses reflected their clarity of mind regarding the punishment: she should be "*stoned to death*". Why then did they not just carry out the punishment themselves, but decide to bring the woman to Jesus? The Gospel narrator reveals their intention: they did this "*as a test, looking for something to use against Him*". So, the trial was not so much of the woman, since she required no trial as she had been found to sin, as of Jesus. He claimed to have come to save humankind in love; how would He show the woman His love against the death penalty the Law of Moses imposed on her?

For all the clarity of mind and certitude of their evidence, there is one curious detail about the move of the scribes and Pharisees. The detail comes from an omission. Since the woman was caught in the act, surely, the man who was involved must have been there, equally caught. Where was he? Why wasn't he brought together with the woman? Could there be gender discrimination? Or did he belong to the group accusing the woman? Could there be class discrimination? Why this double standard? This omission is a detail that shatters the sincerity of the accusers and disqualifies them from their role as accusers.

What did Jesus do when confronted with the case? He *"bent down and started writing on the ground"*. He refused to be drawn into a rash action. So, He took time to respond. When the accusers pushed for an answer from Him, He turned the trial they set on Him into a self-trial for them: *"If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."* He then *"bent down again and wrote on the ground"*, this time to give the accusers time to examine themselves. Inevitably, one by one they left, leaving the woman alone with Jesus. For they were no less sinful than the woman! They had one accusing finger pointed to the woman, with three fingers pointing to themselves!

The final detail is furnished by the conversation between Jesus and the woman: *"Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir." "Neither do I condemn you; go away, and don't sin anymore."* Jesus the Word of God made flesh came not to condemn but to give life by forgiving. By her sin, the woman was destined to die by stoning. Without denying her guilt and rejecting the Law of Moses, Jesus' forgiveness of the woman in love liberated her from death and gave her a chance to live again. Indeed, forgiveness not only sets the sinner free but also gives him/her the opportunity to live again.

The short story is loaded with valuable lessons. It is wise to refrain from rash judgment of others and take time to assess a case as well take a good look at oneself first. It is important to be honestly upfront when dealing with a hurt from a neighbour to ensure lasting settlement. Forgiveness, when called for and offered, liberates both the guilty and the accuser, thus giving them the opportunity to start afresh. Law is necessary to regulate life and relationship in a community or society. Law must be fair and thus exclude discrimination of any form. From Jesus' perspective, the application of law ought to be tempered with love and mercy. As Christians, we need to focus on God's love and forgiveness to respond to His call also to love and forgive. Indeed, forgiveness is liberating and love is life-giving.

PALM (PASSION) SUNDAY

Isaiah 50:4-7; Philippians 2:6-11; Luke 22:14 – 23:56

Palm Sunday starts off Holy Week in which attention is focused on the passion and death of the Lord. The blessing of and procession with palms commemorate Jesus' humble entry into Jerusalem where He was tried and condemned to death on the cross. From the very long passion narrative, this homily chooses to highlight its theme of the kingdom (of God), and in particular the attempt of the kingdom of darkness to destroy it.

The passion narrative begins with Jesus' Last Supper with His disciples. It sees this meal as the arrival of "*the hour*" of Jesus' passion and death, and therefore as the accomplishment of His ministry on earth. For sure, Jesus' entire ministry was to proclaim the kingdom of God. Now that He had come to the end of His ministry, as He explained to His disciples, He "*longed to eat this Passover*" with them before His passion. For, as He revealed, He would "*not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God*". He thus tied His last Passover meal with the kingdom of God. The Jewish Passover meal commemorated their liberation or salvation. Jesus had come to bring this liberation in a radical way: liberation from Satan's slavery and possession of eternal life in the kingdom of God. To be expected, Satan would put up a hard fight with Jesus.

Satan had sown among the disciples an inordinate desire for positions of authority and power. In the course of the meal, a dispute broke out among them as to which of them would be the greatest. Their struggle would eventually destroy their unity as a community and block their entry into the kingdom. Jesus corrected their inordinate ambition by highlighting servant leadership, which marked kingdom leadership. Should they embrace that, Jesus promised to "*confer a kingdom*" on them, as they would "*eat and drink at His table in His kingdom*." In this way, He announced the kingdom banquet, of which His last Passover meal was a foretaste. In this way, He claimed victory for the kingdom of God over Satan's reign of darkness.

For sure, Satan and his forces would not give up their efforts to destroy Jesus and the kingdom He was proclaiming. So, they took a more radical step. Satan lured Judas into betraying Jesus and Peter into denying Him three times. These belonged to Jesus' inner circle of disciples. In this concrete attempt of his, Satan aimed to have a greater chance of success! But Jesus saw Satan's plot and revealed it to His disciples: "*Satan has got his wish to sift you all like wheat*" and assured Simon Peter of His prayer that his "*faith would not fail*". Thus, later at

the Mount of Olives, just before Jesus prayed during His agony, He instructed His disciples to *“pray not to be put to the test”*, that is, not to give in to Satan. But they slept right through. At His arrest, He told the men Judas led to arrest Him, *“This is your hour; this is the reign of darkness.”* For the moment, Satan and therefore the kingdom of darkness seemed to be winning the struggle.

Even as Satan appeared to have the upper hand, there were glimmers of victory for the kingdom of God. The first one came in at the cockcrow. *“The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter”* who then *“went outside and wept bitterly”*. Peter wept in utter repentance. Next, at their trial of Jesus, both Pilate and Herod found Him innocent. Pilate made a public declaration of it. However, overcome by cowardice, Pilate *“handed Jesus over”* to those who demanded His crucifixion. Again, a struggle between the kingdom of God and Satan’s reign underlay this trial. The kingdom of God appeared to score points in Peter’s repentance and Pilate’s declaration of Jesus’ innocence; but Satan’s reign seemed to win the fight when Pilate, in his cowardice, surrendered Jesus to His enemies.

The next glimmers of victory for the kingdom of God radiated from the crucifixion scene. Jesus’ prayer to His Father to forgive His enemies showed that He was master of His entire passion and death. Such mastery had already been shown when He revealed Judas’ betrayal and Peter’s denial of Him, when He prayed His Father to spare Him the painful death only in accordance with His (the Father’s) will, and when He allowed Himself to be arrested by His foes. His prayer of forgiveness indicated He had risen above all physical force to freely make a personal decision to accept His passion and death as the way His Father would open the doors of His kingdom to everyone.

The prayer of one of the two criminals crucified with Jesus also offered a glimmer of victory: *“Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”* Jesus’ reply conveyed His certitude of victory: *“Indeed, I promise you, today you will be with Me in paradise.”* The confession of the centurion, *“This was a great and good Man,”* provided the final glimmer of victory.

For sure, after or more accurately, through all His passion and death, Jesus secured the kingdom of God for all, amidst a fierce and persistent struggle from the reign of darkness, Satan’s evil kingdom. Indeed, everyone could now enter the kingdom of God. Jesus’ promise to His disciples, *“You will eat and drink at My table in My kingdom”*, holds true for everyone. But a personal decision to accept it is called for. Peter, the repentant criminal, and the centurion made their decision through their repentance. What about us?

HOLY THURSDAY

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

Would an employer or a “tauokay” run errands for his employees? Generally not, because he has employed them to serve his cause. This is a mentality that has been prevailing since time immemorial. It is tied to status, ranks and class. It is a consequence of an order caused by sin.

In the Gospel reading, this was the underpinning reason for Peter’s protest when Jesus proceeded to wash his feet: *“Never, Lord; you shall never wash my feet.”* Jesus was the Lord and Master; Peter was a disciple of His. The disciple should wash the master’s feet, not the other way around.

Jesus responded to Peter’s protest with two statements. The first is: *“At the moment you do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand.”* By “later” Jesus alluded to the time of His death and resurrection. Then, His entire mission of love and service that He was sent on would be understood.

Washing of feet was the job of a servant and a slave. But Jesus the Lord and Master took it on. For He had come to serve. In the order He set, lordship and servanthood are not contradictory. To be Lord and master is to be a servant. In His gesture of washing the feet of His disciples, Jesus crystallized His entire mission of service carried out in total love for His disciples as well as the people of His time and beyond. That service in love would reach its climax in His death on the cross. Indeed, in the words of the Gospel, *“He had always loved those who were His in the world, but now He showed how perfect His love was.”*

The second statement says, *“No one who has taken a bath needs washing; he is clean all over. You too are clean, though not all of you are.”* In the long-standing tradition of Judaism, cleanliness was insisted on. It took the form of the washing of feet before entering the house and the washing of hands before eating. But over and above this physically hygienic purpose, cleansing took on a religious dimension. Ritual purification was required before entering the presence of God as He was all holy and all pure. External cleansing of the body symbolized internal cleansing of the soul to ensure purity before entering into the presence of God in His holy place.

Pope Benedict XVI in his three-volume book *JESUS OF NAZARETH* (pp. 72-75 of Vol. 2) explains the “bath” in Jesus’ words to Peter in terms of baptism and suggests “washing of feet” to mean confession. Baptism cleanses us totally from

our sins and makes us children of God. So, we receive it only once. But our experience tells us that after baptism we continue to sin. So, confession, symbolized by the washing of feet, is needed, to receive God's forgiveness of our sins. In confession it is Jesus who washes our feet, that is forgives our sins, as He did when He died on the cross for us. He does it through an ordained priest.

After washing their feet, Jesus instructed His disciples: *"If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet."* Jesus wanted His disciples to love and serve one another as He did. They should desire, not the power to dominate, but rather the disposition to serve. In the light of Pope Benedict XVI's link of the washing of feet to forgiveness of sins in confession, Jesus' instruction would include a call to forgive. The call to serve and forgive one another was made to all disciples, including all of us today.

Jesus told Peter: *"If I do not wash you, you can have nothing in common with me."* In other words, Peter could not be in the company of Jesus. He would therefore be excluded from any relationship with Him as well as share in His life and ministry. Only by allowing Jesus to wash his feet would Peter be able to accept Jesus' offer of relationship with Him and share in His works. This held true for the other disciples as well.

Indeed, Jesus offers every one of us a share in His life and relationship with Him. This is a most precious gift from Him, offered to us at His death on the cross followed by His resurrection to life. But He does not force His offer down our throat. He calls for our free decision to accept it. We express our free choice of it by our acceptance of His instruction: *"You too should wash each other's feet"* – that is, love and serve one another, and forgive one another. Peter and his fellow disciples understood this after their experience of the risen Lord.

To serve one another in love, I think, is a lifestyle many of us readily embrace. The degree to which we embrace it may vary. But many find it very difficult to forgive because of the hurt received and felt. Yet, to forgive is not a feeling but a decision. The decision often does not bring about a good feeling because the hurt feeling is often still there. Despite the hurt feeling, the decision is valid and so the forgiveness is real. Over time, the hurt feeling will go off, for the desire to have "something in common with Him" eventually makes one humble like Him.

Love and service to the point of forgiving constitute the order set by Christ. This order treats everyone as God's children with equal dignity. Hopefully, our experience of the risen Christ will embrace fully the order set by Christ.

GOOD FRIDAY

Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12; Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 8:1 – 19:42

Good Friday commemorates the passion and death of the Lord Jesus. The Lord died a sacrificial death out of His sheer unconditional love for all of us. While bearing all this clearly in mind, we will now focus our reflection on the final scene of the long passion narrative: Jesus' body was taken down from the cross and buried in a garden nearby.

Jesus' body was to be taken down urgently because "*it was Preparation Day*", the day on which lambs were slaughtered for the Passover meal. The Gospel underscores the "*special solemnity*" of that particular sabbath in view of the Passover feast. Jesus' body was pierced with a lance and immediately blood and water flowed out from it. Indeed, Jesus was the new and true Passover Lamb, whose blood shed on the cross purified us as it brought us forgiveness of sins.

The scene conveys a sacramental significance. The water that flowed from Jesus' side points to Baptism and the body with its blood to the Eucharist. While Baptism leads a person to participate in the death and resurrection of Christ, the Eucharist is a memorial of Him crucified and risen. All sacraments of the Church belong together as the Church is the fundamental sacrament of Christ; but Baptism and the Eucharist share a very special bond in their grace of effecting an experience of the death and resurrection of Christ. Indeed, it is only the baptized who are empowered to celebrate the Eucharist and experience the presence of Christ crucified and risen in it.

Baptism seals discipleship. The final scene of the passion narrative has two cowardly disciples of Jesus now coming into the open to take down the body of Jesus and bury it. Joseph of Arimathaea had been a secret disciple of Jesus because he was afraid of the Jews. Jesus encountered strong and persistent opposition from the Jews. They had arm-twisted Pilate to allow them to crucify Jesus. Such violent opposition could also be inflicted on His disciples. At Jesus' death, Joseph of Arimathaea plucked up the courage to get Pilate's permission to take down Jesus' body to give it a proper and dignified burial. By this act, he publicly professed his discipleship.

Nicodemus was in a more precarious position than Joseph of Arimathaea. For he was a Pharisee. That was why he went to Jesus at night. The Pharisees were among the Jewish authorities all out to do away with Jesus. Nicodemus' discipleship was sure to draw his colleagues' wrath and violent action on him.

Now, he braved all that to come with a hundred pounds of a mixture of myrrh and aloes with which to wrap Jesus' body in linen cloths for burial in accordance with the Jewish burial custom. Like Joseph, he openly declared his discipleship.

Jesus' death on the cross was a clear manifestation of His love for all fallen humankind to the end. It inspired the two secret and cowardly disciples to come out in the open to declare their discipleship, whatever be the risks they faced. Their open discipleship marked their personal and free acceptance of the salvation Christ brought on all humankind through His death and resurrection. From this viewpoint, they were baptized by the water that flowed from Jesus' side and experienced the saving grace of His body being broken and His blood being shed on the cross, the same grace as the Eucharist effects. For sure, they now belonged to the new family instituted by Christ on the cross when He pronounced on His mother and His beloved disciple: *"Behold your son... behold your mother."*

The final part of the final scene of the passion narrative concerns Jesus' burial in a nearby new tomb in a garden. The mention of the garden at the conclusion of the passion narrative sets a contrast with the first garden at its beginning. In the first garden, Judas, a disciple in Jesus' inner circle, led a cohort to arrest Jesus to have Him crucified. In the second garden, secret and cowardly disciples from outside the inner circle openly showed their devotion and loyalty to Jesus by laying His body to rest.

The two gardens hark back to the Garden of Eden in the creation story. There God placed the man and the woman He had created in His own image and likeness to enjoy all its fruits except that of the knowledge of good and evil. Life in the garden was ecstatic. But the couple's disobedience was a rebellion, an act of hostility; it brought them a serious curse: death. The couple, however, were to be saved from that curse, for God promised a Saviour when He cursed the serpent tempter: *"I will make enemies between you and the woman, your offspring and her offspring. It will crush your head and you will strike its heel"* (Gen. 3:15). Jesus fulfilled God's promise through His death and resurrection.

The garden features contradictory dispositions: hostility and loyalty, curse and blessing. Jesus crucified and risen turned hostility and curse into loyalty and blessing. As He lay buried in the new tomb in the garden, He was awaiting His glorious resurrection to life, whereby He would bring salvation, that is, eternal life, to all fallen humankind. We are called to make a free and personal decision to accept this salvation, like Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus.

EASTER VIGIL

Genesis 1:1 – 2:2; Genesis 22:1-18; Exodus 14:15 – 15:1;

Romans 6:3-11; Luke 24:1-12

The passion narrative ends with Jesus' burial in a new tomb in a garden. That was not the end of His life. For from that tomb He rose to life.

Tonight's liturgy celebrates Jesus' resurrection to life. This glorious event left the tomb empty. The Gospel pays much attention to the empty tomb because it is powerful evidence of the Lord's resurrection. The women who had come with spices, presumably to anoint the Lord's body, were terrified because they saw that *"the stone had been rolled away from the tomb"* and *"the body of the Lord Jesus was not there."* They did not know what to make of their discovery. They badly needed an explanation of what had happened.

Two men in brilliant clothes suddenly appeared to give them the needed explanation. Their opening question was poignant: *"Why look among the dead for someone who is alive?"* Indeed, the tomb was for the dead. Jesus could not remain there as He was now alive. The two men reminded the women of Jesus' prediction of His violent death in the hands of sinful men and His resurrection. Jesus' empty tomb was clear evidence of the fulfillment of His prediction. It also became the place from which the gospel of His death and resurrection was first proclaimed.

Led to believe in Jesus' resurrection, the women left the tomb and returned to the Eleven and all other disciples, to proclaim the good news to them. But that good news *"seemed pure nonsense"* to them. However, Peter ran to the tomb to see things for himself; he was *"amazed at what had happened"*, not knowing what to make of the empty tomb. All the Eleven had to wait till the risen Lord appeared to them with all His wounds in order to believe.

With His resurrection, the garden in which the new tomb where Jesus was buried turned the garden in which He was arrested into a place where God fulfilled His promise to fallen Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. This first couple disobeyed God in the garden of Eden while Judas betrayed Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. In both these cases, the garden became a place of sin and betrayal and turned into a place of death. The crucified Jesus was laid to rest in the new tomb in the garden. He was laid to rest among the dead. But from there He rose to life and made it possible for all the dead to rise to life on the last day. He turned the garden back into a place of life.

The Apostles' creed expresses this reality in terms of Jesus "descending into hell", going down to Hades, the biblical name for the place of the dead. Immediately following that, the creed professes faith in His "resurrection from the dead on the third day". Faith and hope in the resurrection of all who have died and been buried with Christ, first in baptism and then in physical death, constitute the last article of the creed. They are articulated in terms of "the resurrection of the body and life everlasting".

Indeed, God's will for all humankind is that they share in His life. The creation story in tonight's first reading proclaims this will of God when He created the man and the woman "*in His own image and likeness*". In addition, God created the entire universe, the world and every creature therein first, so as to set the stage for the man and the woman to appear in the scene. Over and above that, God entrusted all His creation to them. But not satisfied with all that, they disobeyed God and brought death upon themselves. However, God still came to their rescue by promising them salvation.

The sacrifice of Isaac God demanded of Abraham in the second reading prefigured the way God came to fallen humankind's rescue. Just as Abraham willingly and wholeheartedly obeyed God's command to sacrifice his only and beloved son Isaac, so also God unconditionally responded to humankind's cry for His own and only Son, His beloved Son, to save them from sin and eternal death. He sacrificed His Son and Jesus sacrificed His life that all fallen humankind might live.

The exodus story in the third reading tells of God's wonderful liberation of His people from the cruel and enslaving hands of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. It prefigured God's salvation of all of us from our slavery to Satan and sin through His Son Jesus. By His death and resurrection, He brought us from death to life.

Yes, Jesus died and was buried. But He rose to life on the third day. In this way, He brought life to all of us. The empty tomb proclaims His resurrection. It also assures us that on the last day we will rise from the dead. For Jesus will raise us up and bring us into His kingdom to enjoy eternal life. Tonight, as we celebrate Jesus' glorious resurrection for which the empty tomb serves as evidence, we also express the hope of our own resurrection to life on the last day.

Indeed, the Lord has risen. He has also promised that He will raise us up on the last day.

EASTER SUNDAY

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

Today's Gospel does not give us a spectacular description of the Lord's glorious resurrection, but rather the discovery of the Lord's tomb being empty. The empty tomb meant different things to different disciples of Jesus who saw it.

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

Upon hearing Mary's story, these two disciples lost no time to run to the tomb. Presumably, they intended to see and assess the situation for themselves. When they entered the tomb, they found the situation exactly as reported.

The Gospel does not say anything about Simon Peter's reaction. This leaves us to wonder what he made of his discovery. Was Mary right in thinking that the body had been removed? Or was there something else? Of the disciple Jesus loved, the Gospel says, *"He saw and he believed."* For sure, he *"saw"* what Mary and Peter did. But, what did he believe? The concluding verse of the Gospel clarifies it: *"Till this moment they had failed to understand the teaching of the scripture, that He must rise from the dead."* Jesus' beloved disciple believed that the Lord had risen from the dead. To him, the empty tomb was a sign of the Lord's resurrection. It verified *"the teaching of the scripture"* and kindled his faith.

From these different reactions of the Lord's disciples when they found His tomb empty, we can trace a common journey of faith in Christ. From a natural viewpoint manifested by Mary there is a movement towards a questioning or perhaps even puzzled mind. With the aid of the Scriptures, the journey continues through the experience of signs until it arrives at faith in the risen Lord, as Mary later did when He called her by name. With faith, believers are able to see further signs of the presence of the risen Lord in their lives and even when they encounter tragic events. As a result, tragic events when accepted are accepted in faith and contribute to its deepening.

A striking case took place in November 2015. An Abu Sayyaf group kidnapped a Sarawakian Catholic, Bernard Then, in Sandakan, Sabah. They brought him to Jolo Island (Philippines) and beheaded him there not long after. In very clear terms, John, Bernard's father, forgave the kidnappers and beheader(s). He prayed that Bernard's "sacrificial" death would be a lesson for all to respect the sanctity of life, for authorities to beef up security and peace in the nation and the region, and for the perpetrators to lay down their arms and give up their violence.

Like the empty tomb of Jesus, Bernard's beheading could have triggered different reactions: from John's forgiveness to all-out revenge even if it meant bloodshed. John's response averted all the others. It came from his Christian faith in the Lord's death and resurrection. His faith led his Christian heart to forgive as the Lord forgave. For him, the "empty tomb" was the emptiness he experienced from his son's tragic death, as his life seemed to have come to nought. However, his faith in the Lord's resurrection gave him hope: that the risen Lord would raise his son to life. But he had another hope, this time having to do with the son's captors and murderers: experiencing his forgiveness, they might be led to the faith that the Lord was there calling them to repentance and to His light, and respond positively.

John's faith and forgiveness came from his own encounter with the risen Lord in his life experiences, inspired by the *"teaching of the Scriptures"*. There have been many other cases, though not so tragic, of such unequivocal expressions of the Christian faith rooted in the word of God in the Scriptures. A common pastoral experience of this comes from funeral Masses. It is not rare that entire families have been drawn back to their Christian faith after their encounter with the word of God at the funerals of their departed loved ones. Not a few non-Christians too have asked for instruction and baptism after experiencing Catholic funerals.

Those who are ready to open their hearts and minds to the Scriptures are in a similar position to see signs of the Lord's presence in their lives, even in the midst of ambiguities and sufferings. In the course of this experience, their faith in the Lord deepens and they are led to see that there is only one goal in life that matters: to rise to eternal life with the Lord on the last day. Pursuing this goal leads to the joy of Easter: the joy that comes from the Risen Lord.

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 5:12-16; Apocalypse 1:9-13,17-19; John 20:19-31

Today's Gospel narrates the story of the risen Lord appearing twice to His disciples. They had locked themselves up in a room for fear of the Jews. A significant point in the story comes from the Lord's repeated greeting, "*Peace be with you.*" The repetition of the greeting is followed by the mission He entrusted to them, "*As the Father sent Me, so am I sending you.*"

These words of the risen Lord in the first part of the Gospel link the peace He offered with the mission He entrusted to His disciples. The link becomes stronger through His articulation of what the mission was going to entail: "*for those whose sins you forgive they are forgiven*". Forgiveness of sins is the way to peace.

In entrusting it to His disciples, the risen Lord made it very clear that the mission was the same as that His Father had given Him. In other words, He was sharing His own mission with them; that means, they were to continue it. What was that mission? It was clearly forgiveness of sins. For humankind had sinned against Jesus' Father. On the cross, Jesus took the place of all sinful humankind to pay the death penalty due to their sins. In this way, He won for them forgiveness of sins and saved them from the death penalty. Clearly, the forgiveness of sins lay at the heart of Jesus' mission.

Forgiveness of sins led to reconciliation with God. Reconciliation in turn led to a restoration of the relationship with God broken by sin. With this restored relationship, sharing in God's eternal life became possible. All these were stages of grace: forgiveness of sins, restored relationship, and sharing in God's eternal life. They constituted the peace that the risen Lord brought to His disciples in His greeting to them. His repetition of it for sure served to emphasize its importance.

Peace was the mission Jesus had received from the Father. He had achieved it by His death and resurrection. Now that He had risen from the dead, He was going to return to His Father from Whom He had come. From His Father's right hand, He was going to continue His mission through His disciples. He would do this by pouring out His Spirit on them. Empowered by the Spirit they were to go out and offer the forgiveness of sins He had brought about.

The disciples had no way of offering this forgiveness unless they themselves possessed it first. They could not possess it unless the risen Lord gave it to them,

and unless they believed that the Lord Jesus had risen from the dead. The risen Lord's apparition to them was to lead them to faith in Him and offer them peace. The second part of the Gospel brings to the fore the necessity of faith. Because of his disbelief without concrete proofs, the risen Jesus not only showed Thomas His wounds, but invited him to touch them. That elicited faith in the unbelieving disciple: "*My Lord and my God.*" Faith in the risen Lord was indeed a prerequisite for carrying out His mission, which Thomas now qualified to receive.

As forgiveness of sins lay at the heart of the mission, the disciples needed the Holy Spirit to carry it out. For this reason, the risen Lord "*breathed on them*" and said, "*Receive the Holy Spirit.*" This was John the Evangelist's way of presenting the risen Lord pouring out His Spirit. Being the Spirit of the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit would be the risen Lord's new presence among His disciples.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples to carry out the mission the risen Lord entrusted to them constituted them as His Church, the community of Christ's disciples. As a Church, their mission to forgive sins by the power of the Holy Spirit was a continuation of Christ's mission: "*As the Father sent Me, so am I sending you.*" The Church's mission is to bring to all humankind the salvation achieved by Christ through His death and resurrection. She carries out this mission by the power of the Holy Spirit. Or to be more precise, the risen Christ continues His saving mission through the Church empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The sacrament of reconciliation is the *locus par excellence* in which the Church explicitly exercises her mission of forgiving sins. There, Christ's delegated power through the Holy Spirit takes effect: "*Whose sins you forgive they are forgiven.*" With that forgiveness, reconciliation with God takes place and the peace Christ brought to His disciples becomes a personal experience for the penitent.

Outside the sacrament of reconciliation, the Church carries out her mission chiefly through the forgiveness of enemies or offenders. Such forgiveness is part and parcel of Christ's disciples' way of life. He demands it of them and includes it as a condition for receiving the Father's forgiveness in the Lord's prayer: "*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" The logic is simple: addressing God as "*Our Father*" means accepting one another as His children and therefore as sisters and brothers. This calls for good relationship and where it is damaged, repair in the form of reconciliation ought to be sought.

The risen Lord is in our midst with His peace. He is sending us out to foster this peace, even if it calls for reconciliation through forgiveness. Will I do it?

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 5:27-32,40-41; Apocalypse 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

Perhaps at times the choice of leaders for the Church has defied expectations and drawn sharp criticisms. Today's Gospel presents a case in point.

Jesus' appointment of Simon Peter to shepherd His flock seems unwise. For in the first place, he had denied Jesus three times during His trial before the high priest. Then, of the disciples listed in the Gospel, the one Jesus loved would by far be the preferred candidate to look after the Christian community.

The Gospel story presents a stronger case for Simon Peter's disqualification. Despite the risen Lord's earlier apparitions to him and his companions, he influenced some of them to *"go fishing"*. A number of them were fishermen before and Jesus had called them from this occupation to be *"fishers of men"* (cf. Mt. 4:18-22; Mk. 1:16-20; Lk. 5:1-11). In the light of their occupation and call, Simon Peter's decision could have two senses. In the literal sense of fishing, he could have intended to go back to his former occupation and influenced the others in the group to do the same. In the metaphorical sense, his decision meant embarking on the mission to which Jesus had called them.

The Gospel provides a significant detail with regard to the disciples' decision: *"They went out and got into the boat but caught nothing that night."* The word "night" has a symbolic meaning beyond its temporal indication. In John's Gospel, it figures as the realm of Satan and his forces. Thus, when Judas left to betray Jesus, the Gospel asserts, *"Night had fallen,"* (Jn. 13:30) for *"the devil had already put it into the mind of Judas Iscariot son of Simon, to betray Him"* (Jn. 13:2). Whether in the literal or metaphorical sense, the decision to *"go fishing"* was one instigated by the devil. Going back to the former occupation meant giving discipleship up; embarking on the mission Jesus had called them to without Him could have been motivated by a desire for self-glory.

It was after their total failure in the night that the frustrated disciples encountered the risen Jesus without, however, realizing it was He. The Gospel makes it a point to assert, *"It was light by now."* Again, beyond time indication, the affirmation was of the presence of Jesus, the light of the world. The distance the unsuccessful fishermen were from the shore where Jesus stood has its significance: *"they were only about a hundred yards from land."* This detail conveys their return to the Lord after their total failure in their venture. In that return, they were abundantly rewarded with a huge catch. All this is captured

by their obedience to Jesus' instruction: *"Throw your net to starboard."* The miraculous catch could only have come from God. Thus, the disciple Jesus loved immediately recognized Him and told Peter: *"It is the Lord."* Indeed, it was only when the risen Lord was with them that the disciples could have a successful mission, even of *"fishing men"* for the kingdom.

The moment he had been led to recognize the Lord, Simon Peter *"wrapped his cloak around him and jumped into the water"*. Evidently, he was making his way to the Lord Jesus standing on the shore. His *"dressing up"* with his cloak would certainly make no sense as it was certain to slow his movement down. It carries a symbolic meaning. The story notes, *"He had practically nothing on."* His near nakedness depicted his unsuitability to meet the Lord whom he had denied three times. His putting on his cloak indicated his willingness to make the necessary amendment.

That amendment comes in in the last part of the story. Before that, however, Simon Peter was given a stark reminder of his triple denial. The *"charcoal fire"* on which fish was cooking recalled that around which Peter sat with some servants in the high priest's palace at his Master's trial. There, the charcoal fire was a place of denial. Here, it was a place of acceptance: the risen Jesus cooked fish on it and invited His disciples to breakfast with Him.

But of course, the breakfast was not just a breakfast. Comprising bread and fish, it harked back to the Eucharist. The reiteration that the disciples *"knew that it was the Lord"* sitting down to a meal with them reflects the experience of the two disciples of Emmaus recognizing the risen Lord at the breaking of bread (cf. Lk. 24). The Eucharist is the Lord's meal of love and forgiveness.

After its celebration, the Lord asked Peter three times: *"Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these others do?"* Peter's response was, *"Yes, Lord. You know I love You."* Peter acknowledged the Lord's knowledge of his love for Him. In the same breath, he also implied that the Lord also knew his lack of courage in the face of a public challenge, as manifested in his triple denial of Him. With this triple affirmation of love, Peter had a chance to redeem himself and the Lord entrusted to him the pastoral care of his flock. In doing so, the Lord was confident that Peter would exercise his leadership always in the consciousness that He was there in the community, especially through the Eucharist. Thus, He predicted *"the kind of death by which Peter would give glory to God"* – his crucifixion in 64 A.D. Indeed, it is the Lord who holds leadership in the Church and exercises it through His appointed leaders. Faith is needed to accept this.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 13:14,43-52; Apocalypse 7:9,14-17; John 10:27-30

“The Lamb who is at the throne will be their shepherd.” This affirmation in the second reading makes sense only in the light of the biblical depiction of Jesus in figurative terms. Figurative depiction opens up to depths of a mystery not discoverable at one go.

The figurative use of *“the Lamb”* harks back to the sacrifices the people of God in the Old Testament offered. Animals were used and among them was the lamb. But only the lamb, or alternatively, a kid (baby goat), was prescribed for the Passover meal (cf. Ex. 12:5) in commemoration of the people’s liberation from Egyptian slavery. While its flesh was to be roasted and eaten, its blood was smeared on the doorposts and lintel of every Israelite house as a sign for the “angel of death” to “pass over” it and spare their firstborn from the tenth plague.

Jesus came to bring about a new and more important liberation – from Satan’s captivity. He did this through His death on the cross, at which His body was sacrificed and His blood poured out for the salvation of all fallen humankind. In this sense, He was the sacrificial Lamb. John’s Gospel in fact times His crucifixion to coincide with the Jewish slaughtering of the Passover lamb, thus depicting Jesus as the new Passover Lamb (Jn. 18:28; 19:31).

At the same time, however, in John’s Gospel, Jesus is depicted as the Good Shepherd, precisely because He laid down His life for His sheep so that they might have life to the full (Jn. 10:10-11). The Good Shepherd sacrificed His own life in order to save His sheep from theft and destruction by Satan. Jesus’ self-sacrifice underlies the use of the lamb figure to depict Him and qualifies Him as the Good Shepherd. Thus, Jesus *“the Lamb”* is also *“the Shepherd”*.

With this figurative depiction of Jesus in place, the second reading harks back to Psalm 23 to present the salvation He brought to His disciples. They are in God’s dwelling place (Ps. 23:6) where *“they stand in front of God’s throne and serve Him day and night in His sanctuary”*. Where could this dwelling place be, but in the kingdom of heaven? What Psalm 23 proclaims finds its total fulfillment here. The lavish banquet and indestructible safety from hostile forces in God’s dwelling place are the reasons for no more hunger, no more outbreak of plague, and no more tears. In the kingdom, there are *“springs of living water”*; this means, there is only eternal life in the kingdom.

Who qualify to enter the kingdom of heaven? Since the second reading comes from the Apocalypse which addresses the persecution of the Christians by Nero, the Roman Emperor, from 54-68 A.D., it presents *“the people who have been through the great persecution.”* But entry into the kingdom is not confined only to these people. On the contrary, it is extended to all those who *“have washed their robes white again in the blood of the Lamb”*. Indeed, qualification for entry into God’s dwelling place does not come from the disciples, but from Jesus who offered His body and shed His blood as the new Passover Lamb for the salvation of all humankind. Every human person is offered this salvation.

The second reading affirms the universality of salvation in clear terms. In his vision of those saved, its author *“saw a large number, impossible to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe and language”*. The first reading reiterates it. For Paul and Barnabas undertook their missionary journey to the Gentile world because the Lord had told them to: *“I have made you a light for the nations, so that My salvation may reach the ends of the earth.”*

Indeed, Jesus the Good Shepherd has come to call and lead all humankind into God’s dwelling place. But, as the Gospel reading asserts, there ought to be a response from the sheep: *“to listen to His voice and follow Him”*. For sure, those who respond positively will follow Him into God’s dwelling place. *“Listening to the voice”* of the Good Shepherd primarily means attentively reading and reflecting on the Scriptures. For they carry His teachings and record His saving deeds. They reveal Him as Lord and Saviour and spell out His discipleship.

John’s Gospel captures the essence of the person of Jesus, the Word of God made flesh to reveal His Father. It presents Jesus saying, *“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through Me. If you know Me, you know My Father too”* (Jn. 14:6). Reading and reflecting on the Scriptures amount to listening to Jesus, knowing who He is, following Him to His Father and sharing in His eternal life.

When we listen to Jesus’ voice and follow Him as our Shepherd, we *“will never be lost”*, as today’s Gospel assures us; neither will we lack anything, as Psalm 23 guarantees. We will reach His Father’s house where we will enjoy a rich banquet, absolute safety and eternal life. This destiny is so valuable and we are so precious that Jesus the Son of God became flesh to be our paschal Lamb to make it available to us. To ensure that we will achieve it, He chose to be our Good Shepherd to lead us there. Indeed, *“the Lamb”* is now our *“Shepherd”*! Will I listen to His voice and follow Him?

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 14:21-27; Apocalypse 21:1-5; John 13:31-35

“Me and my God.” “Me and my Saviour.” These are utterances coming from a mentality that sees religion as a personal affair. While giving importance to the good, that is, the salvation of every individual, Christianity calls for community living. Salvation includes community relationships.

A community operates on mutual respect and acceptance, care and concern, and give and take. These are fundamental components of the attitude members of a community are expected to embrace. They constitute what is called friendship love, which the Greek word *philē* conveys. It sustains countless communities in the world. It is a very positive attitude and undoubtedly contributes to peace and harmony in the community.

Jesus Christ came into our world to bring this friendship love to another level: what the Greek word calls *agapē*; this is the highest level of love. It is totally self-sacrificing and unconditional to the point of being selfless. It moves one to sacrifice one’s self for the other, regardless of who the other is and what happens to oneself. It was out of this selfless and unconditional love that Jesus Christ broke into human history seriously marred by sin to bring salvation to fallen humankind. In this love of His, He emptied Himself of His divinity to become Man and gave up His human life and dignity to bring life to all human persons. Contrary to all expectations, by doing this Jesus achieved His glory.

Today’s Gospel captures Jesus’ act of selfless love by presenting Judas’ departure to betray Him as the hour of His glorification. In Him, God His Father was also glorified. For sure, this glorification was Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. But it also included the salvation of all fallen humankind, comprising the forgiveness of their sins and granting of eternal life to them.

For sure, what Jesus did was totally unheard of. His love was therefore also totally new. He had shown it and made it possible for His disciples to adopt it. On this score, He commanded them to practise it: *“I give you a new commandment: love one another, just as I have loved you.”* The Greek text uses the verb *agapan* for “love”. It is this level of love that marks Jesus’ command as “new”. Those who put it into practice genuinely imitate Jesus and show themselves as His disciples. Thus, Jesus declared: *“By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are My disciples.”*

Jesus' new commandment undergirds all that the first reading records. In whatever towns they preached the Gospel and won disciples for the Lord, Paul and Barnabas established communities of Christian love and "*appointed elders*" to look after them. On top of that, after their missionary journey, these two apostles returned to Antioch. There "*they assembled the church and gave an account of all that God had done with them, and how He had opened the door of faith to the pagans*".

What did all this mean? Antioch was the place where Paul and Barnabas "*had originally been commended to the grace of God*" for their missionary work. That meant the Church there was the sending Church, the "mother Church". The apostles' return to it to give the community there an account of their mission manifested the unity of the different communities, the local Churches, with the mother Church. Together they formed a larger Church, the universal Church. All the local Churches were in communion with one another. Their communion was sustained by the new commandment of love given by Jesus Christ.

As the earthly community of Jesus' disciples, the Church enjoys the presence of the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit. In apocalyptic terms, the second reading announces its relationship with Jesus: "*the new Jerusalem... as beautiful as a bride dressed for her husband*". This marriage bond is none other than love. It is possible for the Church on earth to enjoy this relationship with Jesus the risen Christ because of His loving initiative. There is something divine about the Church because of this relationship: it is "*the new Jerusalem came down from God out of heaven*" and "*here God lives among men*". The divine presence makes the Church "*a holy city*" where all residents are God's people and He is their God.

The second reading takes the earthly Church beyond its terrestrial boundaries to reach the heavenly realm. It blends the earthly community of Jesus' disciples into the kingdom of God, "*the One sitting on the throne*". From this viewpoint, the Church as the earthly community of Jesus' disciples announces and prefigures the kingdom of God, by their life of *agapē*. The new commandment given by Christ is indeed transformative: it will transform the world and the entire creation into "*a new heaven and a new earth*".

The Church proclaims the Gospel of the kingdom of God by word of mouth and reflects it by loving as Jesus Christ did. Life authenticates proclamation. The Church rings out a clarion call to every member: "Practise what you preach." The call is tied to Jesus' commandment: "*Love one another just as I have loved you.*" Its faithful execution will transform the world into a better place.

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 15:1-2,22-29; Apocalypse 21:10-14,22-23; John 14:23-29

How could the Church founded by Jesus Christ more than two thousand years ago still survive and be relevant to contemporary times? Times have changed very radically and the Church still sticks to the gospel that proclaims the crucified and risen Jesus of more than two thousand years ago.

There is only one answer to this question: God and His power. The gospel of Jesus crucified and risen proclaims His twofold identity as Man and God, and also the mystery of His entire mission. For Jesus is indeed God and is eternal existence. But He became Man and broke into human history in order to save all fallen humankind. As Man He was crucified and, in this way, He took the place of all sinful humankind to pay the death penalty due to their sins. By His resurrection from the dead, He showed His divinity.

Jesus, God-made-Man, founded the Church, the community of His disciples. He was physically present among them and personally taught them. With His resurrection and ascension, His presence was no longer physical but through the Holy Spirit, His Spirit as well as the Spirit of His Father. He will continue to teach the Church through the Holy Spirit. Today's Gospel articulates all this thus: *"I have said these things to you while still with you; but the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you."*

Apart from being Jesus' new presence in the Church, the Holy Spirit is depicted to play two other roles: *"to teach you everything"* and *"to remind you of all I have said to you"*. The two roles are interconnected and may be seen as two dimensions of one role, like the two faces of the same coin. *"To teach you everything"* gives the impression that Jesus did not teach everything and that the Holy Spirit would be sent to complete His teaching. This impression is corrected by the reminder part of the Spirit's mission.

For sure, Jesus had taught everything. But not everything He had taught was understood. The Holy Spirit would recall what Jesus had taught and explain its meaning to the disciples. The meaning of Jesus' teaching would surely have to do with its application to the changing times faced by the Church, the community of disciples, living in different generations and different periods of history. Jesus' teaching must always remain the foundation of the Church's life and mission. Fidelity to it ensures the indwelling presence of Christ and His

Father, as He says: *“If anyone loves Me he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We shall come to him and make Our home with him.”* From this viewpoint, the Holy Spirit is given to ensure the disciples’ fidelity to Christ’s word in the concrete circumstances of their lives.

The first reading provides a fine example of this role of the Spirit vis-à-vis a particular pastoral situation the early Church faced in her mission. With a growing number of the gentiles embracing the Christian faith, the Jewish Christians insisted on their traditional practice of circumcision being observed by all. The apostles convened a meeting to deliberate on the issue. In their letter to the gentile Church to convey their decision, they affirmed the role of the Holy Spirit in their discernment: *“It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves not to saddle you with any burden beyond these essentials... to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from fornication.”* Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the apostles were led to see that the baptism instituted by Christ replaced circumcision prescribed by the old law. The “essential practices” were intended to prevent the gentile Christians from falling back to their previous way of life, both religious and secular.

The risen Christ and His Father continue to be with the Church through the Holy Spirit. In the different periods of her history, the Church faced different issues, theological, moral, spiritual and pastoral. Without fail, the Holy Spirit empowered her to weather these storms. Closer to our days, the Second Vatican Council, convoked by Pope John XXIII in 1962 and seen through to its completion in 1965 by his successor Pope Paul VI, took the Church into the contemporary world. Its purpose was to proclaim Christ and His word in a way intelligible to and impactful on the modern generation. It resulted in a better understanding and renewal of the Church: theology, liturgy, ministry and mission in the world. The role of the Holy Spirit in that Council was clearly acknowledged.

Today, synodality has been adopted for the area of reflection in the next Synod of Bishops. In a nutshell, it has to do with journeying together as the Church in all areas of the Christian life, ministry and mission. It is what the Church founded by Christ as the community of His disciples is all about: love. The decision to deliberate on the matter will surely contribute to the growth of the Church and can only be a fruit of the Holy Spirit’s power at work in the Church.

The Church has existed and will continue to exist because of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus and His Father. He is the unfailing presence of the risen Christ and His Father in the Church, to preserve and proclaim God’s word to the world.

ASCENSION

Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:17-21; Luke 24:46-53

Anything out of the ordinary in the sky is always spectacular and captivating. Jesus' ascension to heaven undoubtedly captivated His disciples: thus "*they were staring into the sky*", as the first reading says.

But that experience of theirs was tempered with a sense of loss. They had had a similar experience of loss before. Jesus their Lord and Master had been crucified. Then they not only grieved the loss of their Master but were also lost for direction: where would they go from there? In addition, they were also fearful of the enemies of their Master.

In that state of loss and fear, they encountered an unexpected event. Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to them. The apparitions of the risen Lord brought them much joy and encouragement, though on occasions they were overcome with doubts (as in the case of Thomas) or confusion (as in the case of the two disciples of Emmaus).

Now after being lifted up from their deep sense of loss by the risen Lord, they had to go through another experience of it. The risen Jesus was taken away from them at His ascension to heaven, this time for good. Their "*staring into the sky*" depicted a total loss as much as being captivated: physical loss of their Lord and Master, emotional emptiness, and loss of direction. In that frame of mind, they could only experience confusion and uncertainty. The Lord had left them for good.

In that situation of loss, "*two men in white*" appeared to them to offer them an explanation of what was happening: "*Why are you men from Galilee standing here staring into the sky? Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, this same Jesus will come back in the same way as you have seen Him go there.*" They explained where Jesus had gone and promised that He would return. For the disciples who had experienced Him risen from the dead, the promise made sense and filled them with hope. All this is what the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles narrates.

The Acts of the Apostles was written by Luke, the author of today's Gospel as well. In both his narrations, Luke captures the disciples' struggle with their natural experience of the physical loss of their Lord and Master to move into the realm of faith. They were helped by the two men in white to make this move. In

the realm of faith, they were filled with hope and joy. That was why, as the Gospel affirms, *“they went back to Jerusalem full of joy.”* Faith transformed their human confusion and uncertainty into joy and hope.

While Jesus’ return would take place at the end of time, He would meanwhile fulfil His Father’s promise of the Holy Spirit – the power from on high. He would give them the Holy Spirit. Both the first and Gospel readings carry the Father’s promise of the Holy Spirit. From Him, the disciples would receive power. Thus, after the Lord’s ascension, the disciples returned to Jerusalem and stayed there to wait for the fulfilment of the Father’s promise. The Acts of the Apostles narrates the great event of the Holy Spirit’s outpouring on Pentecost Day.

The Holy Spirit was the new presence of the risen Lord with His disciples, until His second coming at the end of time. Empowered by this Spirit the disciples were to carry out the mission the Lord had given them: to *“be His witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth.”*

We know from the Acts of the Apostles how the apostles, after receiving the Holy Spirit, bore witness to Jesus Christ in Jerusalem and beyond. They were no longer at a loss. Nor were they prisoners of fear any longer. They carried out the mission Jesus gave them with the power and courage of the Holy Spirit. In proclaiming Jesus, they were enkindling hope – the hope of the eternal life which Jesus had come into the world to offer and for which He was crucified but rose from the dead.

In their mission, the disciples often suffered persecution. But they rejoiced and praised God for their sufferings because they were consequences of their fidelity to the Lord. In the end, practically all of them were put to death for bearing witness to Christ their Lord. Their martyrdom too brought them great joy for they saw it as their faithful imitation of Jesus their Master. All this courage, zeal and joy undoubtedly came from the Holy Spirit.

In a Bavarian radio broadcast on 16 May, 1985, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) said: *“We cannot ignore the statement about the great joy of those returning to Jerusalem, even though we will never be able to explain it totally... Christ’s victory cannot only touch the understanding, but also make itself felt in the heart, and in so doing become truly meaningful. Only when we experience something of it ourselves have we understood the feast of Christ’s Ascension.”*

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 7:55-60; Apocalypse 22:12-14,16-17,20; John 17:20-26

Christian discipleship is imitating Christ totally. Today's first and Gospel readings touch on at least three areas of imitation: death, communion, and mission.

At His ascension to His Father's right hand, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to His disciples to enable them to live their discipleship to the full. Last Sunday, we heard Jesus spelling out the role of the Holy Spirit: *"to teach you everything"* and *"to remind you of all I have said to you."* One of the fundamental purposes of Jesus' teaching was to make His disciples like Him. He clearly expressed this purpose in His instruction to His disciples after He had washed their feet: *"I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you"* (Jn. 13:15). Following that He articulated the significance of His gesture thus: *"Love one another just as I have loved you"* (Jn. 13:34). Love is an unmistakable mark of Christian discipleship: *"By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are My disciples"* (Jn. 13:38). Love yields communion and communion is an essential part of the mission of Christ and His disciples.

Discipleship involves shaping one's life and even one's identity after the master's. Such moulding of life and identity is possible only with the help and power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' teaching is geared towards the formation of discipleship. The Holy Spirit is given to deepen the disciples' understanding of His teaching and enable them to become more like Christ.

Today's first reading narrates the martyrdom of Stephen, a disciple filled with the Holy Spirit. He was stoned to death for his fidelity to Christ. He embraced his death exactly as Jesus did. Firstly, he prayed: *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."* This prayer reflected Jesus' prayer on the cross: *"Father into Your hands I commit My spirit"* (Lk. 23:46). Secondly, Stephen prayed for the forgiveness of those who stoned him: *"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."* In this way he showed his love for his enemies as Jesus his Master did: *"Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing"* (Lk. 23:34). For sure, it was the Holy Spirit who empowered Stephen to imitate Jesus and identify with Him perfectly. What Stephen did at death, he must have lived it in life. Stephen's forgiveness of his enemies was unmistakable evidence of his love for them.

The Gospel today gives us a section of Jesus' priestly prayer to His Father on the eve of His crucifixion. It reveals one of Jesus' innermost concerns: the unity of His disciples: those of His time and the future ones they were to make. He

prayed thus: *“Father, may they be one in us, as You are in Me and I am in You.”* He wanted their unity to be rooted in and modelled on the Trinity. Through this unity of theirs, they would imitate Him in His perfect relationship with His Father in the Holy Spirit. Throughout His ministry, Jesus took pains to form His disciples into a community of love. At His ascension, He poured out His Holy Spirit to empower them to model their community after the Trinity. In this way, they would strive to imitate Him in His union with His Father in the Spirit.

As a reflection of the Trinity, the communion among the disciples would be their execution of the mission Christ entrusted them. In carrying out this mission, they were also imitating Jesus. In fact, their mission was a continuation of Jesus’ own mission on earth. Jesus’ mission originated from His Father and its goal was to draw people to the Father so as to share in the life and communion of the Trinity. In His priestly prayer, Jesus spelt out the purpose of the unity of His disciples: *“that the world may believe it was You (the Father) who sent Me (Jesus).”* The belief here is faith: faith in Jesus as the one sent leading to faith in the Father who sent Him. Such faith is eternal life, for it leads to the salvation the Father sent Jesus to bring to the world. From this viewpoint, the disciples’ unity signals the achievement of the goal of Christ’s mission: to bring life to the world.

Faith in Christ inserts the believer into the community of His disciples and through it into the Trinitarian communion. In this community on earth, the disciples reflect their participation, even if still imperfect, in the life of love in the Trinity. Beyond that, when they pass from this world, *“they will be where Jesus is”, “see His glory”* as well as possess it.

Together the first and Gospel readings highlight three areas of Christian discipleship. Following Christ means embracing His attitude in life as well as in death in a personal way. His whole life was characterized by love; His death on the cross offered full evidence of it, as He laid down His life that all might have life and have it to the full. He had come for that mission: to offer fullness of life, eternal life, to all fallen humankind. Christian discipleship must necessarily embrace this selfless love and strive towards it. In this way, the disciples constitute a community which is modelled on the Trinity and follow Christ in His relationship to the Father in the Holy Spirit. By their communion, they draw people to Jesus as the one the Father sent for the life of the world and thus continue Jesus’ mission on earth. All this is possible because the risen and ascended Jesus has poured out the Holy Spirit on His disciples.

PENTECOST SUNDAY

Acts 2:1-11; Romans 8:8-17; John 14:15-16,23-26

We have celebrated the paschal mystery – the death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as His ascension. Today, we celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on His disciples on the Day of Pentecost. This brings Eastertide to a close.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was in fulfilment of the promise Jesus made to His disciples in His farewell discourse to them. Today's Gospel reading carries one part of the discourse with this promise: *"I shall ask the Father and He will give you another Advocate."* This *"advocate"* refers to the Holy Spirit. What role would He play? We shall explore this role within the confines of today's Liturgy of the Word.

First of all, Jesus' reference to the Holy Spirit as *"another Advocate"* indicates there was a *"first"* Advocate. He was Jesus Himself, sent by the Father. Jesus now promised He would ask the Father to send the second Advocate, evidently to continue His mission. The first reading from the Acts of the Apostles narrates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in fulfilment of Jesus' promise. It also describes how the Holy Spirit continued the mission of Jesus through the apostles. They proclaimed the good news of salvation which Jesus had achieved by His death and resurrection.

In Jerusalem then many people from all the nations of the known world were gathered. They understood the apostles' proclamation in their own respective languages. That indicated unity in diversity. The Holy Spirit unified the multiple ethnic and national groups around the apostles so that they could understand the good news of salvation and form one body of disciples, the Church.

Going back to Jesus' words in the gospel, we find three other functions exercised by the Holy Spirit. Jesus clarified to His disciples that He was *"to be with you forever."* The Holy Spirit would be the new and eternal presence of Jesus among His disciples. Jesus' ascent to His Father's right hand would have deprived His disciples of His presence if not for the Holy Spirit whom He asked the Father to give them. The Holy Spirit was to be Jesus' new presence among His disciples to empower them to continue His mission. By His death and resurrection, Jesus had won salvation for all fallen humankind; by their proclamation of it, His disciples were to draw their audiences to it.

The next role of the Holy Spirit is given at the end of the gospel: He *“will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you.”* This role has to do with Jesus’ teaching. Jesus had taught the disciples everything but they could not understand it at one go. They would need time to understand the teaching more and more, and to apply it to their changing times. Only with this understanding would they be able to live out Jesus’ teaching and pass it on to others. The Holy Spirit would help them to do all that.

The Holy Spirit is present in the Church, the community of Christ’s disciples, *“forever”*. So, He is with us today. Allow me to share two powerful experiences I had of His active presence. The first was during the Archdiocesan Pastoral Congress in 2012 in Kuching. This was an assembly of 650 delegates from all the parishes in the Archdiocese of Kuching to evaluate the five-year focus on the family which we had just completed and then to chart the next course of pastoral and missionary undertakings. After sharing their very varied experiences of the focus on the family and evaluation in the light of the Gospel of John, the 650 delegates crafted a wonderful vision for the Archdiocese: *“Church as Disciples of the Word (Christ) in Communion for Mission”*. They then identified important areas of the Church’s life and mission to realize this vision. For 650 delegates to achieve this, nothing short of the Holy Spirit’s active presence was at play. I felt His active presence among us.

My second experience came from the Extraordinary Synod on the Family in Rome in 2014. Pope Francis exhorted all Synod Fathers to feel free to express their views honestly. A whole range of views, varied and sometimes even conflicting, were shared. Hearing them, I was left to wonder where the Synod was heading. In his closing address, Pope Francis uttered a voice of unity that took account of the very different and at times dissenting voices of the participating Bishops. Such fruit of unity could only have come from the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is present and unfailingly at work in the Church, not just at the universal and even local levels. He is there in every individual, making them children of God and empowering them to call God *“Abba, Father!”* The second reading affirms this. With His presence, the family of every disciple of the Lord becomes a cell of God’s family, the Church. The family is a domestic Church. Believing in the Holy Spirit’s presence and allowing Him to work, all family members will be held in unity and love, despite their different characters, views and ways of doing things. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is in each family to keep it one in love and respect. The readings today give us an assurance of this.

FEAST OF THE HOLY TRINITY

Proverbs 8:22-31; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

The mystery of the Trinity is an essential part of the Christian faith and unique to it. It eludes all mathematical calculations because it is a divine mystery. Faith in it comes from Christ's revelation of it through words and works.

Today's readings carry this revelation in terms of works or functions. In a nutshell, the first reading attributes creation to God the Father; the Gospel highlights the salvation brought about by Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man; and the second reading touches on the guidance and sanctification work of the Holy Spirit following Jesus' achievement of salvation. While these functions are attributed to them individually, every divine Person is actively involved in the works of the other two, because they are all one God.

The fulness of revelation came with Christ. Before that, the revelation was already given, but in steps, not just through the words of prophets, but also through creation and events. The first reading from the Book of Proverbs affirms the active presence of the "*Wisdom of God*" in God's act of creating nature, from "*the heavens*" to "*the deep*", with "*the earth*" and its "*mountains*" and "*seas*". This "*Wisdom of God*" is said to have been "*created*" by the Lord before all creation, to assert its everlasting existence: "*From everlasting I was firmly set*". It served to set God's "*purpose*" in His entire act of creation. The first reading conveys a profession of faith in God as the Lord of the universe and His Wisdom actively working with Him as He created the universe.

The Gospel of John opens with a loaded Christological hymn revolving around the divine Word made flesh. The divine Word was in existence from and for all eternity and was actively present when God created all existing beings. This hymn identifies the divine Word made flesh as Jesus Christ, the only Son of the Father. His active participation in His Father's act of creation ties Him to the "*Wisdom of God*" in the first reading.

While God created everything good, His human creatures rebelled against Him and tarnished creation with their sin. In His unconditional love, God the Father sent His Son to bring salvation to fallen humankind: forgiveness of sins and eternal life. The second reading from the letter to the Romans asserts this salvific

work of the Son of God made man in Jesus: *“Through our Lord Jesus Christ, by faith, we are judged righteous and at peace with God.”* From this righteousness, *“sufferings”* take on their value and can therefore be *“boasted about”*. This is because Jesus Christ suffered to make us righteous, and was crucified to restore to us the life we had lost through our sins. While it was Jesus Christ who carried out this saving work, His Father was the one who had sent Him.

The second reading roots Jesus’ saving work in *“the love of God”*. The Father’s unconditional love for all His human creatures moved Him to send His Son Jesus to save all fallen humankind. The reading further affirms: *“the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us.”* This affirmation is drawn from Jesus’ words in His farewell discourse to them. The Gospel reading today carries them. Jesus announces the coming of the Holy Spirit and reveals an important function of His: *“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will lead you to the complete truth.”*

The word Jesus used when presenting the role of the Spirit is important: *“lead”* (*hodēgēsei* in the Greek text). It affirms Jesus as the fulness of revelation; this means that in His person, life and teaching, He has revealed the truth to the full. The Holy Spirit is given to help His disciples to grasp the truth gradually until its fulness. This has a lot to do with the significance and relevance of Jesus’ teaching to the changing times faced by the disciples. Jesus’ words, *“He will tell you of the things to come,”* indicate this. In the light of Jesus’ words, the Holy Spirit exercises the function of enlightening the disciples to understand the ever-relevant teaching of Jesus and apply it to their constantly changing times. This qualifies the Holy Spirit’s function as sanctifying, because by living out Jesus’ teaching, the disciples become holy.

While the Holy Spirit carries out His function, Jesus and the Father are actively engaged in this work. For, as Jesus clarifies, *“all that He (the Holy Spirit) tells you will be taken from what is mine. Everything that the Father has is mine.”* This is perfect oneness. In this oneness, the Spirit’s role is also that of the Son Jesus Christ and His Father. The second reading qualifies this Trinitarian role as *“the love of God poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit”*. This role is inevitable because the Trinity is essentially love and love yields oneness. Indeed, the love of God must necessarily exude from the God of love. All creation and all history of salvation are expressions of this love of Trinity who is love!

FEAST OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

Genesis 14:18-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Luke 9:11-15

The feast of the Body and Blood of Christ has obviously to do with the Eucharist. Its solemnity indicates the importance and high regard the Church accords to the Eucharist.

For sure, the Eucharist lies at the heart of the Church, her life and her mission. As a memorial of Christ crucified and risen, it recalls the very foundation of the Church. It binds Christ's disciples into a community that the Church is: the mystical body of Christ. It nourishes their Christian life of faith and love. It keeps their hope of eternal life alive. It spurs them into the mission of proclaiming Christ crucified and risen whom it serves to remember and who is present in the Church.

Today's second reading is taken from 1 Corinthians. It recalls Jesus' institution of the Eucharist at His last supper "*on the same night that He was betrayed*". After thanking God, He transformed the bread into His own body and the wine into His own blood. Following that, He instructed His disciples "*do this as a memorial*" of Him until His second coming. He gave them the Holy Spirit to empower them to celebrate the Eucharist. The Church has been faithfully carrying out Christ's instruction and passing it down from generation to generation to our day.

While such celebration of the Eucharist takes place within the liturgical domain, it exerts an impact on the daily life of the disciples. They live out the salvation Jesus achieved by His death and resurrection, commemorated in the liturgy. At the end of the Eucharist, they are sent forth to proclaim this salvation and they do it through their lives of faith and love.

Love translates into active involvement by the disciples in their neighbourhood and workplaces. Today's Gospel highlights Jesus' desire for His apostles to be involved to meet the needs of people. When it was getting late, the Twelve were for sending the people away so that they could look for their own "*lodging and food*". They were concerned for the hungry crowd, but concern alone was not enough. Sending them away was a pragmatic move, for all they had were five loaves and two fish, far from enough to feed the crowd. But still, Jesus challenged them: "*Give them something to eat yourselves.*" He wanted them to move out of their pragmatic passivity into active involvement in faith.

Their reply, *“unless we are to go ourselves and buy food for these people,”* smacked of a reluctance to be involved. Jesus persisted in His desire for them to feed the crowd: *“Get them to sit down in parties of about fifty.”* They were now called to sacrifice their five loaves and two fish for the people. Quantitatively, the supply was far too little for the big crowd. Two things would need to come into play to make their meagre supply more than enough. The first was the disciples’ willingness to sacrifice the precious little they had in a spirit of sharing in love. The second was Jesus’ intervention: *“He took the five loaves and the two fish, raised His eyes to heaven, and said the blessing over them.”* He invoked His Father’s blessing over the little that His disciples were called to share. The result was spectacular: all had their fill, with twelve baskets of left-over.

The multiplication story here carries the Eucharistic gestures: Jesus *“took”*, *“blessed”*, *“broke”* and *“gave”* the bread (and fish) to the disciples to distribute to the crowd. For sure, the story has Eucharistic overtones. It highlights Jesus’ application of the Eucharist to the life of His disciples: they must not just be concerned about the needs of their fellowmen but also be ready to meet them through sharing and sacrifices in love. Only in this way will their Eucharist be authentic: celebrated in the liturgy and lived out in daily life. Only in this way will they experience God transforming the little they have into occasions of grace for many and an affirmation of their hope of eternal life.

In his autobiography, *Marc Oraison*, a French medical doctor turned priest, shares his vocation story. In his medical profession, he struggled against sickness and death. For sure, he had healed many patients. But he was also confronted with the limitations of medical science and its power. That led him to place death vis-à-vis the Resurrection, that is, to want to celebrate the Eucharist. For the Eucharist ratifies in the body and blood of Jesus Christ His death and victory of love, a victory that brought life. That further led him to the priesthood.

The feast of the body and blood of Christ reaffirms our faith and hope of eternal life and should propel us to love one another as Christ has loved us. In this love, we are ready to share what little we have with one another. Christ will bless and transform our sharing into a *“miraculous feeding of a multitude”* and strengthen our hope of eternal life. In this way, we become what we are by Christ’s death and resurrection: His mystical body.

FEAST OF THE ASSUMPTION

Apocalypse 11:19; 12:1-6,10; 1 Corinthians 15:20-26; Luke 1:39-36

It is natural that when we die, our bodies rot away and return to dust. Of course, a body can be scientifically preserved to prevent this natural process. Bodies of some saints too have been found not to have corrupted; and in our faith, we see this as God's work. But these bodies remain on earth.

In the case of our Blessed Mother, her body was not only incorrupt but taken up into heaven together with her soul. This is the meaning of her assumption into heaven – the feast we celebrate today. Mary's assumption into heaven was defined as a dogma, that is, a point of faith, on 1 November 1950 by Pope Pius XII. Sometimes this mystery is called the "falling asleep" of Mary.

There is no doubt that Mary was given this great privilege because of her holiness. She was conceived without sin; that is the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. She lived a sinless life: she always believed in God and lived her life in total obedience to God's will.

Today's Gospel presents the beautiful story of Mary visiting her old relative Elizabeth. Mary had just received news from Angel Gabriel that God had chosen her to be the mother of His Son-made-man – Jesus. She was also told that Elizabeth, in her old age, had conceived a son – John the Baptist.

Mary made haste to visit Elizabeth. The encounter between the two great women enjoyed the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. As a result, the child in Elizabeth's womb leapt for joy. He and his mother recognised the child in Mary's womb as their Lord. Thus Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, proclaimed: *"Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?"*

Mary's very special privilege came from God who had decided to save the world through His Son Jesus Christ. Like all human beings, Mary was saved by Jesus too. It was through this salvation planned by God and carried out by Jesus Christ that Mary was kept free from original sin. She kept herself free from personal sin as well. She was indeed faithful to God's will at all times and in all circumstances. In other words, she did her part to keep the holiness God bestowed on her intact.

As unique as she was, being chosen to be the mother of her Lord, she was also uniquely assumed body and soul into heaven. This was certainly a fruit of Christ's

work of salvation. Today's second reading (from 1 Corinthians) affirms: *"Just as all men die in Adam, so all men will be brought to life in Christ; but all of them in their proper order: Christ as the first-fruits and then, after the coming of Christ, those who belong to Him."* All fallen men and women who accept the salvation brought about by Christ will rise from the dead and be taken into heaven when Christ comes again at the end of time. But Mary was given the privilege to enjoy this grace even before the second coming of the Lord.

Mary's assumption into heaven serves to assure us of the reality of Christ's work of salvation and His victory over Satan, sin and death. The first reading (from Apocalypse) depicts Satan's determination to destroy Jesus Christ. In symbolic language, Satan is represented by the *"huge red dragon"* who is vested with deadly power in its *"seven heads and ten horns"*, with *"each of the seven heads being crowned with a coronet"*. *"Its tail had already dragged a third of the stars from the sky and dropped them to the earth."*

In symbolic language, Jesus Christ is depicted as being still in the womb of His mother. This is figuratively portrayed in terms of *"a pregnant woman in labour, crying aloud in the pangs of childbirth."* The huge red dragon *"stopped in front of the woman"* waiting to *"eat the child"* at its birth. Indeed, Satan was all out to destroy Jesus Christ. But Jesus overpowered Satan and *"was to rule all the nations with an iron sceptre."*

Jesus Christ will certainly come again at the end of time. We do not know when that exactly will be. But that does not matter. At His second coming He will raise our bodies up from the dust into which they have rotted. He will reunite our bodies with our souls. He will bring us body and soul into heaven where we will share in God's eternal life. That will be our *"assumption"* into heaven.

In order to be sure of entry into heaven, we need to imitate the example of our Blessed Mother: believe in God and be faithful to Him by obeying His will. In order to empower us to do so, Christ has filled us with the Holy Spirit. We should cooperate with the Holy Spirit fully as He empowers us to defend ourselves from the onslaught of Satan and his forces and live our lives totally for Christ and His kingdom.

From heaven, our Blessed Mother is continually drawing us to her Son Jesus Christ as she brought Him to her old relative Elizabeth and John the Baptist her son. Are we ready to encounter Jesus and live our lives for Him?

FEAST OF ALL SAINTS

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

The Feast of All Saints naturally evokes the concept of holy people in heaven. Heaven is commonly thought of as a place where qualified departed ones go. There, they have eternal life and live it in the eternal presence of God.

While this concept is fundamentally correct, its finer notions may require a deeper investigation. The Liturgy of the Word for the feast furnishes elements for a considered attempt to have a better and hopefully more complete grasp of the matter. For a start, the first reading taken from the Apocalypse describes the author's vision of *"a large number, impossible to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe and language, ... standing in front of the Lamb... and worshipping God."* This is a picture of heaven. The gathering there is all-inclusive and in the presence of Jesus (Lamb slain) and His Father. It is made up of people who *"have washed their robes white again in the blood of the Lamb."* This means, therefore, that it is Jesus the Lamb who, by His death, makes these people qualified to gather in His presence to worship His Father.

This ties in with the Gospels' proclamation of the universality of the salvation Jesus achieved with His death and resurrection. Jesus is at the heart of this salvation. Today's Gospel reading proclaims it through the beatitudes Jesus spells out in His sermon on the mount. Each beatitude starts off with a declaration of blessedness: *"Blessed are..."* In his book, *"To look on Christ"*, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (who later became Pope and took the name of Benedict XVI) sees Jesus at the heart of His beatitudes: *"He it is in whom it becomes clear what it means to be 'poor in spirit': it is He who mourns, who is meek, who hungers and thirsts for righteousness, who is merciful. He is pure in heart; He is the peacemaker; He is persecuted for righteousness' sake. All the sayings of the sermon on the mount are flesh and blood in Him"* (page 60).

Cardinal Ratzinger then draws two aspects from his interpretation of the beatitudes. The first is that they summon us to follow Jesus Christ in discipleship. For sure, on our own, we cannot achieve what the beatitudes spell out, but we can and must cling to Him and become His, so that what He has achieved will become ours. The call to discipleship is a call to be in communion with Jesus. Our response takes place in the *"today"* of our lives on earth.

“The second aspect concerns the future hidden in the present” (page 61). This has to do with “conclusive salvation” – fellowship with God. While it will be fully realized in the future, it is already happening in our communion with Jesus in the present. Thus, eternal life is already a present reality today. Experience of it today gives us the hope of its fulness in the future because Jesus has achieved it totally for us by living out all the beatitudes in His life to the point of dying on the cross for us, rising from the dead and returning to His full communion with His Father.

Returning to the vision in the first reading, we note that those washed in Jesus’ blood “*have been through the great persecution*”. Historically, the persecution was the one executed by the Roman Emperor. It fulfilled Jesus’ general prediction in the final beatitude. There is no doubt that the persecuted suffer and in their fidelity to Jesus, they cry out to God for help: they “*mourn*”, as the third beatitude says. God hears their cry and comes down to comfort them with His Kingdom. The saints in heaven are those who when they suffered on earth remained faithful to Jesus and found comfort in God’s descent with His Kingdom. Now they are in that Kingdom and enjoy full communion with Jesus and His Father in the Spirit.

In the light of all this, heaven is not a “place”, that is, a location. It is the definitive and eternal communion with Jesus and His Father in the Spirit, a definitive and eternal participation in the Trinitarian communion. The reality is possible because of Jesus Christ. Of this, the saints in heaven provide unmistakable evidence. Faithful communion with Jesus everyday also gives His disciples on earth an experience and therefore hope of the reality in a personal way.

The Feast of All Saints is not just a day in the Church’s liturgical calendar. It is an expression of the faith in the salvation Jesus brought to the world by His total commitment to His beatitudes to the point of dying on the cross, followed by His resurrection and ascension to His Father’s right hand. In this paschal mission of His, Jesus Christ, God made Man, “has given human existence a place in the existence of God Himself” (Cardinal Ratzinger, “Co-Workers of the Truth”, page 351). The saints in heaven show us where we will be when we live our present in communion with Jesus and intercede for us to be faithful to this communion.

BAPTISM OF THE LORD

Isaiah 42:1-4,6-7; Acts 10:34-38; Luke 3:15-16,21-22

Identity and mission are inseparably tied. Thus, for example, one identified as a medical doctor is expected to treat sick people.

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord touches on the identity and mission of Jesus Christ. Immediately following His baptism by John the Baptist, as He was at prayer, a voice from heaven revealed Jesus' identity: *"You are my Son, the Beloved, my favour rests on you."* The voice was evidently that of God the Father. But immediately before that, the Holy Spirit descended on Him in the form of a dove. What did these extraordinary manifestations convey? Jesus' identity as the Son of God, anointed with the Holy Spirit, and assuming the identity of Christ.

This identity assumed by Jesus defined His mission. Anointed with the Holy Spirit, Jesus the Son of God made Man was sent to bring salvation to the entire fallen humankind. His baptism marked His anointing and inaugurated His saving mission. For this mission, He embraced solidarity with all sinful humankind. To this end, He joined the many people to be baptised by John the Baptist. This gave another significance to His baptism: He had become a real human person to carry out His saving mission. He did it in order to take upon Himself the sins of all fallen humankind and take their place to pay the death penalty due to their sins.

What then was the mission of Jesus that flowed from this identity of His? To capture this, let us draw on the second reading from the Acts of the Apostles which narrates the baptism of a Roman officer, Cornelius, by Peter. In his homily at that baptism, Peter had this to say about Jesus: *"God had anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and because God was with Him, Jesus went about doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the devil."* Peter went back to the scene of Jesus' baptism and saw it as His anointing with the Holy Spirit and with power.

Once anointed, Jesus started His public ministry. He set out to proclaim the kingdom of God, to call people to repent in order to enter it, to heal the sick and even to raise the dead; and to liberate people from the devil's captivity. He came with the power of God to set people free from the power of the devil. That was His mission. It was a mission that God had decided for Him and announced through the prophets of the Old Testament. Without naming Him, the first reading from Isaiah prophesied Jesus' mission thus: *"I have endowed him with*

my spirit that he may bring true justice to the nations... I have appointed you (him) as covenant of the people and light of the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to free captives from prison, and those who live in darkness from the dungeon."

The four Gospels give us extensive accounts of Jesus' very concrete works among the people – proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of heaven, preaching justice and love, pronouncing forgiveness of sins on sinners, showing love to the sick by curing them and even raising the dead to life. The ultimate work of liberation was to save all sinners from the hold of Satan and his forces and bring eternal life to them. To this end, He was crucified whereby He took the place of sinful humanity to pay the death penalty for their sins. In this way, He obtained forgiveness of sins for all men and women. Following His death, He rose to life and brought eternal life to all forgiven humankind. That was Jesus' saving mission and He carried it out with resounding success!

As a result of Jesus' mission, we now have life. At our baptism we received this life personally. The Holy Spirit also came down upon us and made us children of God the Father in Jesus Christ. In this way, we were given a new identity: disciples of Christ and children of His Father, made possible by the Holy Spirit.

Identity defines mission. With the new identity we received at our baptism, we were given a mission: to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of heaven and draw people into it. We do this by living as faithful disciples of Jesus and loving children of God our Father. This means carrying out Christ's command of love: *"Love God with all your heart, mind and soul; and love your neighbour as yourself."*

Some concrete examples serve to illustrate Christian love. Like Christ, we are called to liberate people from oppression – whatever be the form it takes; in particular, our attention should be focused on the poor, the needy and the marginalized. We are called to speak up and speak out against injustice and corruption. We cannot do this unless we ourselves stay clear from unjust and corrupt practices. Christ's call to forgive one another rings loud and clear in the Gospels. As God's children, we ought to respond to this call. Where we have been deeply hurt, our mission as children of God is not to give in to our natural tendency to retaliate; but to forgive instead.

Indeed, our identity as Christ's disciples and children of God undergirds our mission to love another everyday of our lives.

SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 62:1-5; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11; John 2:1-12

The Lord's baptism which was celebrated last Sunday marked the start of His mission. Today's Gospel from John narrates His first work as well as serves to launch His entire mission.

The event was a wedding feast in Cana. The story focuses on the shortage of wine and Jesus' intervention to save the situation. In the Bible, wine is a necessary ingredient for a celebration. Its shortage is therefore critical, as it would either dampen or cut short a celebration.

Jesus' mother noticed the looming crisis and drew His attention to it. His response was shocking on three counts. He addressed His mother as "woman" and this seemed rude. Then He seemed unwilling to be involved: "*Why turn to Me?*" The reason He gave was: "*My hour has not come yet.*" This beat the common expectation that time was never a factor for Him to act.

Jesus' mother was undeterred by His shocking response. For she was confident that He would intervene. So, she proceeded to instruct the bridegroom's servants: "*Do whatever He tells you.*" He did indeed intervene and told these servants: "*Fill the jars with water.*" That was a rather strange order. For what was needed was wine, not water. Beating all the shock and strangeness coming from Jesus was that of the water the servants filled the jars with had turned into wine, and the best wine at that.

That miracle lies at the heart of the story. The author of the story presents it as Jesus' "*first sign*" and clarifies it as a manifestation of His glory to elicit faith. The Gospel of John revolves around Jesus working further signs to draw people to faith in Him and through Him, in His Father. In His prayer to His Father, Jesus affirmed that this faith was eternal life (Jn. 17:3). His mission was to bring eternal life to people.

The miracle in the Cana episode was water being changed into wine. There was a transformation. But it symbolized a more important transformation: faith transforms a person into a disciple of Jesus. All Gospels highlight this point: all disciples of Jesus followed Him because they had come to believe in Him. They were always ready to learn from and obey Him. In the Cana story, the bridegroom's stewards became disciples of Jesus because guided by His mother they listened to and carried out His word to them. That was a transformation.

At Cana, Jesus' sign fulfilled its intended purpose: to elicit faith and make disciples, and thus transform. But there is another episode that brings the transformation to another level. That is the story of Jesus on the cross in Jn. 19:25-27. It bears close parallels with the Cana story which suggest an intended connection with it. At the foot of the cross were Jesus' mother and His disciples who included His beloved disciple and two or three women. Here, Jesus also addressed His mother as "woman". He then gave her and His beloved disciple to each other as mother and son.

There is an easy tendency to see Jesus' gesture as fulfilling a human necessity: He was entrusting His bereft mother to the care of His beloved disciple, a man He could fully trust. But there is a much deeper significance behind the gesture. On the cross and therefore by His death to be followed by His resurrection, Jesus instituted a new family, the family of His Father in heaven. The family was not constituted on flesh and blood, but on faith in and fidelity to Him. His mother was a disciple of His *par excellence* and His beloved disciple was so because of his fidelity. Elsewhere Jesus had said, "*Anyone who does the will of God is My brother and sister and mother*" (Mk. 3:35). The familial terms indicate an intimate relationship within the family of God.

In John's Gospel, Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection are seen as the "*hour of His glory*". Thus, the timing "*My hour*" in His response to His mother the Cana episode was intended to point to His crucifixion. His glory manifested at Cana was only partial and would take its full force in His hour of glory. The power to change water into wine would come into full play when He rose from the dead. By His death and resurrection, He brought eternal life to all, that is, He brought His disciples to share in the life of His Father in heaven, thereby making all of them His children. They formed the new family of God.

In the light of the link between the two episodes, the miracle at Cana symbolizes and highlights the transformation into discipleship while the crucifixion brings it to a higher level: disciples are transformed into children of God. Jesus' entire mission was geared towards bringing about this double transformation: eliciting faith to make disciples and then to turn disciples into His Father's children by empowering them to share in His life which is eternal.

At our baptism, the transformation Jesus brought about took its effect in us. We became children of God and now belong to His family, to the glory of Jesus. We should live in faith and fidelity to God.

THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Nehemiah 8:2-6,8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-30; Luke 1:1-4,14-21

On 30 September 2019, Pope Francis decreed the Third Sunday of every year in Ordinary Time as the Word of God Sunday. His intention was to remind the faithful of the importance of the word of God in the life of the Church and so in the life of every Christian.

The first and Gospel readings for today's Liturgy focus on the word of God as contained in the Scriptures. The first reading taken from Nehemiah narrates Ezra the scribe and priest proclaiming and explaining the word of God in the Book of the Law to the assembly of God's people. That Book of Law was the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. The details surrounding the proclamation highlight the respect for and impact of the word of God.

The day of the proclamation was *"the first day of the seventh month"*, a *"day sacred to the Lord"* and the start of the New Year. All the people old enough to understand, men and women, young and old, children included, assembled to hear the word of God. Ezra stood on a wooden dais in full view of the assembly to proclaim it. Gestures are noted in detail: when Ezra opened the book, the people stood up. Before reading it, Ezra blessed the Lord while the people with raised hands answered *"Amen! Amen!"* and then prostrated themselves.

All these details about time and gestures indicate the sacredness of the word of God and the people's profound respect for it. Its proclamation on the first day of the New Year was intended to motivate the people to live every day of the year in fidelity to the word of God. Though it was Ezra to proclaim and explain it, it was actually God who was speaking to them.

Fidelity to the word of God amounted to obedience to God Himself. This point undergirded the people's careful attention to its proclamation and the seriousness with which they took it. After listening to the word, they wept and mourned in remorse for their failures to keep it. This showed how effective the word of God was. Ezra was sure that their remorse manifested their conversion of heart and renewed determination to be faithful to the word of God. He thus exhorted the assembly to feast, to celebrate the start of the New Year. This was because he was equally sure that their conversion was pleasing to the Lord as he assured them, *"the joy of the Lord is your stronghold."* The word of God was indeed sacred and powerful; it converted the people who heard it.

The Gospel has two parts: the first is taken from the opening four verses of Luke's Gospel, and the second from chapter 4 which records Jesus participating in a sabbath day service in the synagogue in Nazara, His hometown. Both parts revolve around the word of God.

The first part reveals Luke's attitude towards the traditions concerning Jesus Christ. These traditions were sources of the "word" of Jesus Christ that eyewitnesses and ministers had handed down. Luke was so drawn by its value that he felt the urge to share it with a certain *Theophilus* to show "how well-founded the teaching" he had received. The name *Theophilus* means "lover of God" and very likely Luke intended it to refer to anyone who loves God. Luke was sure that such a person would want to hear the word of God. While eager to share it, Luke took care to do thorough research because it was very sacred.

The second part of today's Gospel narrates Jesus Himself proclaiming the word of God as contained in the Scriptures. The passage He chose was from Isaiah. It announced the Messiah, the one God anointed with the Spirit and sent to bring liberty to captives, that is salvation to all sinners. Jesus' interpretation of the passage was confidently categorical: "This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen." He claimed to be Messiah God promised through Isaiah.

Jesus' proclamation and interpretation of Isaiah affirm God's fidelity to His word: God fulfills His every promise. All His promises revolve around the liberation of fallen humankind from Satan's hold, from sin and death. Jesus Christ is the one who brought about this liberation and is therefore the ultimate fulfilment of all God's promises. In fact, He is the Word of God made flesh, the personified Word of God. Thus, His claim at the sabbath day service in the synagogue in Nazara.

God's word is always relevant. Jesus' claim that the passage He proclaimed was fulfilled "today" affirms it. Luke's earnest desire to write his Gospel to share the word reiterates it. His diligent research in order to transmit the word of God faithfully shows his respect for its sacredness.

We are truly privileged to have received the word of God in the Scriptures. Through it, God still speaks to us today. Therefore, the Church proclaims it in every liturgical celebration. We ought to listen to it attentively during the Liturgy of the Word at Mass and other celebrations. At the personal level, we ought to make it a point to read and pray the Scriptures regularly. Very importantly, we ought to let it transform our lives as it did the people in Nehemiah's time and be convinced of its relevance as Jesus asserted and Luke reiterated.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 1:4-5,17-19; 1 Corinthians 12:31 – 13:13; Luke 4:21-30

Last Sunday was “the Word of God Sunday” and today is “Catechetical Sunday”. The sequence is logical because catechesis which is faith formation takes the word of God as its source and basis.

In this regard, it is significant that today’s Gospel passage immediately follows last Sunday’s. In fact, both form a larger unit that serves to introduce Jesus at the start of His public ministry in Luke’s Gospel. The scene was Jesus presiding at a sabbath day service in the synagogue at Nazara, His hometown. Immediately after reading from the scroll from Isaiah, Jesus claimed He was the Messiah, the anointed Saviour, the prophet had announced therein. In line with the introductory intention of the Gospel passage, the audience’s responses to Jesus’ proclamation are a nutshell summary of what Jesus was to encounter in His public ministry.

For sure, some responses were positive, others negative. The positive ones are expressed thus: *“He won the approval of all, and they were astonished by the gracious words that came from His lips.”* The negative ones are reflected in the statement about Jesus’ family background and the violence that follows. These responses have a bearing on catechesis because faith formation attempts to equip believers to respond appropriately to the word of God.

In the Gospel episode, those responding negatively to Jesus’ claim demanded Him to do the same works as those He did in Capernaum. At the surface level, they appeared to be desiring to benefit from Jesus’ ministry no less than the residents of Capernaum. But in reality, they were calling for proof of His claim of Messiahship. They wanted visible signs of His messianic identity before staking their faith in Him. Over and above that, they knew His family too well to believe His claim: *“This is Joseph’s son surely.”* Their familiarity with His humble background was a great obstacle to their faith.

Their inability to transcend human familiarity to believe triggered Jesus’ statement: *“No prophet is ever accepted in his own country.”* To illustrate His point, He took up two cases from the Old Testament where Israelite prophets ministered to gentiles: Elijah worked a miracle to provide an endless supply of food to a widow at Zarephath in the height of a great famine; Elisha healed Naaman a leper from Syria.

Jesus' illustrations propelled His unbelieving townsfolk to violence: *"they sprang to their feet, hustled Jesus out of the town, took Him to the brow of the hill their town was built on, intending to throw Him down the cliff"*. It was violence aimed to kill Jesus. Such violence erupted from a refusal to believe.

Contrary to their unbelieving counterparts, those who were open to the word proclaimed by Jesus marvelled at His gracious words and gave their approval. That amounted to a response of faith. They too knew Jesus was Joseph's son and therefore His humble family background. However, the Gospel passage does not separate them from the unbelievers and thus seems to include them in the violence that followed. Yet, they could not have joined in this violence.

The Gospel reading today offers us a few vital points of consideration regarding catechesis. Faith formation cannot happen in the absence of faith and without the word of God. Faith is a basic virtue that transcends all human knowledge, understanding and reasoning to accept what God reveals. For sure, faith is God's gift and for it to be operative it must be accepted. Faith accepts the Scriptures as the word of God in which He reveals Himself and His will for humankind. God's word became Man in Jesus and found total fulfilment in Him.

In offering His word, God sought to strike a communication and therefore a relationship with humankind. Response from them is called for. In Jesus the Word of God made flesh, the human response was perfect. This means the relationship between God and humankind reached its perfection in Jesus.

Effectively, therefore, in Jesus, our relationship with God, which we have broken through our sins, is restored. He is truly the Messiah, our Saviour. Catechesis aims to help us to understand God's word better and allow it to permeate our lives so that we will grow in our relationship with God. To this end, it draws on the Church's long and inspired understanding of God's word in its magisterial teaching. In this regard, the "Catechism of the Catholic Church" is a valuable magisterial compendium for faith formation.

Catechesis tends to be perceived as teaching a doctrine. But in the final analysis, its aim is to build up the believers' understanding of the word of God and deepen their relationship with Jesus, the Word made flesh, the Saviour of the world. Indeed, the person of Jesus should be the central focus of catechesis, the primary content of faith. In Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are led into a profound relationship with the Father. All this presupposes God's gift of faith and His word. Catechesis equips us to accept it and grow in faith.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

A common reason for declining ministry in the Church is: "I am not worthy." At times it is even more boldly put: "I am too sinful for it."

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of such responses. For no one is without sin and all Church ministries ultimately serve the all-holy God. But, as the first and Gospel readings today illustrate, God still chooses to involve sinful human individuals to offer His salvation to the world. Both are vocation stories.

The first reading narrates Isaiah's vocation, or rather, self-offer to God after his overwhelming experience of His holy presence in the Temple. The divine presence was majestically accompanied by seraphs, that is, heavenly beings. They acclaimed God as the all-holy and glorious Lord of hosts. In this holy and glorious presence of God, Isaiah could only acknowledge his own sinfulness: "*a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips*". In Isaiah's mind, there was an unbridgeable gap between God's holiness and his own sinfulness. Just to be in God's presence was unthinkable and risked death. For this reason, the Old Testament carries the thought that anyone seeing God would die. Perhaps, Isaiah was expecting to die when he remarked: "*My eyes have looked at the King, the Lord of hosts.*"

But God carried out a symbolic gesture through a seraph: He touched Isaiah's lips with a live coal from the altar. In this way, He burned away Isaiah's sins and purified him, as He explained: "*See now, this has touched your lips; your sin is taken away; your iniquity is purged.*" With that purification, Isaiah confidently offered himself to be God's messenger. When God asked, "*Whom shall I send?*" he boldly responded, "*Here I am; send me.*"

Isaiah's story drives home the point that God is not deterred by a human person's sinfulness in His desire to involve him/her in His work. For He is not only all-holy and all-powerful, but also all-merciful. He bridges the gap between His holiness and human sinfulness by removing sins and purifying the persons He calls. The experience of God's merciful act of forgiveness was powerful enough to draw Isaiah to offer himself to God's work.

While sharing common points with Isaiah's story, Simon Peter's call in the second reading reflects important differences as well. For one thing, the event took place not in the Temple but by "*the lake of Gennesaret, with the crowd*

pressing round Him (= Jesus) listening to the word of God". Jesus had left the synagogue of Nazareth and come to the shores of the lake. His presence and proclamation of the word of God turned the crowd into a Church community. That community was the new Temple, the new synagogue. Simon Peter's call took place therein.

After ministering to the Church community, Jesus turned to Simon and instructed him: *"Put out into deep water and pay out your nets for a catch."* After a whole night of hard and empty labour, Simon was still able to respond, *"If you say so, I will pay out the nets."* He took Jesus' word seriously. For it was the word of the same God which He had proclaimed to the Church community on the shores of the lake. It had power and thus, Simon had a big catch in the deep.

Simon's experience pointed to Jesus as the all-powerful and all-holy God. That was why he *"fell at the knees of Jesus"* in worship of Him, and acknowledged: *"I am a sinful man."* Feeling totally unworthy of the presence of the all-powerful and all-holy Lord, he asked Him: *"Leave me, Lord."* Yet, Jesus intended that experience to lead Simon to accept the ministry He wanted him to exercise in the Church community He had come to found. Thus, His words to him: *"Do not be afraid; from now on it is men you will catch."*

In this ministry, much would need to be done with many challenges to be faced. The *"deep water"* Jesus instructed Simon to cast his nets into takes on this significance. But Simon's experience should give him the confidence of the presence and power of the Lord. In that confidence, he would be able to minister to the Church community and bring them safely through the challenges facing them. Over and above that, the community would grow, as more people would be drawn into it. Simon, however, was not to work alone, but together with his *"partners"*, James and John. So, *"they left everything and followed Jesus."* This was in stark contrast to Simon's earlier reaction: *"Leave me, Lord."*

The Lord's all-holy presence undoubtedly sets in bold relief our sinfulness. But the all-holy God is also all-merciful. In His mercy, He forgives us. Paradoxically, in His power, He wants to involve us in His work of drawing men and women to Himself, to make us *"fishers of men"*. But He does not force His will on us. So as in the story of Isaiah, He asks, *"Whom shall I send?"* After experiencing His awesome forgiveness, are we drawn to offer ourselves to Him? If there is still fear lingering in us, does His assurance, *"Do not be afraid"*, give us the confidence to say to Him as Simon did: *"If you say so, I will pay out the nets"?* God's word is powerful for nothing is impossible for Him.

SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 17:5-8; 1 Corinthians 15:12,16-20; Luke 6:17,20-26

A meaningful life is one lived with a goal in mind. This is true for a Christian, but with one significant qualification: the goal is set by Christ and it is the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is so valuable and important that Jesus Christ came into our world not just to preach it but also to inaugurate it on earth. This year, from the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time on, the Gospel episodes, taken from Luke's Gospel, serve to unfold this. In a sabbath day service in the synagogue at Nazara, Jesus proclaimed Himself as the Messiah God promised through Isaiah. He had been *"anointed and sent to bring good news to the poor"*. Isaiah foresaw that that good news would include healing and liberation from oppression. For sure, such miraculous works could only come from God and they marked the coming of His kingdom.

Today's Gospel reading presents Jesus assuring His disciples of the kingdom of God as the source of their happiness. But before that, it underscores Jesus' messianic mission of preaching the good news and healing by noting *"a large gathering of His disciples with a great crowd of people... who had come to hear Him and to be cured of their diseases."* Indeed, Jesus was now carrying out His mission in fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy. His "sermon on the plain" was part of His proclamation of the good news of the kingdom.

In His sermon, Jesus identified four beatitudes followed by four woes. Every beatitude begins with the Greek word *makarioi*, which means "happy". It is to be noted that through the pronoun "you" in the plural, Jesus was applying the happiness to His responsive audience. These comprised the *"Twelve"* apostles whom He had chosen after a whole night of prayer in the hills (Lk. 6:12-16), the *"large gathering of disciples"* and *"a great crowd of people from all parts of Judaea, Jerusalem and the coastal regions of Tyre and Sidon"*. The last group indicated the gentile population and thus the universal mission of Jesus the Messiah. He had come to open the kingdom of God to all peoples of the earth.

In this context, the "you" in Jesus' sermon referred to anyone who cared to *"come to hear Him and to be cured of their diseases"*. The majority, if not all of these people were materially *"poor"* as they belonged to the marginalised and exploited class. In their situation, many of them were *"hungry"* and suffering, for which they *"wept"*.

These people were well disposed to Jesus' proclamation of the good news. That was why they had come to hear Him. Jesus declared them "*happy*" not because they were poor, hungry and suffering, marginalised and exploited, but because they had accepted His teaching and become His disciples. They had come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah and accept the kingdom of God which He had come to announce and inaugurate. In God's kingdom, they had God and God would reverse their current situation, liberate them and meet their needs.

The fourth beatitude had to do with a consequence of their discipleship: persecution. It was bad enough for them to be poor, marginalised and exploited; they would now be expelled from the social and religious communities, abused and denounced as criminals, "*on account of the Son of Man*". They would be persecuted simply because they had become Jesus' disciples. Such persecution was real in the time of Jesus because religious authorities held Him to be a blasphemer while civil authorities were influenced by them to see Him as a cause of civil unrest. They felt the need to impose harsh measures on His disciples to bring them under control. But again, Jesus assured His disciples of a great reward in heaven. So, they ought to "*rejoice and dance for joy*".

From the sequence of events in Luke's Gospel, it was very likely that some Pharisees and scribes and their disciples were present to listen to Jesus' "sermon on the plain". They were all out to find fault with Him. They had been doing this earlier on: they questioned and even condemned Jesus for claiming to forgive the sins of the paralytic (Lk. 5:17-26), eating with tax collectors (5:29-32), not fasting with His disciples (5:33-39), and not observing the sabbath (6:1-11). At their sight, Jesus pronounced the four woes in a reversal of the beatitudes to warn His disciples against following them. In doing so, they would be rejecting God's works in Jesus. Ultimately, they would be excluding themselves from the kingdom of God, in favour of a good life on earth – their goal of life.

The beatitudes in today's Gospel focus not on the poverty and misery of Jesus' disciples but on their favourable disposition towards the kingdom of God and acceptance of it. The kingdom became their goal of life and gave meaning to their lives even though of poverty and misery. That kingdom was not just a future possession but a present experience as they had Jesus in their midst and they had become His disciples, living in communion with Him. It brought them lasting happiness. Indeed, Jesus' words to His disciples in His time on earth should inspire us to make the kingdom of God our goal of life, for we too are His disciples. In doing so, we will find true happiness in life.

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

1 Samuel 26:2,7-9,12-13,22-23; 1 Corinthians 15:45-49; Luke 6:27-38

The call to love and forgive one's enemies, from the human point of view, is sheer foolishness. But Jesus still demands it of His disciples and promises them a great reward for putting it into practice.

Loving and forgiving enemies are considered folly because they go beyond human expectations of love. The Golden Rule seems to be a more reasonable option: *"Treat others as you would like them to treat you."* Love is shown to those who return the love. By the same token, hate yields hate. This rule is universal as it dictates common practice. It has its value insofar as it sustains basic order for peaceful coexistence and perhaps harmony to a certain degree. At best, it comes close to the love expressed by the Greek word *philē* – friendship.

But Christian discipleship transcends human expectations and boundaries. Jesus picks up from the fourth beatitude about persecution to bring love to a heroic degree: *"Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who treat you badly."* Persecutors of Jesus' disciples surely rank among their enemies. The disciples suffer persecution in their hands simply because they follow Jesus as their Master. As Christ's disciples, they are called to forgive. Such a response, by human reckoning, is utter foolishness.

Four verbs define this foolish but Christian response. The first, *"love"*, in the Greek text is *agapē*. It goes beyond the boundaries of natural human relationship upheld by the golden rule; it extends the boundaries from friends to enemies. It is the fundamental disposition necessary for the practice of the other three areas of the Christian response to persecution. For it is only in love that the disciple can return good for evil by *"doing good to those who hate"* them, *"blessing those who curse"* them, and *"praying for those who treat"* them badly. All these are gestures of forgiveness in love.

The Christian response, while foolish to human beings, reflects God's wisdom. 1 Cor. 1:25 says: *"God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom."* The Christian response therefore reflects firstly God the Father's compassion. Jesus commands it in today's Gospel: *"Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate."* Secondly, it marks Jesus' disciples as children of God the Father and Jesus affirms it thus: *"You will be sons (and daughters) of the Most High, for He Himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked."*

God's wisdom undergirds Jesus' call to forgive. It is unfailingly experienced when a positive response is given. Forgiveness sets not just the forgiven but also the forgiver free. To appreciate this, it is useful to consider the negative impact a hurt causes to the parties involved.

In a situation of hostility, a hurt is deliberately intended. The hostile offender seeks to inflict pain and suffering on the offended and takes delight when he/she succeeds. The offender feels superior to the offended and achieves a certain sense of victory over him/her. Unless forgiveness is extended, the offended is gripped by his/her anger and led to take revenge. Unless and until revenge is taken, he/she feels caught in his/her loss to the offender. This is captivity.

In the case of friendship, hurt affects relationship. It restricts and may even paralyze the offended party. In this sense, it imprisons him/her. The hurt adversely impacts not just the relationship but also some areas of personal life. For it imposes a burden which for sure the offended and perhaps the offender will have to carry in whatever they are doing.

Forgiveness liberates one from such restrictions and captivity. When given, it sets the offended above the offender. Where the hurt is intended, the offended does not allow the offence to destroy him/her. He/she reflects an ability superior to that of the enemy. In the case of friendship, forgiveness extended restores whatever is broken. It opens up to continued relationship and frees both parties from all reservations, thus allowing them to move on in life without inhibitions.

The freedom that forgiveness brings about is the "*great reward*" which Jesus assures His disciples of. For, by forgiving, they reflect the same attitude as their heavenly Father and live as His children. Indeed, God the Father unconditionally forgave "*the ungrateful and the wicked*" by sending His Son Jesus to pay the death penalty due to their sins. That forgiveness liberated them from death and restored their broken relationship with the Father. That was total and perfect freedom. Redeemed children of God could now move on in their lives with confidence.

The freedom to move on in life yielded by forgiveness is a great treasure, the "*great reward*" assured by Jesus. The call to forgive one's enemies is therefore not foolish but reflective of God's wisdom. Responding to it corresponds to the disciples' identity as children of God and possession of divine wisdom. This brings them true happiness.

EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ecclesiasticus 27:4-7; 1 Corinthians 15:54-58; Luke 6:39-45

Words are intended to communicate. In the process, it affects relationships either positively or negatively. Indeed, words have power. They can encourage, energize, vitalize, motivate and build up; they can also discourage, demotivate, demoralize and destroy. Their basic power is to reveal.

Today's Liturgy of the Word touches on this power of words to reveal the character of their speakers. The first reading comes from Ecclesiasticus. This book, written around 185 B.C., looks back to past events of Israel's history and picks up from reflections on them offered by the people's sages and teachers. The text that constitutes the first reading has this one point to make: *"Do not praise a man before he has spoken, since this is the test of men."* The underlying reason is clear: the kind of person the speaker is, comes through in his/her words, as *"the test of a man is in his conversation."*

Indeed, in conversation, much is revealed: views, intentions, concerns, desires, emotions, and so forth. All these elements revolve around the characters of the persons involved in the conversation, like whether they are optimistic or pessimistic, strongly opinionated or accommodating, dominating or respectful, rash or prudent, harsh or gentle, narcissistic or altruistic, hard-hearted or compassionate. The character list goes on. For sure, Ecclesiasticus has all this revelation in mind in the two statements quoted above.

Today's Gospel reading makes the same point as Ecclesiasticus. It is the third part of Jesus' "Sermon on the Plain" – the first part consists of the four beatitudes and four woes declared by Jesus, while the second is His command to love one's enemies. From the variety of themes it presents, this third part is likely a collection of Jesus' teachings on different occasions; but Luke the author sees their unity in the final statement in today's Gospel passage: *"For a man's words flow out of what fills his heart."*

The first part of the Gospel reading employs the word *"hypocrite"*, a term Jesus used of the Pharisees whom He condemned for their very strict teaching about the Law and traditions of human making while often not observing them themselves. The use of the term, supported by their contents, suggests that Jesus' teachings in the first part of the Gospel reading were originally directed at the Pharisees. Their hypocrisy qualified them as blind teachers of the Law leading others to *"fall into a pit"* with them. It also gave rise to their tendency to

judge others, *“taking out the splinter”* in their eyes, without ever *“noticing the plank in their own.”* Their hypocrisy shone through their words in their strict teaching of the Law and demands to observe human traditions and their own non-compliance. Inserted into Jesus’ *“Sermon on the Plain”*, Jesus’ criticism of the hypocritical conduct of the Pharisees is a general warning to all His disciples. Their words must flow from an honest and authentic heart.

The second part of the Gospel reading introduces the theme of *“a tree being told by its own fruit”*: a *“sound tree”* producing *“sound fruit”* while a *“rotten tree rotten fruit”*. Surely, this theme reiterates the fact that one’s true self is revealed by one’s words. Thus, at the end of the reading, Jesus asserts: *“A man’s words flow out of what fills his heart.”* This assertion highlights the need for authenticity and its inevitable disclosure. For, even if one tries to hide one’s true self behind one’s words, the audience will eventually see through it.

Sound fruit in Jesus’ teaching clearly crystallizes the positive effects of words: to encourage, motivate, energize, vitalize, build up – in short, to give life. A person who promotes that is a sound tree. It marks true Christian discipleship. For Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. The Prologue in John’s Gospel affirms that He was *“in the bosom (heart) of His Father”* (Jn. 1:18). He had come from there to *“make His dwelling among us”* (Jn. 1:14) and *“make Him (the Father) known”* to us (Jn. 1:18). In His prayer to His Father, Jesus affirmed, *“Eternal life is this, to know You (Father), the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent”* (Jn. 17:3). Clearly, the incarnation was intended to reveal the Father and His Son in order to give life to all fallen humankind. In other words, as the Word of the Father, Jesus revealed Him to sinful humankind and made it possible for them to enter into a profound relationship with them. This relationship is conveyed by the term *“know”* in both the Prologue and Jesus’ prayer. An essential part of this relationship is sharing in the eternal life of the Father and the Son.

The Word of God that Jesus is, is life-giving. All those who accept Him become His disciples and possess life. We are among them. As disciples, we are expected to imitate Jesus and be life-giving to others. This obliges us to speak words that are positively impactful: encouraging, energizing, vitalizing, motivating and building up. This is part of our Christian mission. St. Paul in today’s second reading exhorts us to *“keep on working at the Lord’s work always, knowing that, in the Lord, we cannot be labouring in vain.”* In other words, our positive and constructive words will eventually build up a good relationship – with God and among ourselves. They are testimony to our being the *“sound tree that produces good fruit”*, that is, faithful disciples of Jesus the Word of God made flesh.

NINTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

1 Kings 8:41-43; Galatians 1:1-2,6-10; Luke 7:1-10

A google search provides these statistics: the world's population is 7.9 billion of which 31.2% are Christians. These figures are likely to raise questions about the common Christian understanding of salvation by Jesus Christ.

The Gospels are clear and explicit that Jesus is the Saviour of the world (cf. Jn. 4:42; also Lk. 2:11) and that in love, God had sent Him into the world to bring salvation (cf. Jn. 3:16-17). They also uphold that faith in Jesus is necessary for salvation. Such faith makes one a disciple of Jesus – that is, a Christian. A logical conclusion from the Gospel declarations tends to uphold the salvation by Jesus Christ as benefiting only the Christians. It then begs the question: can the all-loving God leave the great majority of the world's population to perdition? If so, how can He be all-loving and His love be unconditional? Isn't the salvation for which He sent Jesus meant to be universal? If not, then how do we understand this salvation? What happens to the non-Christians?

Today's first and Gospel readings offer us elements for an understanding of the universality of God's salvation. In the first place, they make room for the gentile population. The first reading presents King Solomon's prayer as he dedicated to the Lord the Temple he had just finished building. The king had no qualms imploring the Lord to hear the prayers of foreigners, that is, those not belonging to the covenantal people of God, to *"come and pray in this Temple"*. The purpose stated by the king was to draw them to *"know Your (God's) name and revere You (God)."* Indeed, while acknowledging God's choice of the Israelites as His people in the covenant, the prayer asked Him to extend His relationship to other peoples. In the Bible, the word *"know"* conveys the idea of relationship while God's *"name"* stands for God Himself. With King Solomon and his people, God struck a relationship through the covenant. But in His infinite wisdom, He would have other ways to relate to people. Solomon's prayer acknowledged this almighty wisdom of God and appealed to Him to work things out for the gentiles.

The Gospel narrates the story of a Roman centurion asking Jesus to cure his favourite servant of a terminal illness. A few details are significant. Firstly, he did not personally approach Jesus but *"sent some Jewish elders"* to Him. Secondly, these elders *"pleaded earnestly with Him"* because he (the centurion) was *"friendly towards our (their) people... and built the synagogue."* These first two details underscore an open, respectful and trusting attitude at the heart of a harmonious relationship between the Jews and the Roman centurion. They

could trust themselves into helping each other: while he attended to their needs, they were now also attending to his need. Race and religion did not stand in the way of a peaceful and harmonious relationship.

The third detail concerns the centurion's faith and humility. He felt unworthy to meet Jesus personally: that was why in the first place, he did not "*presume to come (himself) to Him*" and now to have Jesus come to his house. He believed that all that Jesus needed to do was to "*give the word*" and his servant would be healed. The fourth detail is Jesus' praise of the centurion in surprising terms: "*I tell you, not even in Israel have I found faith like this.*" The nature and quality of the centurion's faith exceeded that of the chosen people. Jesus' praise of him acknowledges the possibility of a profound faith in God and therefore a genuine relationship with Him among peoples outside the covenant.

God's love is universal and unconditional. His salvation comes from this love of His and is meant for all humankind. For sure, He sent His Son Jesus to bring this salvation to all humankind. From the first reading, the point is inferred that God, in His infinite wisdom and power, has His different ways of extending this salvation to non-Christians. The Gospel story depicts one way: through some Jewish elders who pleaded with Jesus. That indicates the intercessory dimension of the community of the chosen people. God chose the people of Israel not just for themselves but for the nations. The intercessory function also applies to the Church, the community of Christians. Even as we intercede for others, it is important to keep in mind Jesus' remark about the centurion, for their faith may be greater than ours! Humility is called for; and humility opens our hearts to acknowledge that God has His ways of offering to all humankind, regardless of race and religion, the salvation He sent Jesus to bring to the fallen world. No one, no group, no religion can and should monopolize this salvation.

Acceptance of the salvation God sent Jesus to bring to the world calls for mutual acceptance by all citizens, ethnic and religious groups, as well as nations in the world. Undergirding this call is human fraternity. On February 4, 2019, Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Abu Dhabi, jointly signed a declaration on human fraternity. One statement in this declaration affirms, "The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings. This divine wisdom is the source from which the right to freedom of belief and the freedom to be different derives." Such is the wisdom of God. Infinitely surpassing all human wisdom, it extends the salvation brought by Jesus to all humankind in unexpected ways.

TENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

1 Kings 17:17-24; Galatians 1:11-19; Luke 7:11-17

Death is an inescapable reality. No one has power over it. When it comes after a reasonably long life, it is readily accepted, though not without grief. But its early or premature occurrence in a young person is generally resented, at times with anger and in not a few cases with superstitious beliefs.

Today's first and Gospel readings revolve around the death of a young man. The first reading hints at some superstitious elements. Prophet Elijah was the guest of a widow. Her son suddenly fell seriously ill and eventually died. Her superstitious mind took the better of her to question the prophet: *"What quarrel have you with me, man of God? Have you come here to bring my sins home to me and to kill my son?"* Her superstition tied her son's death to her past sins. The presence of the holy man of God made her recall these sins of hers. She felt guilty and probably found her guilt harder to bear than her son's death.

Against this superstitious background, the tragedy had a strong message to offer. The prophet carried the dead boy upstairs. The story gives a curious detail: the prophet brought the boy into the room where he stayed and laid him on his own bed. The detail would seem to highlight the prophet's belief in God as the authority behind his mission and his care to put the boy under this divine authority. His belief stood in stark contrast with the widow's superstition and set God over all powers she might entertain. All this emerged quite clearly from the prophet's question to God: *"Lord my God, do You mean to bring grief to the widow who is looking after me by killing her son?"* The prophet attributed the boy's death to God's doing and dissociated it from his mother's sins.

Following that, Elijah prayed God to restore the boy's life. God answered his prayer. The prophet gave the resurrected boy to his mother. She reiterated his status as *"a man of God"* and acknowledged the power of God's word he uttered. The message of the story is clear: God is the source of life. He has the power to give it or take it away, for His purpose. On that particular occasion, His purpose was to lead the widow out of her superstitions to total faith in Him. Her good deed of generously offering hospitality to Elijah should be motivated solely by her faith in God and not by superstitious beliefs.

The Gospel narrates another story of the death of a young son, the son of a widow. Jesus, accompanied by His disciples and a crowd, encountered his funeral procession on His way to Nain. Moved with compassion for the widow,

Jesus raised the young man to life and gave him to his mother. A number of details in the story are significant.

First of all, the young man was the only son of his widowed mother. Bereft of her husband, she would have to rely on her son for her old age. Her future, in this sense, was adversely affected, if not totally shattered. Her grief was therefore twofold: loss of a son and loss of a stable future. That moved Jesus to have compassion for her and raise her son to life. Its significance was clear: Jesus ensured her future.

All that was behind another detail: *“Do not cry.”* These words of Jesus touched the depth of the widow’s grief over the loss of her son and worry about her uncertain future. Jesus followed His words up with action: *“Then He went up and put His hand on the bier.”* He turned His attention to the dead son and touched the carrier of his corpse. He commanded him, *“Young man, I tell you to get up.”* He exercised His divine power to give life and the dead young man rose to life. Now alive, the young man began to talk and could surely get off the bier and walk to his mother. But no; the story makes this point: *“Jesus gave him to his mother.”* The point conveys the significance that Jesus not just raised the dead young man to life but also restored a stable future to his mother. In this way, His instruction to her not to cry was an assurance of a stable future for her.

The reaction from the people around carried something expected and a surprise. The expected element was, *“Everyone was filled with awe and praised God.”* The surprising part was that they praised God not for bringing the young man to life, but for placing *“a great prophet”* in their midst. The entire miracle assured them, *“God has visited us”* in order to give them life.

This reaction from the people is a detail with its own significance. It points to God’s visitation of His people, a visitation that gives life to them. Indeed, humankind has no power over death and will remain in death unless God comes into the scene. Death is an inescapable reality. But with God, it becomes a transition to life. God enters human history through Jesus. With His coming, the powers of death come to a standstill, waiting to be defeated. The story conveys this point through the detail it furnishes: *“the bearers stood still”* when Jesus *“put His hand on the bier”*.

Indeed, bodily death is an inescapable reality. But by His own death and resurrection, Jesus has transformed it into a transition to eternal life. Therein lies our future!

ELEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

2 Samuel 12:7-10,13; Galatians 2:16,19-21; Luke 7:36 – 8:3

Man's general tendency is to cover up what is disgraceful and scandalous. Experience tells us that covering up which, in effect amounts to secrecy, leads to further sin. On the contrary, repentance leads to an honest and humble admission of guilt and wins forgiveness from God and likely from others too.

The first and Gospel readings of today's Mass underscore God's forgiveness. In the first reading taken from 2 Samuel, the great King David was consumed by his passion to commit adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, an officer in his army. Informed of her pregnancy, the king attempted a cover-up: he ordered the return of Uriah from a military campaign in the hope that the latter would spend the night with his wife. Out of his sense of solidarity with his soldiers still in the battlefield, Uriah decided not to enjoy the comfort of his home. In dismay, David had him sent back to the battlefield with a clear order to his army general that he be placed in the frontline of the battle. David achieved his purpose: Uriah was killed and the king conveniently took Bathsheba as his wife.

David's attempt to cover up his sin of adultery with Bathsheba led him to have Uriah, her husband, killed. One sin led to another. It was at this point that Nathan the prophet was sent to David to confront him of his sin. The prophet first reminded the king of the Lord's abundant blessings on him, then denounced his sins of adultery and murder, and announced the punishment to befall him. David then confessed, *"I have sinned against the Lord"*. Following David's confession and repentance, Nathan pronounced the Lord's forgiveness on him.

The Gospel picks up the same theme of repentance and forgiveness in its story about a repentant woman. She was identified not by any personal name, but by a negative depiction: she *"had a bad name in the town"*. She was infamous for her bad deeds – whatever these might be. In effect, she was known to be a sinner. There was no cover-up possible for her anymore since she was well known for her sins. Society had judged and condemned her.

Her saving factor was her honesty – her acknowledgment of the reality she was: one *"with a bad name"*. She had come to terms with this public identification of her; she honestly felt she deserved the bad name because of her own misconduct. In that honesty, she boldly turned up at a dinner hosted for Jesus by Simon who by virtue of his being a Pharisee was a person of social standing.

The woman's behaviour broke all etiquette and was shockingly scandalous. Her bad name badly dented the good name of Simon the Pharisee. She *"waited behind Jesus at His feet."* In the eyes of the distinguished guests, she was defiling Jesus the Rabbi. She was weeping and *"her tears fell on His feet and she wiped them with her hair"*. For this, she had to loosen her hair. Loose hair would be unkempt and signal disrespect. Through this scandalizing gesture of hers, she would be perceived to be insulting Jesus.

For sure, that was Simon's perception. His soliloquy articulated it: *"If this man were a prophet, he would know who this man is that is touching Him and what a bad name she has."* For sure, Jesus knew the bad name of the woman. But He was not adversely affected by the woman's gesture. For He saw beyond the public perception of it and looked at the person of the woman. She was not being disrespectful and insulting; rather, she was repentant.

Through a parable of two men in debt of different amounts being forgiven, Jesus shared His perception with Simon who was then able to affirm: *"The man who was pardoned more was the one who loved more."* The woman was totally herself, very honestly and unashamedly acknowledging her sinful state in public, when she performed a gesture that went against all social etiquette. Wetting Jesus' feet with her tears and drying them with her hair, she was expressing her sorrow as well as love for Jesus. In the depth of her heart, she was hoping for forgiveness. By contrast, Simon was dictated by exact social correctness – playing host to Jesus and nothing more than that.

Jesus saw the woman on the road to sainthood – because she was well disposed to God's total forgiveness of her sins. Thus, He said to her, *"Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."* She could now leave in peace for Jesus had pronounced forgiveness for *"her sins, her many sins"*. In this way, her past was no longer a matter for regret. She had now been unburdened of it by God's forgiveness and could live in the knowledge that she had been forgiven and was now loved. Her hope was fulfilled and she was on the path to salvation.

What the woman in our Gospel story experienced from Christ is also within the reach of every sinner. God's forgiveness sets the sinner free from the burden of the past so that he/she can now live in peace and be on the path to sainthood. The story of David in the first reading brings to the fore an important point: while God's forgiveness is always there, a humble and honest admission of sins followed by genuine repentance is called for, in order to receive it.

TWELFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Zechariah 12:10-11; Galatian 3:26-29; Luke 9:18-24

“Who do you say I am?” Jesus’ disciples might have been taken aback by this question their master put to them. For they had been following Him for quite some time already. Did they still not know Him?

Peter answered, supposedly on behalf of his fellow disciples, *“The Christ of God.”* The word “Christ” simply means “the anointed One” – the Messiah whom the people of Israel were waiting for. While Peter gave the correct response, his understanding of the Messiah most likely corresponded to popular expectation. Generally, the people of Jesus’ day expected the Messiah to be a political liberator, one who would set them free from foreign domination. From His authoritative teaching, His marvelous deeds, and courageous and consistent criticism of the Jewish authorities, He would certainly fit the Messiah the people were expecting.

Popular views at the time when Jesus asked His disciples about His identity had not come to take Him as the Messiah. But still, they generally identified Him with great figures of the past: *“John the Baptist”, “Elijah”* and *“one of the ancient prophets come back to life.”* These views could only have been shaped by what they had experienced of Jesus: His authoritative teaching, His miraculous deeds, and courageous stand against the Jewish authorities.

But the disciples saw beyond these great historical figures and identified Him as *“the Christ of God”*. Against the backdrop of Jesus’ impressive ministry, they were confident that He was the political liberator the people of Israel had been expecting. This popular expectation had developed despite some prophetic declarations about the suffering Messiah. One such declaration came from Zechariah in the first reading. It prophesied that the people would *“pierce and mourn for the Messiah as people would weep for a first-born child.”* Indeed, the Messiah would be a suffering servant of God.

If not checked, the popular expectation of the Messiah might lead to a complete rejection of Jesus by His disciples when they encountered His crucifixion. Thus, immediately following Peter’s reply, Jesus provided clarification on His identity. Thus, He predicted His passion and death to pre-empt undesirable reactions from His disciples. From His terrible tragedy, however, there would be a positive outcome: He would be *“raised up on the third day”*. By this death and resurrection of His, He would bring salvation to the world.

Salvation has two components. The first is forgiveness of sins. At His passion and death on the cross, Jesus took our place to pay the death penalty for our sins. As a result of that, we received forgiveness of sins from God. On the cross, Jesus both satisfied the justice of God and brought God's mercy on us.

Now that we have been forgiven of our sins, we are properly disposed to receive the second part of salvation – eternal life. By His resurrection, Jesus brought life to us. This life is a share in God's own life – eternal life. This is God's unconditional love for all of us. In sharing His life with us, God draws us into His loving embrace so that we can intimately relate with Him forever in His kingdom.

The kind of Christ Jesus was defined His discipleship. Since His "Christhood" entailed the way of the cross, all His followers would also have to walk the same way. On this score, He declared: *"If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me."* True disciples of the Christ of God are those who live their lives for Jesus. Since many attitudes and trends of the world go against Jesus' values, these disciples must expect to face a lot of challenges in their lives on earth. They will often suffer in the hands of the Lord's enemies – that is, people who are opposed to Christ and go after His followers as well.

It is a fact that many Christians are suffering persecution in different parts of the world just because they profess faith in Christ and choose to follow Him. These disciples are living martyrs in that they bear true witness to Christ by their fidelity to Him. Indeed, they brave violent opposition and are prepared to suffer and even die for Christ. By dying for Christ, they *"lose their lives"* for His sake here on earth, but *"save"* their eternal life in heaven.

The decision to follow Christ to the cross comes from one's experience of His unqualified love. The experience strongly draws one to Him in love. This is a response of love to the love of Christ. In this love, nothing else matters except being in close relationship with Christ and sharing in His life, which is in fact God's eternal life.

We are Catholic Christians, many of us for a long time. But do we know who Jesus truly is? What is our answer to His question: *"Who do you say I am?"* Do we really know the kind of Christ that He is, and understand what it means to follow Him? Are we prepared to embrace His discipleship?

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

1 Kings 19:16,19-21; Galatians 5:1,13-18; Luke 9:51-62

Today's liturgy of the word focuses on vocation – the vocation of Elisha (1st reading), the Christian vocation presented by Paul (second reading), and the vocation of Jesus and of three other persons (Gospel). It is in the vocation of Jesus that all the others have meaning.

The Gospel presents Jesus moving resolutely towards Jerusalem *“as the time drew near for Him to be taken up to heaven.”* Jerusalem, with its Temple, was considered God's dwelling place on earth. Jesus' resolute journey to it marked His commitment to His Father's will to save all fallen humankind. For, in Jerusalem, He was to suffer and be put to death on the cross to bring life to all humankind. His death marked His completion of this mission. His resurrection and ascension following it signaled His return to the Father. In light of these considerations, Jesus' journey to Jerusalem was His execution of the mission to which His Father had called Him.

The call to discipleship is a call to follow Jesus. His call must therefore have a bearing on it. Today's Gospel illustrates this through three instances of the call to discipleship. The first concerns a man Jesus met on His way to Jerusalem. That man told Him: *“I will follow You wherever You go.”* Jesus did not reject him, but told him in no uncertain terms that *“foxes have holes, the birds of the air their nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.”* Following Jesus meant being ready to move on wherever Jesus' mission would take Him and whatever hardship it might involve.

The second call came from Christ Himself: *“Come follow me.”* The one called felt he had to bury his father before following Christ. Surely, that was a case of filial piety. It made Jesus' response surprising at face value: *“Let the dead bury the dead; your duty is to go and spread the news of the kingdom of God!”* But, in the light of His mission, Jesus' advice made total sense. He had come to bring eternal life and He would do it through His death and resurrection. Physical death is the end of physical life, but the transition to eternal life. Following Jesus is therefore

about eternal life. The dead have transitioned to it and there is no need to worry about them. There is an urgency, however, to draw the living to possess it.

The third person was keen to follow Jesus: *"I will follow You,"* but felt he had to bid goodbye to his folks at home. Jesus responded: *"Once the hand is laid on the plough, no one who looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."* Jesus was not objecting to the man's courteous gesture, but cautioning him against a change of mind. For, his homelike might discourage him on grounds of the mounting opposition Jesus was encountering.

Against the backdrop of Jesus' resolute journey to Jerusalem, these three vocation episodes touch on different but interrelated aspects of discipleship. As in Jerusalem, Jesus was to meet His tragic death, so His disciples must expect persecution even to the point of martyrdom. As Jesus did not give up but was determined to face His sufferings and tragic death so as to complete His mission, so His disciples must not *"look back"* to avoid persecution but move on to the end. As Jesus was to draw people to God's kingdom to possess eternal life, so His disciples must set the kingdom as the object of their mission.

Jesus' call to mission and His instructions about discipleship in today's Gospel have a bearing on the significance of Elisha's prophetic call in the first reading. After going back home to *"kiss his father and mother"* and cook a farewell meal for his men, he left his family and farming life for good. He was committed to his call to succeed Elijah as God's prophet and went wherever his ministry took him, without looking back.

The second reading applies the Gospel's vocation message to all Christians as it exhorts them to *"live in accordance with the spirit"* and not *"yield to the cravings of the flesh."* In actual reality, Christian life is a vocation. It is a call that comes from God to enter His kingdom and enjoy eternal life. The call is extended to all states of life: priesthood, religious, married and single. Fidelity to it at all cost is what counts!

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 66:10-14; Galatians 6:14-18; Luke 10:1-12,17-20

What is success and how do we gauge it? The world has its standards. Jesus has His. Today's Gospel, an immediate sequel to last Sunday's Gospel passage, spells out their fundamental difference.

Last Sunday, we heard the story of Jesus resolutely making His way to Jerusalem where He would be condemned to death on the cross. By the world's standards, this fate marked Jesus' life and mission as a total failure. Yet, as the Scriptures announced and Jesus Himself predicted, His death was to lead to His resurrection to life. In this way, He was to achieve the salvation His Father had sent Him to the world for. That meant, by His death and resurrection, He would open to all fallen humankind the doors of the kingdom of God where they would enjoy eternal life.

Jesus knew that the paradox of His death to bring life was difficult to accept. Thus, on His way to Jerusalem, He sent messengers ahead of Him to a Samaritan village to make preparations for His own visit. His purpose was to affirm to the Samaritans that the paradox was for real. Unfortunately, they would make Him no welcome.

While this negative response angered James and John, Jesus was not affected by it. Today's Gospel presents Him going to another village, as He continued His journey. This time, He sent seventy-two other disciples out *"ahead of Him, in pairs, to all the towns and places He Himself was to visit."* That meant, He involved more disciples. Many people in different places needed to hear the good news of the kingdom of God. Jesus affirmed this in His words, *"The harvest is plenty, but the labourers are few."*

Indeed, because the harvest was plenty the mission was urgent. The instructions Jesus gave the seventy-two disciples were intended to meet this urgency. So, first of all, He commanded them, *"Start off now."* Secondly, He asked them to travel light, *"carry no haversack"*, and not to waste time, *"salute no one on the road."* Finally, they were to trust in divine providence; to this end He instructed them: *"carry no purse", "stay in the house"* which offers welcome, and *"eat what is set before you."* Trust in divine providence overrode undue concerns.

Transcending all these earthly concerns, Jesus' disciples would be able to focus on their mission wholeheartedly. That mission was to proclaim, *"Peace to this*

house” and *“The kingdom of God is very near you.”* Even in the face of rejection, they were still to proclaim the imminence of the kingdom, although they were to *“wipe off from their feet the dust of the town”* that rejected the good news. Rejection of the good news was a failure not of the proclamation of the good news by the seventy-two disciples, but rather of the audience’s response.

Carrying out the mission Jesus had given them and following all His instructions, the seventy-two disciples came back with a resounding success story. They were filled with joy and reported to Jesus: *“even the devils submit to us when we use Your name.”* Jesus confirmed their success story, *“I watched Satan fall like lightning from heaven.”* But He pointed out, *“Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you; rejoice rather that your names are written in heaven.”*

Jesus’ correction of the seventy-two’s reaction crosses a very important point about success. Victory over Satan by eradicating His evil works symbolized by *“serpents, scorpions and the whole strength of the enemy”* does not constitute success. It is only a sign of the kingdom and the kingdom is the end-all of mission. Success, for Jesus, is entry into the kingdom, signalled by having one’s *“name written in heaven”*. He articulates it very clearly in His first prediction of His passion and death in Jerusalem: *“Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for My sake, that man will save it. What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but loses his own soul?”* (Lk. 9:25). Gaining the whole world is success by worldly standards. But in Jesus’ eyes, it is possessing eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. For this, one needs to follow Jesus faithfully, even if it means suffering and failure by the world’s standards, as was the case for Jesus in Jerusalem.

My conclusion in last Sunday’s homily was, *“Fidelity to it (= God’s call) at all cost is what counts.”* I see today’s Gospel presenting the end goal of this fidelity: to have our names written in heaven. That is the success by Jesus’ standard. It is indeed the only true success.

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Deuteronomy 30:10-14; Colossians 1:15-20; Luke 10:25-37

A scheming mind tends to seek personal advantages. To this end, if need be, this tendency may call up fine prints or make fine distinctions.

Today's Gospel reading presents a case in point. It narrates a lawyer attempting to "*disconcert*" Jesus. This was after the seventy-two disciples Jesus sent out to proclaim the kingdom of God had come back with reports of great success (Gospel of last Sunday). They were rejoicing because devils had submitted to them. Jesus checked their thinking, for they were rejoicing for the wrong reason. They should rejoice because their names were written in heaven. For that meant, they had found entry into the kingdom of God and inherited eternal life.

The lawyer probably followed this declaration of Jesus up to satisfy his own anxiety. For he was not among the seventy-two Jesus had sent out on mission. In His declaration to the seventy-two disciples, Jesus seemed to perceive eternal life in terms of mission: proclaiming the imminence of the kingdom of God. How then was he to inherit eternal life? Thus, he asked, "*Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*"

Jesus drew his attention to the "Law": "*What is written in the Law?*" The "Law" is the law God gave His people through Moses. It is all found in the first five books of the Scriptures, often called the "Law of Moses" or the "Book of Moses". True to form, the lawyer called out the two greatest commandments: loving God with one's whole heart, mind and soul (cf. Dt. 6:5), and loving neighbour as oneself (cf. Lev. 19:18). They capture and constitute the spirit of all the concrete laws stipulated in the "Law". For sure, the lawyer answered correctly and Jesus affirmed it as the way to inherit eternal life.

From there, the lawyer sought to "*justify himself*". He asked, "*And who is my neighbour?*" In the eyes of the "Law", a neighbour is a fellow Jew; its extension at best makes room for a non-Jew who, by virtue of being a servant of a Jew, is considered as part of the master's family. But in His ministry, Jesus' care and concern often went beyond the Jewish circle. For example, earlier on, He had sent His first group of disciples to a Samaritan village (Gospel of two Sundays ago) which He intended to visit. In his attempt to "*disconcert*" Jesus, the lawyer might likely have intended to challenge His mindset and conduct. Jesus responded with the famous parable of the good Samaritan.

Jesus depicted the Samaritan in favourable light, despite a couple of factors. Firstly, Samaritans and Jews had been enemies for centuries. Secondly, the Samaritans He had intended to visit rejected Him, because He was set for Jerusalem (Gospel of two Sundays ago). The goodness of the Samaritan stands out even more strongly against the negative responses of the priest and the Levite to the victim of robbery and violence. From the context and tone of the story, this victim in Jesus' mind was a Jew. The two religious officials came upon the man and *"passed by on the other side"*. On the contrary, against all expectations, the Samaritan who saw the man was moved with compassion. He then did all that it took to nurse the wounded man and brought him to an inn before proceeding to attend to his personal affairs. He pledged to the innkeeper to cover all expenses incurred in attending to the victim upon his return.

In the story, all hostility was set aside. The compassion of the Samaritan led him to undertake all necessary action because the Jewish victim was in need of help and care. The story goes beyond the concept of neighbour in the "Law" and applies it to anyone in need. That is clear. But Jesus' question to the lawyer brought in another dimension: *"Which one of these three, do you think, proved himself a neighbour to the man who fell into the brigands' hands?"* He amended the lawyer's question, *"Who is my neighbour?"* to *"Who proves himself a neighbour?"* In effect, it amounts to: how am I to be neighbour to others?

The lawyer responded: *"The one who took pity on him."* Why did he not say: "the Samaritan"? Perhaps, because he was ashamed or felt uneasy to implicate his religious officials. But more importantly, because Jesus' concept of "neighbour" transcended all racial and religious boundaries to reach the fundamental level of the human person. It involved initiative and action flowing from a heart of compassion. Such a concept has universal application. Ultimately, then, a true neighbour is one who loves and is ever ready to serve. It is in doing so that a person manifests his/her love for God. Thus, Jesus told the lawyer: *"Go and do likewise."* Jesus took the lawyer back to the two greatest commandments of the Law which he had rattled off in his effort to disconcert Jesus. Putting them into practice was the way to inherit eternal life.

In the context of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of heaven, inheriting eternal life means entering it. To do that, one needs to be a true neighbour to all, especially those in need. In the final analysis, it calls for good and caring attitude towards others, much in the same way as towards oneself.

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Genesis 18:1-10; Colossians 1:24-28; Luke 10:38-42

Life on earth is flooded with all kinds of cares and concerns and can be disrupted by them. To keep life in reasonable control, many have set their priorities with a view of handling these cares and concerns with a certain degree of success.

In His visit to Mary and Martha which today's Gospel narrates, Jesus singled out just one concern that really mattered. He pointed out to Martha, *"You worry and fret about so many things, and yet few are needed, indeed only one. It is Mary who has chosen the better part."* What was that *"better part"*, in fact, the *"only one"* needed?

From the story itself, the *"better part"* Mary had chosen was to *"sit down at the Lord's feet and listen to Him speaking."* Humanly speaking, that choice made a lot of sense. For Jesus visited the two sisters to relax and relate with them, and enjoy their company. Martha was concerned about *"serving"* and annoyed because her sister had left her to do all that by herself. In all probability, the serving meant cooking a meal for Jesus. While this would be a sign of warm hospitality, as the first reading narrates about Abraham serving his three unfamiliar visitors, it would take Martha away from Jesus' company. Jesus did not say Martha's concern was wrong; He affirmed that Mary had chosen the *"better part"*. Being with Jesus and listening to Him allowed engaging in a conversation with Him, which He had primarily come for.

But the *"better part"* had a deeper significance. For Mary *"sat down at Jesus' feet"* and *"listened"* to Him. This gesture of hers indicated a student learning from a teacher. Mary was now ready to *"listen"* to Jesus and learn from Him. For sure, Jesus taught only things that mattered in life. In contrast to what Martha was doing - serving material food - Jesus was offering the food for life, the word of God.

Martha's worries were about material food and therefore earthly concerns. Notwithstanding her good intention of serving Jesus a meal, she failed to grasp the *"better part"* in at least two senses. Firstly, by busying herself with *"serving"*, she betrayed her thinking that she could satisfy Jesus' need with her efforts. She was missing the point that in fact, she was the one in need and Jesus had come to satisfy it. She must make room for the Lord to do that. Secondly, she let her material concerns take away her opportunity to receive spiritual food. Yet, the

latter was far more important; it was the *“better part”* which her sister had chosen.

Jesus’ visit to the two sisters takes on another significance when it is read together with the preceding episode: His encounter with a lawyer who asked Him a poignant question, *“Who is my neighbour?”* Through the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus led the lawyer to see that he had asked a wrong question; he should have asked how he could be neighbour to all, especially those in need. In the light of Jesus’ correction of the lawyer, His visit to Mary and Martha reflected His role of being a good neighbour to them. He visited them to meet their very important and fundamental need for the word of God.

This further significance of Jesus’ visit to the two sisters unravels the full meaning of the *“better part”* which Martha had chosen. Sitting down at Jesus’ feet and listening to Him meant learning to imitate Jesus in life: how to be neighbour to others. In the larger context of His journey to Jerusalem (in which the Gospels over the past few Sundays are set), Jesus could now be seen as forming Mary and Martha much as what He was doing for His disciples. The entire formation revolved around His passion and death in Jerusalem followed by His resurrection. But its focus was on eternal life.

Eternal life was so important that Jesus was prepared to lay down His life to achieve it for all. Prior to His death in Jerusalem, He sent His disciples out to different towns and villages to proclaim this salvation. Indeed, eternal life was the greatest and only need that mattered for all fallen humankind. Jesus had come to fulfil it and offer it to one and all. In this, He was neighbour *par excellence* to one and all, to the point of becoming the Saviour of the world.

Everyone would have to make a personal decision to accept Jesus’ offer of eternal life. In the story of today’s Gospel, Mary decided to *“sit down at Jesus’ feet and listen to Him speaking”* the word of life. That was her acceptance of Jesus’ offer. Martha, however, was still too concerned about earthly needs to fully realize that that was the *“better part”*. What about me – what do I think and what is my choice?

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Genesis 18:20-32; Colossians 2:12-24; Luke 11:1-13

The general trend when praying is to make requests of God. Does He not know what we need? If so, do we need to ask? Do we really need to pray?

Prayer, in essence, goes much deeper than asking God for one's needs. In a nutshell, prayer has to do with relationship. For this reason, as today's Gospel records, Jesus Himself *"was in a certain place praying"*. In that prayer of His, He was surely focusing on His Father and thus His relationship with Him. Inspired by His example, one of His disciples requested, *"Lord, teach us to pray."* Somehow, this disciple felt the need to pray as well.

Jesus taught His disciples the "Lord's prayer". It consists of two interdependent parts. The opening address to God belongs to the essence of prayer which is a conversation with Him. The specific title *"Father"* for God in this opening address is an acknowledgement that we are His children. This defines the "Lord's prayer" as sustaining a children-Father relationship. If Jesus highlighted this relationship, it could be safely assumed that in His own prayer He must Himself have focused on His own relationship with His Father.

The relationship conveyed by *"Father"* sets a bearing on all the petitions in the "Lord's prayer". They cover various aspects of relationship: with God in the first part and with His children in the second. Neither of these parts can do without the other. For, addressing God as Father means acknowledging one another as His children. As in a family, relationship with parents flows into relationship among siblings. Only then will the family stand.

The relationship with the Father in the first part of the prayer is articulated in two petitions which reflect two aspects. The first petition adopts an ancient feature of Jewish prayer: *"May Your name be held holy."* It professes the uniqueness of God. "Name" stands for the person bearing it; so *"Your name"* simply means *"You (Father)"*. The word *"holy"* in the Jewish Scriptures denotes a separation. Used of God, it conveys His separation, His being apart, from all created things, and therefore His absolute uniqueness. The grammatically passive form conveying the petition (*"may be held holy"*) places its fulfillment on the shoulders of the child(ren) who pray(s). In other words, they are to uphold God's absolute uniqueness in every way, including now His position as Father. They can do this only by genuinely relating to Him as children to Father.

The second petition, *“Your kingdom come,”* draws attention to the rule of God which is none other than His will. It expresses a desire for God’s will to be done. Here again, the responsibility falls on the children; for they are the ones to do the will of God the Father. The two aspects are in fact tied to each other: God’s children will genuinely uphold His unique position as Father only when they are faithful to His will.

However, there is another level of significance that the word *“kingdom”* takes on when viewed in the light of the kingdom of God that the Gospel readings of the previous several Sundays proclaim. It has to do with eternal life which is in essence a share in God’s own life. Clearly, this touches the heart of the relationship with God: to be a child of God is to share in His life.

Relationship with God the Father, to be authentic, must include that with all His children as in family. The second part of the *“Lord’s prayer”* brings this to the fore through its use of the first person pronoun in its plural form: *“we”*, *“us”* and *“our”*. While this literary feature indicates the prayer for community use, it also makes room for its use by an individual. At both levels, relationship among God’s children is upheld. Thus, when an individual person prays the *“Lord’s prayer”*, (s)he does so as a child of God’s family in relationship with the other children.

The petitions in the second part of the prayer bear in mind this family relationship. The prayer for *“our daily bread”* is for God to meet the daily needs of everyone in His family. The petition for God’s forgiveness of sins is tied to one’s forgiveness of one’s *“debtors”*. In effect, it means that restoration by God of a broken relationship with Him calls for the children’s reconciliation with one another. The final petition, *“Do not put us to the test”*, expresses the faith that God is in control of all events. It amounts to asking God to keep His children in faithful relationship with Him and with one another. Vis-à-vis the first part of the prayer, it amounts to asking God to enable His children to make *“His name holy”* and make *“His kingdom come”* through their good relationship with one another.

Jesus prayed because prayer was a necessity for Him. It was part of His unfailing relationship with His Father. That sustained His mission. Prayer is also a basic necessity for us as God has made us His children. We pray primarily to sustain our relationship with God throughout our earthly lives in the hope of enjoying it fully in His kingdom in heaven.

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ecclesiasticus 1:2; 2:21-23; Colossians 3:1-5,9-11; Luke 12:13-21

“Vanity of vanities. All is vanity!” The preacher in the first reading makes this poignant observation of life. A person seems to be born into the world for a life of hard work. But this life will eventually end in death and all the hard work will end in emptiness which the preacher calls “vanity”.

This proclamation is true of a life lived without God. Such a life is usually self-centred. The parable Jesus gives in today’s Gospel underscores the vanity of this kind of life. The farmer who has had a good harvest from his land talks to himself: *“My soul, you have plenty of good things laid by for many years to come; eat, drink, have a good time.”*

By all counts, from a solely human point of view, this farmer is totally successful. For sure, he has worked hard and done the right things. This is why he has reaped a rich harvest. With this abundant yield, he has to embark on another plan and seems once again to plan well: build bigger barns to store the rich harvest. In this way he is ensuring himself a secure and pleasurable future.

But for all that right planning of his, the farmer is guilty of a serious failure: he fails to acknowledge that his rich harvest was due to the conducive climate that allowed the crops to grow well. The right climatic conditions came from God. From this standpoint, his sustenance and therefore his entire life depend on God. In fact, his life is a gift from God and his sustenance a blessing from Him. A total disregard for God leads him to see his success as his own achievement and take it all for himself. It does not cross his mind to share that blessing with others – not even his family members, much less his friends and neighbours, or the poor and needy.

God comes to confront the farmer. He calls him *“Fool!”* because he disregards God and those around him. He is a fool because he does not factor death in his planning. Death comes his way when God confronts him: *“This very night the demand will be made for your soul; and this hoard of yours whose will it be then?”* Indeed, life and death are in God’s hands. No plan, however good, can ensure a lasting security if it disregards God. Jesus affirms this in His conclusion to the parable, *“So it is when a man stores up treasure for himself in place of making himself rich in the sight of God.”*

Making oneself *“rich in the sight of God”* means first of all acknowledging that He is the master of one’s life and source of everything one needs for subsistence, and therefore of all blessings. On this score, account must be taken of God in all decisions in life. Dependence on God and gratitude to Him for His blessings must undergird *“being rich in His sight”*.

Secondly, gratitude to God finds genuine expression in sharing His blessings with others. This means thinking of the welfare of neighbours, especially the poor and the needy. Indeed, anyone who is grateful to God for His blessings will share them with others. Such a person is undoubtedly making himself/herself *“rich in the sight of God”*.

A point of central importance about being made *“rich in the sight of God”* is what the second reading from Paul’s letter to the Colossians calls, *“a life hidden with Christ in God”*. When Christ is revealed at the end of time, everyone who lives this hidden life with Him will be revealed in all their glory with Him. For *“Christ is everything and He is in everything”*.

No life lived for God and for neighbour is vanity. On the contrary, it leads to eternal life in Christ in the kingdom of heaven. Indeed, the kingdom of heaven is the goal of our life on earth. At the moment of death, a person leaves this world; but Christ comes to lead him/her into the kingdom of heaven. But we do not have to wait until death to experience life in the kingdom; we can experience it on earth if we live our *“life hidden with Christ in God”* by loving God and neighbour.

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Wisdom 18:6-9; Hebrews 11:1-2,8-19; Luke 12:32-48

Experience bears testimony to the truth of Christ's statement in today's Gospel: *"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."* For treasure is what one's heart values most.

Generally, one's treasure is earthly. But earthly treasures can never be permanent, because they will perish and in any case, because their owners will lose possession of them at death. There is only one lasting treasure. Jesus identifies it in the Gospel: the kingdom. It comes from the Father: *"It has pleased the Father to give you the kingdom"*. The kingdom is indeed God's gift to us. Is this statement from Jesus true? Of course, it is!

But we need to believe it because we do not see it with our physical eyes. We need to have faith to experience it. Faith is what today's second reading (taken from the Letter to the Hebrews) underscores. The patriarchs of old, namely, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, showed profound faith in God and obtained great treasures from the Lord. Abraham and his wife, Sarah, received the great gift of a son, Isaac, in their old age. In addition, they possessed the land God promised to give the patriarch and his descendants from Isaac.

Faith calls for faithfulness, especially to God's will. The second reading also highlights Abraham's faithfulness to God flowing from his life of faith in Him. It recalls Abraham's response to God's call for him to depart for the country He promised to give him for an inheritance. The patriarch manifested striking faithfulness when he obeyed God's demand to sacrifice Isaac, the son of his old age. For his faith and faithfulness, Isaac was restored intact to Abraham.

The second reading sees Isaac's restoration as his resurrection to life. In praising Abraham for his obedience, it says: *"He was confident that God had the power even to raise the dead; and so, figuratively speaking, he was given back Isaac from the dead."* In this wonderful story of Abraham's faith and faithfulness, Isaac prefigured Christ – the only Son of God the Father whose life we sinners demanded to be sacrificed. Unlike Isaac, Christ was sacrificed, but He rose from the dead.

With His death and resurrection, Christ opened the doors of the kingdom of God to all of us and offered us eternal life in it. We now have to ask ourselves: Do we believe this? Do we take this eternal life in the kingdom as our treasure? Do we

live our lives on earth for this treasure in heaven? In short, does our faith lead us to live a life of faithfulness to God's offer and will?

Even if all our answers are positive, one question that may still pop up in our minds is: when will we enter the kingdom and enjoy the eternal life awaiting us there? Jesus gives us the answer in today's Gospel: at the coming of the Son of Man. But we may ask further: Didn't He come already? Yes, He did, more than 2000 years ago. But He will come again at the end of time; and before that, He will come at the end of our lives on earth.

When will that be? Again, His answer is clear: *"The Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."* No one knows and no one can even guess when. So, what should we do then? Well, always be prepared for it; Jesus teaches us: *"See that you are dressed for action and have your lamps lit... Happy those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes."*

Hearing this response from Jesus, Peter asked Him: *"Lord, do you mean this parable for us, or for everyone?"* Peter's question seemed to betray a certain attitude of complacency. He felt he and his companions were doing well since they were Jesus' disciples and might well be considered to be ready for His coming.

Jesus did not give Peter a straight answer. Instead, He gave another parable that carried the same message as the first one. For the lesson it offers is: *"Happy that servant if his master's arrival finds him at this employment."* It is a call to be always prepared for the master's return by being faithful to one's duties.

What is the significance of all this for all of us? For sure, none of us should be complacent or take things for granted. We are called to believe in the kingdom of heaven. We must take it as our treasure and set our hearts on it. This means, we must do whatever it takes to enter it: be detached from earthly possessions and give alms. In this way, when Jesus comes to lead us into the kingdom, we will be ever ready for it.

TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 38:4-6,8-10; Hebrews 12:1-4; Luke 12:49-53

In today's Gospel, Jesus seems to proclaim that He has come to bring violence and division to the world, including the family. His two words, "fire" and "division", deepen the impression and spring a frightening surprise.

Drawing on the Gospel of Luke, from which today's Gospel passage is taken, a fundamental point comes to the fore. In the infancy narrative, Zechariah, at the birth of his son John the Baptist, proclaimed Jesus "the rising Sun" coming to "guide our feet into the way of peace" (cf. Lk. 1:79). When the birth of Jesus was announced to shepherds watching their flocks at night, a heavenly host praised God singing: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to men who enjoy His favour" (cf. Lk. 2:14). Jesus' pronouncement of "fire" and "division", fortified by His denial of His mission as one of "peace", starkly contradicts this double declaration. It also contradicts what the Christian faith upholds about the salvation which Jesus Christ the Saviour was sent to bring to the world: *shalom*, which is commonly translated as "peace" and denotes the total well-being of a person.

For sure, the Christian faith cannot accept such a fundamental contradiction. On top of that, Jesus Himself cannot be self-contradictory. His words in today's Gospel must have a meaning beyond what they convey at the surface level. The four keywords, "fire", "baptism", "peace" and "division", beg a brief exploration to unwrap their significance and show that Jesus is not self-contradictory.

This brief exploration must again go back to the infancy narrative in Luke's Gospel, to the old prophet Simeon's encounter with the infant Jesus when His parents presented Him in the Temple. While prompted by the Spirit Simeon came to know that with this encounter his time had come "to go in peace" (Lk. 2:29), he also prophesied that the child was "designed for the fall and the rising of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is rejected" (Lk. 2:34). "Fall and rising" were seen in terms of "rejection" and pointed to "division". In effect, Simeon prophesied that Jesus would be accepted by some and rejected by others. For sure, He had come to bring "peace" in the sense of salvation, as Simeon himself had been led by the Spirit to accept. But division would set in, between those accepting it and those rejecting it.

The division would be as radical as the acceptance or rejection of Jesus, so much so that it could even affect family relationships in a household. Jesus pointed

this out. Indeed, acceptance of Jesus as Saviour is a fundamental life decision; it must transform one's life, as the second reading calls for: *"Let us not lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection."* Jesus did this by *"enduring the cross"* and *"now taking His place at the right of God's throne"*.

The second keyword, *"baptism"*, in Jesus' declaration refers to His death on the cross. He was condemned to it because He was totally committed to bringing *"shalom"*, salvation, to the whole world and there were people who were adamantly rejecting it. Jesus' total commitment made no room for compromise even if that meant violent death. Similarly, those who choose to follow Jesus must, in the words of the second reading, *"keep fighting to the point of death"*.

It is not surprising that those rejecting Jesus will oppose and even inflict violence on His disciples. Jesus' judgement on the former will come, not in the lifetime of His disciples, but on the last day. In this regard, the first keyword, *"fire"*, sheds a significant light. It harks back to John the Baptist's declaration about Jesus: *"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fan is in His hand to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn, but the chaff He will burn in a fire that will never go out"* (Lk. 3:16-17).

Two meanings of the keyword, *"fire"*, emerge from John's declaration. The first has to do with the Holy Spirit and the second with Jesus' judgement on the last day. For sure, these two meanings are intrinsically linked. Those who choose to follow Jesus in a radical way receive His baptism with the Holy Spirit. They are radically transformed by the Holy Spirit into faithful disciples of Jesus. Many of them will encounter strong and violent opposition from those rejecting Jesus, often throughout their lives on earth. But on the last day, that is, at His second coming, Jesus will judge all and this is the *"fire"* *"that will burn the chaff"*. This judgement on the last day will be the definitive separation that seals the radical *"division"* on earth between Jesus' faithful disciples and His hardcore enemies.

Far from contradicting Jesus' mission of peace, today's Gospel reiterates His achievement of it through His baptism, that is, His death on the cross. The reference to division within a household serves to highlight the radicality of this salvation won by Jesus. Accepting it is a radical decision and calls for following Jesus *"to the point of death"*. For that following leads to the joy of His kingdom.

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 66:18-21; Hebrews 12:5-7,11-13; Luke 13:22-30

The possibility of being shut out of God's kingdom is frightening and at the same time faith threatening.

Today's Gospel addresses the issue through the question someone posed to Jesus: *"Sir, will there be only a few saved?"* Clearly, the question concerns salvation. The point is relevant but restricting it to the number of people saved seems somewhat strange. To grasp its significance, it is helpful to note the opening statement which provides the context for the question: *"Through towns and villages Jesus went teaching, making His way to Jerusalem."*

This opening statement recalls Lk. 9:51: *"Now as the time drew near for Him to be taken up to heaven, He resolutely took the road for Jerusalem"* (cf. Gospel of 13th Sunday). In Jerusalem, Jesus would return to His Father. That return would mark His completion of the mission that the Father had given Him. That mission was to bring salvation to all fallen humankind, that is, to open the kingdom to them. He would do this by His death on the cross followed by His resurrection.

Jesus took the opportunity of His way to Jerusalem to teach His disciples about the kingdom and the way to enter it. The Gospels over the last several Sundays presented important points of His teachings. He underscored the kingdom as the goal of life on earth. Entering it would surpass any worldly success as a reason to rejoice (cf. Lk. 10:17-20: Gospel of 14th Sunday).

The way to the kingdom, however, was the way of the cross. Jesus exhorted His disciples: *"Take up your cross and follow Me."* (Cf. Lk. 9:18-24: Gospel of 12th Sunday). This call by Jesus made one wonder how many people would respond to Him. Thus, the question in today's Gospel. Jesus did not answer it, but called for efforts to *"enter by the narrow door."* He then clarified, *"Many will try to enter and will not succeed."* The *"narrow door"* reaffirmed the *"cross"* He asked His disciples to carry to follow Him into the kingdom.

In His earlier teachings *"on His way to Jerusalem"*, Jesus had singled out important aspects of the cross and therefore of discipleship. On the top of the list is love underscored by the parable of the good Samaritan (cf. Lk. 10:25-37: Gospel of 15th Sunday). In love, the question is not, *"Who is my neighbour?"*, but *"How am I to be a true neighbour?"* In that parable, the priest and the Levite who came upon a robbed and wounded fellow Jew passed him by *"on the other*

side". A Samaritan, considered a traditional enemy of the Jews, did all it took to nurse the victim of armed robbery.

These contradictory responses in the parable undergird Jesus' metaphorical statement: *"The master of the house has locked the door."* The ones locked out call him to open the door and claim, *"We once ate and drank in your company; you taught in our streets."* Indeed, the priest and the Levite in the parable are likely candidates to make such claims. For, priests and Levites, together with the scribes and Pharisees, were often found at meals to which Jesus had been invited. They had been keenly following His teachings. But their primary intention was to find fault with Him. Jesus hit out at their attitude, including that of imposing burden on people which they would not lift a finger to offload. Over and above that, they were responsible for the division Jesus, in last Sunday's Gospel, saw among people, even in the same household.

Locked out of *"the kingdom of God"*, these Jewish leaders and officials would *"weep and grind their teeth"*, in total regret and despair, as they saw in it *"Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets" "and men from east and west, from north and south"*. While it would be within their expectation to see their patriarchs and prophets in the kingdom, the sight of Gentiles and even their enemies, including Samaritans, there would be a great shock to them.

Love is an indispensable criterion for entry into the kingdom. Love disregards skin and colour, race and religion, class and status. Love sees in every person the image of God and seeks to be a true neighbour to him or her. In a world where ethnic and religious hostilities, financial and class distinctions dominate, the practice of love can be misconstrued, as proselytization or patronization, for example. Under such an unhealthy climate, it is resented and can even draw persecution. This is one sense of *"the narrow door"* of the kingdom. Entering through it requires a readiness to *"carry the cross"* to follow Jesus to Jerusalem.

God's salvation is for all, both Jews and Gentiles. He wants all to enter His kingdom. It is so important that He sent His Son Jesus to lay down His life for all. To this end, Jesus resolutely set His mind to go to Jerusalem. Despite His radical undertaking to achieve salvation, every person is free to accept or reject it. Inclusion in or exclusion from the kingdom depends on the person's decision, while God's will is all-inclusive.

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ecclesiasticus 3:17-29,28-29; Hebrews 12:18-19,22-24; Luke 14:7,2-14

Honour and public recognition are human cravings. They normally determine seating arrangements in gatherings in different spheres and at different levels.

Jesus' time was no exception. Leaders, and in particular, the scribes and Pharisees, were pretty insistent on seating arrangements, like at banquets, for example. Over and above that, there was the general tendency for the highest ranking to arrive last for a function. Jesus, at one meal a leading Pharisee invited Him to, noticed both these phenomena. He then took the opportunity of what He saw to drive home an important attitude before God in His heavenly banquet.

Before considering Jesus' teaching, two points are worthy of note: the meal was hosted on "*a sabbath day*"; and: "*they watched Him closely.*" In this statement, "*they*" in all probability refers to the scribes and Pharisees, expected guests of the leading Pharisee. In practically all cases in the Gospels, where scribes and Pharisees were found in the company of Jesus on a sabbath day, they sought to confront Him. In our Gospel reading, the opening statement alludes to this intention of theirs. Immediately following the statement is the story of Jesus healing a man with dropsy. Very likely, the scribes and Pharisees had deliberately brought in the man to challenge Jesus. He broke free of their trap and manifested His love for the sick man by healing him. Today's Gospel reading skips the story to move on to Jesus' teaching on the importance of reaching out to the poor and disabled. For such conduct, humility is a prerequisite.

While Jesus' opponents were watching Him closely to find fault with Him, He too was observing how they were "*picking the places of honour*" at the meal. That led Him to give a parable to cross home to all guests the importance of the virtue of humility: "*For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the man who humbles himself will be exalted.*" The parable was about how a guest taking a seat of honour at a wedding feast. He ran the risk of being required, to his embarrassment, to vacate his seat for "*a more distinguished person*". The lesson from the parable was for a guest to take "*the lowest place*" so that the host might "*move him/her higher*" in public view.

The lesson may give rise to a possible act of hypocrisy. A guest could display false humility in the hope of being honoured in public. What an honour that would indeed be! But such hypocrisy was far from Jesus' mind. For He was not talking about an earthly wedding feast, but rather the eschatological banquet – the

heavenly feast. The heavenly Father is the host. He cannot be deceived. He exalts the humble and humbles the self-exalted, as Mary's "*Magnificat*" proclaims.

In the second part of the Gospel, Jesus addressed His host, the leading Pharisee. He exhorted the host not to seek any return for his invitation and to this end, to "*invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind*". Their inability to repay the host would mean he was "*fortunate*". The word "*fortunate*" translates the Greek word: *makarios*. This Greek word begins every beatitude in Lk. 6:20-23. It expresses the happiness that comes from possessing the kingdom of God, as affirmed in the first and the last beatitudes. In the parable of the wedding feast that immediately follows Jesus' address to the host, the four groups of marginalised and disabled people are featured as guests. As the wedding feast signifies the heavenly banquet, they are God's guests.

This depiction is in line with the Old Testament concept of God favouring especially the poor and the needy, often represented by widows and orphans. While society looks down on them, God has a soft spot for them. Jesus' intention in his address to His host was to draw him to have regard and respect for those whom society looked down upon because of their special place in God's heart. Treating them with respect and looking after their needs were tantamount to imitating God's humility in reaching out to them to make them guests of His banquet in heaven. For this, the host would be pleasing to God and granted entry into His kingdom, "*when the righteous rise again*", that is, on the last day. There, he would surely be *makarios*, that is, blessed.

The Gospel reading today presents genuine humility as greatness in God's eyes. Such humility treats everybody, including, or especially, the poor, the disabled and the marginalized, with great respect. It has no place for hypocrisy. Rather than falsely denying one's talents, it gratefully acknowledges them as God's gifts. In this gratitude, the person is drawn to use his/her talents to serve others, especially the poor and the needy. In this way, he/she strives to imitate God and is exalted by Him.

Exaltation by God is the highest honour. It eliminates any need or desire for honour and public recognition by humankind. Social positions do not matter at all anymore, for respect for others characterizes the exalted person's interior attitude and love marks his/her way of life.

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 9:13-18; Philemon 9-10,12-17; Luke 14:25-33

Strategic planning is very much a part and parcel of life. Indeed, from the womb to the tomb, the lives of many people have been planned. Many parents plan the future of their children already from infancy.

Planning involves setting a target or a goal and working out the means to achieve it. A lot of things are foreseeable but many are unforeseeable. These latter are often factored in the calculation of one's ability to achieve the goal, with rough estimates as well as with risks.

The two illustrations Jesus gives in today's Gospel are about the need for strategic planning – the first involves the building of a tower and the second defence in war. Through these parables, He seeks to teach about following Him into the kingdom of heaven. One needs to calculate the cost of this discipleship before undertaking it, for it involves radical decisions. Jesus spells out three such decisions.

The first calls for *“hating one's father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, and indeed one's own life”*. Isn't this a stark contradiction to Jesus' teaching about loving one's neighbour as oneself? Also, to the fourth commandment: *“Honour your father and mother”*?

To understand the meaning of Jesus' demand in today's Gospel, we need to take into account the relative sense of the word *“hate”*. In relation to God, it means loving family members less than God. Love of God relativizes as well as gives value to all human relationships, including those in the family. For sure, this is in line with the first commandment: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”* And when the disciple focuses total attention on God the Father and loves Him wholeheartedly, God leads him/her to also love his/her neighbour as himself/herself. This means, loving especially one's family members and loving oneself as well, but placing it lower than God.

The second radical decision involves *“carrying one's cross”*. The cross refers to suffering and everyone wishing to be a disciple must expect it because Jesus Himself was on His way to Jerusalem to be put to death on the cross. The cross could come from persecution by Jesus' opponents and enemies. But it would surely involve sacrifices the disciple would have to make in life to follow Jesus. The sacrifices constitute the cross.

The third decision has to do with “*giving up all possessions*”. Oftentimes, possessions are placed as a higher priority than relationship with people, including dear ones. For, they constitute a person’s treasure and that is where his/her heart is. To part with this treasure calls for a radical sacrifice. It brings suffering and is thus also a cross a disciple is required to carry.

Indeed, discipleship in the sense of following Jesus and the cross are intrinsically tied at least on two grounds. Firstly, Jesus Himself was crucified. Secondly, the decision to follow Him calls for sacrifices. But the end makes the cross worth carrying. For it is eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. Eternal life is so precious and important that God too was prepared to sacrifice Jesus His Son for all of us. In turn, Jesus readily carried His cross and laid down His life on it that we might have eternal life.

But because the cross brings sufferings, Jesus in today’s Gospel stresses the need to plan adequately in order to follow Him to the end, that is, to His kingdom. Half-hearted commitment will not work. Full commitment is a radical decision that submits all values of life to the supreme value of life in the kingdom. In the final analysis, discipleship is a choice for God in Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, with whom one desires a faithful relationship.

While that relationship could be and is enjoyed on earth, it is definitively sealed in the kingdom. Indeed, we human beings can plan from the cradle to the grave; but beyond the grave, we need God to plan for us. In His love, God has planned a dwelling place for us in His kingdom, where we will live in His presence forever. A radical decision to follow Jesus has this dwelling place for its destination. A committed disciple will do what it takes to reach this destination, including carrying his/her cross.

In effect, Christian discipleship shapes the life of a person and directs it to the kingdom. It calls for radical choices for Christ and this is bound to the cross.

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Exodus 32:7-11,13-14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-32

Religion is sometimes seen as a curbing of one's freedom. Does breaking loose from God give us true freedom and security? Today's liturgy of the word gives us elements for an answer.

The first reading taken from the Book of Exodus narrates one incident in which the people of Israel tried to break loose from YHWH their covenant God. They got Aaron, Moses' elder brother, to mould for them a golden calf and transferred to it an exclusively divine title: "*Your God who brought you from the land of Egypt*". Indeed, YHWH God had liberated His people from Egyptian slavery through Moses. Tired of life in the wilderness under God's guidance and providence, they sought to break free from His control. Worshipping the golden calf, a product of their own hands, amounted to being gods unto themselves, and ultimately, to being free to live their lives as they wished.

If YHWH God had not alerted Moses to their apostasy, the prophet would not have interceded for His forgiveness. As a result, the people would have experienced what the prodigal son in today's Gospel is depicted to suffer after he has broken loose from his father's guidance and providence. Tired of living what he thinks is a restricted life, the young and brash son seeks what he perceives to be a good life out there. As if wishing his father dead, he demands a share of his inheritance.

The father's love for the prodigal son borders on foolishness by human reckoning. He prematurely signs off to his pleasure-seeking son his share of his inheritance. By doing that, he can be construed to be endorsing his selfish and self-centred boy's treatment of him as dead, for only in death does a person's last will take effect. On top of that, he must have been well aware that his immature son will squander his wealth.

True enough, the prodigal boy spends all his wealth "*on a life of debauchery*". Left with nothing, he is forced to seek employment and takes up one that breaches his Jewish dignity: to look after pigs. He cannot even feed on the fodder he serves to the unclean animals. He has hit rock bottom in life which ultimately means at death's doorstep. It is only then that he comes to his senses and decides to return to his father.

At the sight of his return from afar, his father displays another bout of foolishness. To be sure, his father has been anxiously waiting for his return. As if this was not foolish enough, he unashamedly displays rash and undignified gestures: he runs to the boy and puts on him *“the best robe, a ring and sandals”*. These symbolic gestures express restoration of sonship to the boy. He had virtually wished his father dead. Isn't it foolishness to accept him back into the family? In addition, he throws a sumptuous banquet, with the *“fatted calf”* for its main course. Will all these overboard gestures not lead the returning rascal to his antics?

For sure, such thoughts are playing in the elder son's mind. He expresses them in no uncertain terms to his father as well as his utter displeasure with him. He passes a very strong judgment on him: for all his hard and faithful work for him, he has *“never”* received from his father even *“so much as a kid to celebrate with his friends”*. What injustice indeed!

Despite all these negative impressions, the father's overboard welcome of the returning prodigal son has its own wisdom. For it springs from his heart of love. In that love, he views the younger son's return differently from the elder son: *“he was dead and has come back to life.”* That life calls for a restoration of sonship and a grand celebration.

The parable of the prodigal son crosses an important message: only in the father's house is there true freedom because there, there is life. That is because the father loves and he loves to the point even of appearing to be foolish. In love he gives in to the demands of his irresponsible younger son. In love he lets his judgemental elder son condemn him. In his heart of love, both sons are still sons and continue to be free to enjoy his inheritance. In this way, they have fulness of life with full security.

The message relates well to the experience of the people of Israel in the first reading. With God's forgiveness, they continued to live in relationship with God and enjoyed His presence, protection and providence as they journeyed through the wilderness into the Promised Land. There, they grew as a people and became a sovereign nation with full freedom. The message is equally relevant for all of us, believers and children of God: remain with God and we have life to the full!

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Amos 8:4-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-8; Luke 16:1-13

Unscrupulous exploitation of people and manipulation of the economic system to get rich are commonplace not just today but also in the distant past. This mentality is the red thread running through today's first reading and Gospel passage.

The first reading carries the prophet Amos' condemnation of this mentality. Amos worked as a prophet eight centuries before Christ. In those days, those propelled by greed for money were only waiting for their "*feasts and sabbaths to be over*" so that they could do business. Feasts and sabbaths were days when work and therefore business were not allowed. And when businessmen traded, they cheated, by lowering the bushel and raising the shekel. In other words, they sought to make unjust profits by tampering with the scales and raising prices. As a result, while they became filthily rich, many people were forced into dire poverty, to the point that some had even to sell themselves just for a pair of sandals, that is, for basic needs. Through Amos God took these greedy and ruthless business people to task.

Did they listen to God? Apparently not, because the mentality of becoming rich at all cost, including the exploitation of the poor, persisted till the time of Christ, and even beyond. Faced with such a trend, Christ challenged His disciples to make a choice between money and God. He told them in no uncertain terms: "*You cannot be the slave both of God and of money.*" Those propelled by greed for money continued to exploit others for their own wealth and thus make money their god.

Jesus used a parable to illustrate His point: the parable of a shrewd steward. Realizing that he would be fired from his job on account of his dishonesty, the steward worked out a way to win friends who would welcome him to their homes once he had lost his job. He reduced the debts of all his master's debtors. The morality of the action of this man may be disturbing. Some scholars try to iron it out by suggesting that the amount by which the debt was reduced was actually the amount due to the steward as his commission.

But this particular point of morality was not the concern of Jesus in the parable. His primary concern is expressed in the statement in the parable: "*The master praised the dishonest steward for his astuteness.*" The steward's astuteness lay in his use of money, not people, to buy him welcome by his master's debtors the

moment he was sacked. He used money as his slave. That was the point that Jesus sought to underscore. And He followed that up with a call to them to “*use money, tainted as it is, to win friends who would welcome them into the tents of eternity.*” No one would ever think of eternity without acknowledging God; and no one who acknowledges God would not accept Him as master. So, the point of the parable lends weight to Jesus’ challenge to His disciples to use money as their slave in order to serve God their master. This challenge is to use money to meet the needs of fellowmen and in this way to serve God.

Money is needed to live in our world. By all means, let us earn in order to live. But we must bear in mind the purpose of life on earth. Our catechism teaches us that God created us to love and serve Him in this world and to be happy with Him forever in the next. This puts all priorities in perspective: earn money in order to live; and live in order to love and serve God; love and serve God in order to be happy with Him forever in heaven, “*the tents of eternity*”.

To be a slave of God is a way of life that includes “*winning friends who will welcome you into the tents of eternity*”. It clearly advises embracing neighbours as friends. This advice touches on the command of love – love of God and love of neighbour. Good relationship with God necessarily leads to friendship with all His children and coming to the aid of those in need.

Jesus’ teaching through the parable of the shrewd steward has thus to do with the purpose of life on earth: to ensure a place in God’s kingdom. To this end, we are to steer clear of exploiting people and manipulating systems for our selfish ends. On the contrary, we are called to use all our resources to love one another and help especially the needy. This amounts to serving God genuinely.

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Amos 6:1,4-7; 1 Timothy 6:11-16; Luke 16:19-31

Once, a very committed Catholic lady shared with me her wish that a deceased relative would come back to tell her what life was after death. That wish resonated with that of the rich man in the parable Jesus gives in today's Gospel.

In the parable, the rich man used to wear the finest and most expensive clothes and feast most sumptuously every day. He totally ignored Lazarus, the poor man, who sat at his gate, *"covered with sores and longing to fill himself with the scraps that fell from his table."* Though they lived opposite kinds of life on earth, their end was the same: death. Lazarus died of his sores and hunger. The rich man might have died of overeating and overindulgence. Death does not discriminate.

In their life after death, the situations of the two men were reversed. Lazarus was received into *"the bosom of Abraham"* – that is, the eternal bliss in heaven. The rich man suffered *"torment in Hades"* and *"agony in flames"* – so much so that he longed for even a drop of water to *"cool his tongue"*. That was the kind of suffering he received in hellfire. Not wanting his five brothers to land up in hell, he requested Abraham to send Lazarus to them to give them a warning.

What was Abraham's answer? *"If they will not listen either to Moses or to the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead."* Moses and the prophets spoke God's word to the people. The rich man himself had not listened to Moses and the prophets. If his brothers were like him, they would not heed Lazarus at all, even if he rose from the dead.

We Christians have the advantage of further assurance from Christ Himself. He taught about eternal life in the kingdom of heaven and promised to raise His faithful disciples to life on the last day. He Himself had indeed risen from the dead and appeared to His disciples. His apparitions are recorded in the Gospels. His resurrection was clear proof of the reality of eternal life in the kingdom.

In today's second reading, St. Paul expresses his faith in the risen Lord: *"Jesus Christ is immortal, the only Ruler of all, King of kings and Lord of lords."* He will come again not just at the end of time but at the end of the life of every person. His coming is to bring His faithful disciples to eternal life in His kingdom. Death is a transition from our lives on earth to eternal life in heaven.

Motivated by this faith of his, St. Paul gives this very strong exhortation: *“Fight the good fight of the faith and win for yourself the eternal life to which you were called when you made your profession.”* The profession here refers to baptism. The good fight of the faith is the struggle to be faithful to Christ in life.

The first and Gospel readings explain what the struggle on earth is. Every person is naturally attracted to good and luxurious life on earth. It is all right to enjoy life on earth provided one keeps God in focus and the poor in sight. Focusing on God inevitably leads to paying attention to neighbour, especially the poor and the needy. The bliss of Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom underscores the biblical concept of God having a soft spot for the poor and the needy.

But a luxurious life easily leads a person to look inwards and focus on the self. This naturally draws him/her away from God. He/she is not bothered about the poor and the needy. This was what happened in the time of Amos, as the first reading describes. The rich and opulent people were so self-indulgent that they *“did not care about the ruin of Joseph”* – that is, the destruction of their nation. As a result, they would be *“the first to be exiled”* – the first to be punished.

Today’s liturgy of the word drives home a very important message. Death is inevitable and does not discriminate. What happens after death? The parable Jesus gives in today’s Gospel gives us an inkling of the answer to this question. Depending on how we live our lives on earth, we will after death be either in *“bosom of Abraham”* – that is enjoy eternal life in heaven, or be cast into *“Hades”* – that is suffer in hell for all eternity.

How must we live our lives on earth? *“Fight the good fight of faith”*, St. Paul tells us. That means, be faithful to Jesus Christ who is our Saviour, our Ruler, our King, our Lord. He wants us to love one another as He has loved us – that is, to live in good relationship with one another, to share our lives with one another, to share our wealth with the poor and the needy. This is very clearly expressed in His commandment: *“Love one another as I have loved you”*; and Jesus loved us to the point of laying down His life for us on the cross so that we might live. He identified Himself with the poor and the needy in this very categorical statement of His: *“Whatever you do to the least of these brothers of mine, you do it unto Me.”* At the end of our lives on earth, we eagerly hope to hear Him say to us: *“Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world”* (Mt. 25:34).

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4; 2 Timothy 1:6-8,13-14; Luke 17:5-10

It is not uncommon to hear this statement, “God does not listen to my prayers.” Perhaps, we have at times also said the same thing.

The opening question in the first reading articulates the same discontentment: *“How long, Lord, am I to cry for help while You will not listen?”* In spite of this persistent cry, the situation remains the same: one of “outrage and violence, contention and discord.” God whom the discontented petitioner accuses of not answering his/her prayer, now gives a response. He says, *“See how he/she flags, he/she whose soul is not at rights; but the upright person will live by his/her faithfulness.”*

God’s response goes right to the heart of the petitioner’s problem: his/her wavering attitude and conduct. He/she needs to change his/her mindset and lifestyle to experience God’s answer to his/her prayer. God contrasts the petitioner’s unsteady behaviour with that of an upright person: *“The upright man/woman will live by his/her righteousness.”* God’s intention here is to lend weight to His call for a change of heart and for faithfulness in the petitioner.

Faithfulness is fidelity to one’s faith. It means being faithful to the God one believes in. God is almighty, all-powerful, all-loving and all-caring. Genuine faith in God does not question but embraces this reality about God. It does not demand God to work miracles to show His existence, power, love and care; on the contrary, it sees a miracle in every experience in life. In other words, genuine faith sees God present with His power, love and care, every single moment of life. In this view, prayer becomes an intimate conversation and relationship with God.

This vision of faith underlies Jesus’ bold declaration in today’s Gospel: *“Were your faith the size of a mustard seed you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”* Jesus makes this declaration in response to the apostles’ request: *“Increase our faith.”* They make this request after Jesus instructs His disciples, a larger group than the apostles, to take care not to lead the “little ones” astray through scandals (Lk. 17:1-3). He follows that up with a call to forgive a repeated offender (Lk. 17:4).

The apostles sense that Jesus is grooming them to lead His larger group of disciples. His call to the disciples must therefore feature in their leadership which is a ministry of faith. Thus, their request: *“Increase our faith.”* In His response, Jesus takes the word “increase” in the sense of the dynamic quality of

faith. His analogy of the mustard seed for faith recalls His parable where He observes that the smallest seed grows into the biggest shrub (cf. Lk. 13:18-19). Faith, however small it may be, can make the Christian community great. Here, it can move *“a mulberry tree”* into the sea. As leaders, the apostles are to have faith and let it empower their ministry and make the community of Jesus’ disciples grow.

Faith yields the certitude of God’s unfailing and unceasing presence with His power, love and care. It counts on this presence of God and leads to a trusting relationship with Him. His presence gives one the confidence to face whatever situation one is in and the power to weather it. In daily living, the believer’s relationship with God permeates his/her activities and responsibilities. He/she conforms every act to His will. This is fidelity to God. True faith in God translates into fidelity to Him in life.

This is the point Jesus means to drive home to His apostles in the second part of today’s Gospel. Anyone rooted in this faith-filled life will possess the same spirit as the faithful servants reflected in the concluding words of today’s Gospel, *“We are merely servants; we have done no more than our duty.”* Vis-à-vis faith in and fidelity to God, these words acknowledge the supreme authority of God. From this standpoint, ministry is deemed merely as a dutiful service to Him through His people.

Though addressed to apostles as distinct from disciples, Jesus’ teaching in today’s Gospel is offered to all of us as well. For, every one of us is entrusted with responsibilities and has therefore a ministry to exercise. To this end, God has gifted us with talents. Jesus is calling us today to be faith-filled and faithful in our life and ministry, like the righteous person in the first reading. In this way, our faith will be the power that transforms our life into a consistent and intimate relationship with God as well as a ministry to others.

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

2 Kings 5:14-17; 2 Timothy 2:8-13; Luke 17:11-19

“Thank you” is generally expressed for a gift received or a favour done. But when what is received or done is perceived as a right entitled to, its recipient may think it is not necessary to express it. The story of the cure of the ten lepers in today’s Gospel touches on these two types of mentality.

Of these ten lepers, the Gospel explicitly identifies one as a Samaritan and further affirms that he is a foreigner. He knows very well that as a foreigner, he has no right to a cure from Jesus, the Jewish Master; nor does he deserve it. He deeply appreciates his cure as a totally gratuitous gift from Jesus. The Gospel describes him bursting into joy and gratitude: *“he turns back praising God and throws himself at the feet of Jesus to thank Him.”* He not only thanks Jesus but he praises God. He acknowledges God’s hand at work behind Jesus’ act of healing him. His healing by Jesus has led him to God.

The explicit identification of the Samaritan leper implies that the other nine are Jews. After their cure, they do not bother to thank Jesus. Perhaps, they take it for granted that as a fellow Jew Jesus will help them. Or, they may even think that Jesus, for all the power that He is known to possess, is duty-bound to cure them and they have a right to expect this of Him. Such thinking has no place for gratitude.

Yet, the way the story evolves construes the attitude of the nine cured Jewish lepers as basically flawed. First of all, when Jesus enters the village, all of them call out to Him, *“Jesus! Master! Take pity on us.”* Their plea to Jesus depicts their situation as one to be pitied. Undoubtedly, leprosy is a pitiable condition of the body and requires its sufferers to be completely ostracised, that is, cut off from the community. There is even a thinking that it makes the leper unclean, not just physically but in all other respects as well. He is to be excluded from worship, implying that he is not worthy to come into God’s presence. No Rabbi or Jewish Master, is duty-bound to do anything for him.

Jesus breaks off from all this common attitude towards leprosy. When approached by the ten lepers, He cures them all. He confidently asks them to show themselves to the priests to certify that they are cured. When the Samaritan returns to thank Him, Jesus asks, *“Were not all ten made clean? The other nine, where are they?”* He is absolutely certain that all ten have been cured. His statement following his questions is revealing: *“It seems that no one has*

come back to give praise to God, except this foreigner.” Here, Jesus endorses the healed Samaritan leper’s act of praising God, as it attributes the cure to God. If the Jewish lepers think that they have a right to demand Jesus to have pity on them, they clearly fail to appreciate that the cure comes from God. Or even worse, they ignore God altogether. They should have known better than the Samaritan. Yet he alone returns to thank Jesus and praise God.

What is the consequence of this Samaritan’s heart of gratitude? Salvation. Jesus tells him, *“Stand up and go on your way. Your faith has saved you.”* In the Greek text of the story, Jesus says, *“Rise up,”* which is the same word for the resurrection. Coupled with the word *“save”*, Jesus’ words to the cured Samaritan leper amount to pronouncing salvation on him, the salvation Jesus will bring about through His death and resurrection. It is for this salvation that Jesus is resolutely making His way to Jerusalem, as Luke’s Gospel (9:51; 13:22) states. The Samaritan is restored to life not just physically but also spiritually. He will one day rise to eternal life.

The nine cured Jewish lepers miss out on this proclamation of salvation by Jesus. Nothing is said of their salvation. It is pointless to speculate what will happen to them. What is sure of them is their failure to appreciate the significance of what they have received, which is the lesson offered by the cured Samaritan leper: God’s hand is at work behind Jesus’ act of healing. They fail to acknowledge God’s gratuitous cure of them.

It is indeed important to realize that life and all that sustains it are precious gifts from God. For sure, everything is a free gift from God: all that one is and all that one has. No one deserves anything from God and He is indebted to no one. Life and all that sustains life are God’s gratuitous gifts. Everyone should be thankful to God for them.

Gratitude to God is a fundamental attitude needed to live one’s life for the right purpose: salvation. For, the gift of earthly life is oriented towards the gift of eternal life Jesus came to bring to all humankind. Gratitude opens one’s heart to the ultimate gift of eternal life. That gift constitutes salvation and is definitively given in the resurrection. Jesus’ declaration to the grateful Samaritan leper, *“Rise up; your faith has saved you,”* is uttered to all who have gratitude in their hearts. The question each one needs to ask is: Am I truly grateful to God for all that I am and have?

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Exodus 17:8-13; 2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:2; Luke 18:1-8

At times, God may appear to be not answering one's prayer. In such an experience, one may feel that one is just too little or insignificant to merit God's attention and may give up praying altogether.

Jesus in today's Gospel affirms the need to pray continually and never to lose heart. He gives a parable to drive home His point. The parable is about a widow who keeps pestering an unwilling judge until she gets him to do her justice against her enemy. The parable is usually interpreted to assure that God will answer the prayers of His chosen ones: if an unwilling judge grants the widow her annoying request, how much more will the loving God respond to a believer's prayer? While accepting this meaning of the parable, I would like to look at it from the perspective of the widow.

In the Old Testament, widows and orphans are listed among the powerless whose rights God makes it a point to protect (cf. Ex. 22:22; Dt. 10:18). God will therefore not hesitate to intervene in their favour (cf. Mal. 3:5). The widow in the parable is presumed to know this special privilege of hers before God. She must have prayed to God to manifest His favour for her. And so, though powerless, she confidently approaches and pesters the powerful but unwilling judge to do justice for her against her enemy. In the end, she gets what she wants, though the judge grants it to her not out of a sense of justice but out of a desire not to be "*worried to death*" by her annoying persistence.

The widow's attitude and conduct of course illustrate Jesus' point about praying continually and not losing heart. Prayer presupposes faith. In other words, it is only when there is faith that one is drawn to pray. In prayer, the believer enters into a dialogue with God and strikes a relationship with Him. In that dialogue, he/she at times petitions God for particular needs. In response, God desires to engage the petitioner to play his/her part to secure what he/she is praying for.

Going back to the parable, we see the widow playing her role. Armed with confidence that God favours her in a special way, she keeps on pestering the powerful and unwilling judge until he acts. She would have had to continue suffering the injustice done to her if she had remained passive. In that case, her prayers would have remained unanswered.

The first reading from the Book of Exodus narrates another case of how God involved petitioners to answer their own prayers. Moses prayed for his people to win a war against the Amalekites. To this end, the prophet kept his arms raised. In his tiredness, he had Aaron and Hur to support his arms. He was engaged not physically in battle but in prayer for God's continuous help. The army of his people played their part in the fighting. That was how God engaged Moses and the army to secure victory over the Amalekites.

It is not just the widow or Moses who is guaranteed God's protection. Everyone is given the same guarantee. For everyone is precious to God. None of us is too little or insignificant for Him not to pay attention to. For sure, He answers everyone's prayers. But in His response, He often wishes to engage us to achieve what we pray for. Indeed, we need to play our part.

Thus, if at times God does not seem to answer our prayers, one serious reason is our own inertia or passivity. We expect God to put all our requested favours on a silver platter before us without our doing anything. Inertia could be due to laziness, unwillingness to do the needful or giving in to a feeling of being powerless.

There is a need to change such a mindset. For example, in the case of a habitual drunkard, however hard he prays for deliverance from his sinful habit, he will not see results unless he is prepared to put in the necessary effort to kick off his bad habit. A refusal to change underlies sloth and reluctance. It also gives rise to this repeated excuse: "I want to give up my bad habit but I am powerless!" Worse still, the blame may ultimately be put on God: "I have been praying hard to get out of this habit, but God does not answer my prayer."

For sure, God will answer our prayers. Jesus affirms this in His rhetorical question: "*Now will not God see justice done to His chosen who cry to Him day and night even when He delays to help them?*" But persevering and active faith is needed to experience God answering our prayers. In other words, we need to believe that God is there for us when we pray. We also need to take the necessary steps to achieve what we pray for. When we do not get immediate results, we must not lose heart and give up. For, doing our part is a discipline that takes time to cultivate. We need faith to sustain our efforts. Above, all God's grace is always there to help us persevere in our efforts.

THIRTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ecclesiasticus 35:12-14,16-19; 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18; Luke 18:9-14

Pride and prejudice are generally interconnected. The proud think highly of themselves and look down on others, often with great prejudices.

The parable in today's Gospel addresses this issue of pride and prejudice. We are told Jesus gave it to *"some people who prided themselves on being virtuous and despised everyone else."* They reflected the attitude of the Pharisees. Thus, the parable figures a Pharisee in his self-pride and self-righteousness. It sets this negative attitude in great relief by contrasting it to a tax collector's humble acknowledgement of his sinfulness. The parable has both these men go to the Temple to pray at the same time.

The Pharisee thanks God that he is *"not grasping, unjust and adulterous"*. There is nothing wrong with this self-evaluation if it comes from a sincere acknowledgement of God's grace. But the Pharisee's uncalled-for self-contrast with *"the rest of mankind, particularly with this tax collector here"* betrays his self-pride and underscores his prejudice. He claims he is not like them and adds, *"I fast twice a week; I pay tithes on all I get."* He blatantly and sweepingly assumes that all the rest of mankind and the tax collector do not carry out these religious duties. That's outright prejudice to the core.

The Pharisee's *"Thank you, God"* as he begins his prayer is clearly and totally insincere. Far from acknowledging God as the source of his righteousness, he proudly trumpets his own achievement and takes this as his grounds for making prejudicial judgements on others. In effect, he may be putting himself on par with God who alone has the prerogative to judge.

Indeed, God the sole Judge takes over. In the parable, Jesus affirms this in His statement about the tax collector: *"This man, I tell you, went home at rights with God; the other did not."* To be at rights with God means receiving a favourable judgement from God. This judgement from God is clearly the opposite of that pronounced by the Pharisee. The great irony in the parable is that this self-appointed and self-assessed righteous judge finds himself unfavourably judged by God.

Jesus' concluding statement on the parable calls for humility. Flowing from humility is sincerity. These two virtues are very clearly reflected in the tax collector's prayer. He sincerely acknowledges that he is a sinner and so very humbly prays: *"God, be merciful to me, a sinner."*

From the parable Jesus gives in today's Gospel, two attitudes come to the fore as regards prayer: one to be avoided and the other to be adopted. A judgemental attitude arising from a proud sense of self-righteousness makes a mockery of prayer. For it betrays the pray-er's false self-esteem and perhaps even a tendency to play God. In this tendency, he/she does not need God and his/her prayer is reduced to an act of compliance with public expectation or a public show. It is clear that such an attitude is to be avoided at all cost.

The other attitude is to be adopted. It comprises humility and honesty. For sure, these are important dispositions for genuine prayer. We are humble when we very honestly admit the state we are in. In our prayers, we approach God as we truly are – in our weakness and sinfulness. It is only His judgment of us that matters. For He alone is the sole and true Judge. But above all that, He is our Father for we became His children at baptism.

As Father, God's judgement is tempered with or perhaps even bypassed by His love and mercy. The well-known parable of the Prodigal Son (cf. Lk. 15) lends support to this thought. The younger son's premature demand for his share of the father's property and squandering of it in loose living did not deter the father from unconditionally welcoming him home when he returned. That love of the father in the parable reflects God the Father's love for us – totally unconditional, free from all judgement.

Whatever be our situations or however rotten they may be, let us not be afraid to come into God the Father's presence and say, "*God, be merciful to me a sinner.*" We can be sure of His overwhelming love. Indeed, God looks at us as His children more than at our sins. Our return to Him brings Him great joy and us total restoration of our divine childhood.

It is this faith in our merciful Father and this confidence in His love that make us turn to Him in prayer. Our acute awareness of our sinfulness and need for His mercy steer us away from a judgmental attitude as we approach Him in prayer. For we are no better than the ones we may tend to judge. The Lord's love and mercy are universal – shown to all.

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 11:22 – 12:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:11 – 2:2; Luke 19:1-10

Conversion is necessary for salvation. It is a lifelong process. It requires the first concrete step to start off.

The story of Zacchaeus in today's Gospel offers a fine example of conversion. Zacchaeus was a wealthy man because he was a senior tax collector. He had become rich probably because he had been exploiting his senior position to profit from the taxes he was collecting.

Zacchaeus had heard a lot about Jesus and become curious to see Him. But we are told that he was short of stature and on hearing that Jesus was passing he climbed a tree to catch sight of Him. Zacchaeus' stature and gesture in the story have symbolic significance. His obsession with wealth had blocked his view of Jesus the divine Master. Climbing a tree may signify rising above all his obsession in order just to catch a glimpse of Jesus. But for sure, this gesture subjected him to great ridicule and humiliation. For the sight of a short man climbing a tree would have been in itself comical.

In addition, Zacchaeus was a tax collector, The Jews hated tax collectors because they were collecting taxes from them for the Romans. The sight of Zacchaeus climbing a tree was likely to draw nasty and cynical remarks from the Jewish crowd. Zacchaeus' readiness to accept all the cynical and nasty remarks, the ridicule and humiliation from the crowd was evidence of his sincere and eager desire to see Jesus and his openness to Him.

Jesus noticed him and paid particular attention to him: *"Zacchaeus, come down. Hurry, because I must stay at your house today."* Zacchaeus must have been totally overwhelmed by this attention from Jesus. Perhaps, for the first time in his life, a Jew accepted him and was prepared to go to his house – and not just a Jew but a teacher, and not just a teacher but Jesus Himself. Yes, because Zacchaeus was really keen to see Jesus, Jesus reached out to him, and offered him beyond what he had hoped for. So, Zacchaeus hurried down and welcomed Jesus enthusiastically.

In the face of an adverse reaction from the crowd, Zacchaeus experienced Jesus' concern and acceptance of him. His public reputation as a sinner underpinned his rejection by the Jewish public but acceptance by Jesus. That was an overwhelming experience for him. Thus, when the crowd questioned Jesus'

decision, Zacchaeus stood his ground. He pledged to Jesus, *“Look, sir, I am going to give half my property to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody I will pay him back four times the amount.”*

Overwhelmed by the powerful grace of Jesus’ attention and acceptance, Zacchaeus took the first concrete step towards a change of heart. That change translated into concrete multiple decisions. More than restoring just the amount he had cheated, he was going to do it fourfold. Over and above that, he was going to look after the poor; these included people he did not know or have dealings with; they were too poor to pay taxes. Commitment to the poor was naturally going to be a long-term affair.

Zacchaeus took a very radical step towards conversion with all seriousness. The fourfold restoration of what he had cheated and the commitment to share half of his property with the poor meant he had risen above his obsession with material wealth. This obsession had blocked his encounter with Jesus. It had stunted his spiritual growth. His story begins with his climbing a sycamore tree to catch sight of the divine Master. This gesture signals Zacchaeus’ willingness to do what it would take to convert. The possibility and process of conversion had now started.

For his positive response, Zacchaeus received Jesus’ pronouncement of salvation: *“Today, salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham, for the Son of Man has come to seek out and save what was lost.”* As a son of Abraham, Zacchaeus was entitled to the salvation Jesus had come to bring to the world. His repentance was his acceptance of this salvation. The salvation for his house was immediate – it took place “today”.

What Jesus declared for Zacchaeus is valid for any sinner who, like Zacchaeus, is open to receiving what Jesus is offering. But sincere and radical conversion is called for. That conversion is possible by the grace of Jesus *“coming into the sinner’s house”*.

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

2 Maccabees 7:1-2,9-14; 2 Thessalonians 2:16 – 3:5; Luke 20:27-38

In the Apostles' Creed, we profess: "I believe in the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting." This article of the creed is solidly anchored on Christ's assurance and His own resurrection to life.

Even before Christ's coming there was a belief in the resurrection. The first reading today narrates the story of how seven Maccabean brothers chose violent and gruesome deaths at the hands of a very wicked king by the name of Antiochus rather than abandoning their religion. This king was all out to promote his pagan religion by forcing his subjects to practise it. The decision of the Maccabean brothers was motivated by their faith in the resurrection which they professed in their reply to the wicked king.

The Gospel today focuses on the same theme of the resurrection. It engages a story also about seven brothers, this time in relation to marriage. The out-of-real-life story concocted by the Sadducees was intended to confront Jesus about the resurrection. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection at all. They wanted to prove their position correct.

The story the Sadducees made up revolved around the levirate law of Moses. This law came from Dt. 25:5, that is, the Book of Deuteronomy, one of the five books of the Pentateuch. This collection attributed to Moses is called "the Law of Moses". The Sadducees accepted it as their Scriptures. According to that law, a man was obliged to marry his brother's wife, if his brother died leaving her childless. The idea behind this law was to beget children for the deceased brother. In the case brought to Jesus by the Sadducees, seven brothers had the most unlikely misfortune of dying one after another, after marrying the same wife, without begetting any children. The question posed was: "*Now, at the resurrection, to which of them will she be wife since she had been married to all seven?*"

Not only was the story out of real life, but the question that followed was also cynical. The Sadducees were making a mockery of faith in the resurrection. But Jesus remained calm. Without being vengeful, He gave the Sadducees a response based on their Scriptures. He took up the story of the burning bush where Moses called "*the Lord the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God*

of Jacob” (cf. Ex. 3:6,15). Jesus then drew the conclusion: “Now He is God, not of the dead, but of the living; for to Him all men are in fact alive.”

Jesus’ conclusion tied the patriarchal era comprising Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to Moses’ experience of the Lord’s self-revelation in the burning bush. By human reckoning, the patriarchs were long gone, dead a long time ago. But by God’s self-revelation as their God, they were in actual reality alive because God was *“God of the living”*. That means, they had risen from the dead. That was the force of Jesus’ argument from the episode of the burning bush narrated in the Scriptures.

Jesus also clarified that *“those judged worthy of a place in the other world and in the resurrection from the dead do not marry because they no longer die... and they are the children of God.”* Here, Jesus pointed out that once risen from the dead, the *“children of God”* were no longer subjected to the conditions of their earthly life. Earthly beings and realities are bound to come to an end; human beings seek perpetuation through propagation, that is, begetting children in marriage. There is therefore a need for marriage on earth, but not in the kingdom of heaven.

The resurrection is to eternal life in God’s kingdom. It, therefore, dispenses with marriage. In the very beginning, God created human beings in His own image, precisely to share in His eternal life in paradise. But human beings fell and lost that life. God, however, promised them salvation. He fulfilled His promise by sending His Son Jesus into their world to restore their lost life through His death and resurrection. All who accept this salvation by Jesus will rise to eternal life on the last day.

We are now called to make a choice: to be like the Sadducees coming to Jesus with a cynical intention to ridicule Him; or to be like the Maccabean brothers taking the resurrection with such great conviction as to be ready to lose their earthly lives on account of it. For sure, the goal of life on earth is eternal life in the kingdom of God. It must shape and direct our lives on earth!

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Malachi 3:19-20; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-12; Luke 21:5-19

The beautiful Notre Dame Cathedral of Paris suffered severe burning on 15 April 2019. Not only the French but also many people around the world were saddened by it. For sure the Cathedral stood for centuries as the pride of France. It had drawn millions of pilgrims and tourists and captured their admiration. Funds to restore it were very quickly raised.

The sentiments elicited by the Notre Dame Cathedral must have also been similar to those shown over the Temple of Jerusalem. Today's Gospel records the people's admiration for it: *"how it was adorned with fine stonework and votive offerings."* Regardless of its beauty and the amount of time, effort and money put into building it, Jesus was very clear in His mind that the Temple would be *"destroyed and not a single stone would be left on another."* Its destruction happened during the Roman-Jewish war in 70 A.D.

The immediate response to Jesus' prediction was: *"Master, when will this then happen, and what sign will there be that this is about to take place?"* Very likely, Jesus' audience was overcome by great sadness and anxiety regarding the destruction of the Temple. Knowing ahead of time when it would happen might help them to take the necessary steps to prevent the disaster. Their esteem for and pride over the Temple were so high that they would certainly do all that it was going to take to protect it from destruction. Most likely it was these sentiments and zeal that gave rise to their question to the Master.

But Jesus drew them away from their immediate and temporal concerns to the only one that really mattered: the end-time. For the end-time had to do with salvation, that is, eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus cautioned them *"not to be deceived"* for there would be a lot of fake news and false claims based on experiences of international battles and wars as well as natural calamities. For these were the apocalyptic signs commonly associated with the end-time. Indeed, many false prophets and preachers of the end-time would come. Their false claims and teachings would bring fear and false direction to the people.

Jesus had no illusion about wars and natural calamities. They would come and inflict pains and sufferings on people. His disciples would have another source of afflictions: their persecution by their enemies and even betrayal by their own families. Jesus exhorted them to remain steadfast in their faith in Him and fidelity to Him. He would come to their defence in mysterious ways. He gave

them this assurance: *“Not a hair of your head will be lost. Your endurance will win you your lives.”*

The way forward for the disciples of Jesus would be to be detached from earthly bonds and legacies in order to be fully attached to Him. For He was the true Temple in the sense of God’s dwelling and presence among men. The earthly Temple of Jerusalem would be destroyed; Jesus too would be put to death on the cross but He would rise on the third day. With His resurrection, Jesus the true Temple of God would stand forever. That means God’s presence with His faithful ones would be everlasting.

God’s everlasting presence is in His kingdom, the kingdom of heaven. By His death and resurrection, Jesus opened the doors of the kingdom to all fallen humankind. In the kingdom, life is everlasting and is lived in the eternal presence of God. By His death and resurrection, Jesus brought eternal life to all fallen humankind. A personal decision to accept it is called for. That decision translates into a life of fidelity to Jesus. In that fidelity, disciples will experience Jesus coming to their defence and standing by them as well as for them. This does not necessarily mean that they will be put to death; it means Jesus will lead them into the kingdom of God: *“Your endurance will win you your lives.”*

It is important to get our bearings correct and set our priorities right. There is no denying that everyone is given one life to live on earth. It is not wrong to strive for achievements for self-fulfilment. There is almost an innate desire to leave legacies so as to be remembered by the next and future generations. However commendable, all achievements and legacies must not be allowed to dominate one’s efforts to the point of obscuring or even doing away with the goal God has set for our earthly lives – eternal life in His kingdom. Losing this is losing the only thing that matters. Then, life on earth, despite all achievements and impressive legacies, amounts to nought and thus failure.

Assessment or judgement is made at the end-time. It will be carried out by Jesus at His second coming. The physical Temple of Jerusalem and one’s earthly achievements will not count. It is one’s life of relationship with God, whose presence the Temple symbolizes, that matters. True and authentic worship in the Temple flows from this relationship. Jesus is now the new Temple, for He is the real presence of God among men. In Him, relationship with God is real and worship of Him is true. Unfailing faith in Jesus and unswerving fidelity to Him will guarantee eternal life in God’s eternal presence in His kingdom. This is the only Temple that matters: it is most magnificent and everlasting.

CHRIST THE KING

2 Samuel 5:1-3; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:35-43

What do people generally associate kingship with? The highest position in a country with supreme authority and power over all its subjects. Jesus Christ is King of the universe because He is the Saviour or Messiah of the world. However, His kingship is not according to popular conception, but according to God's plan and revelation.

Over the head of Jesus on the cross, the inscription "*The King of the Jews*" was affixed. It drew disbelief from the soldiers and bystanders. They, therefore, started to mock Him. How could Jesus be the King of the Jews when He was hanging helplessly on the cross? How could He be the Messiah when, as challenged, He could not even save Himself? The Jews were expecting their Messiah to be a political liberator, one who would set them free from foreign rule, and be therefore their King. In their eyes, the crucified Jesus could not be their Saviour; neither could He be their King. He had made false claims about Himself and therefore deserved His violent death.

Yet, however, precisely because He had been made to suffer and die a violent death, He was truly the Messiah that God had revealed. Through OT prophets like Isaiah, God had made it known that the Messiah was going to be His suffering Servant. God's ways are indeed not man's ways. His plan for the Messiah and therefore for the King, not just of the Jews but of all humankind, was that He would serve and not be served, and that He would lay down His life so that others might have life and have it abundantly.

Jesus was that Christ, that Messiah. He died in order to bring life to all fallen humankind. By His sufferings and violent death on the cross, He "*took us out of the power of darkness*" and won for us "*our freedom, the forgiveness of our sins*", as the second reading affirms. Faith is needed to see and accept this.

The repentant criminal had this faith when he recognised Jesus as the Messiah and therefore as the King of the Universe. He was even brave enough to rebuke his companion who had mocked Jesus. He was confident enough to make this request: *“Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”* Jesus’ response to him was categorical: *“Indeed, I promise you, today you will be with Me in paradise.”* Jesus was absolutely conscious of what His Kingship and Messiahship were about: selfless love, mercy and service. Although He was put to death on the cross, in actual reality He had willingly laid down His life so that all of us would have life and have it to the full.

In this willing self-sacrifice of His, Jesus manifested the love and mercy of His Father for all of us. In this way, as the second reading asserts, He is *“the image of the unseen God”* who *“wanted all things to be reconciled through Him and for Him... by His death on the cross.”* Jesus was King and Messiah through His fidelity to His Father’s will of salvation for all fallen humankind. His death on the cross did not end His mission. He rose from the dead and thus manifested His power and authority over *“Thrones, Dominations, Sovereignities, Powers”* – that is, all earthly and spiritual powers. He is King of kings – the universal King.

On the last day, Christ the King of the universe, the Saviour of the world, will come again. This time, He will judge the living and the dead. He will bring all those judged worthy into His Kingdom. Like the repentant criminal, let our continuous prayer be: *“Lord, remember me in Your Kingdom.”* To be authentic, our prayer must be accompanied by our efforts to repent and live in fidelity to the Lord’s will which is that we love one another as Christ has loved us, that is, selflessly. Our earnest hope is that we will hear Jesus Christ our King say to us, *“Come, you that are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world... Truly, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of Mine, you did it to Me.”*

CLOSING WORDS



Beloved Sisters and Brothers in the Lord,

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

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

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

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

Yours as ever in the Lord,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left and then curves back under the name.

John