The ABC of Sunday Matters
Dominican Series

The Dominican Series is a joint project by Australian Dominican women and men and offers contributions on topics of Dominican interest and various aspects of church, theology and religion in the world.

Series Editors: Mark O’Brien OP and Gabrielle Kelly OP


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The ABC of Sunday Matters

Reflections on the Lectionary Readings for Year A, B, and C

Mark A O’Brien OP

2013
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Introduction

Sunday matters or should matter to Christians. It is the Lord’s day and so the most important day of the week, a time for us to acknowledge God as the source, centre and goal of our lives. Because Sunday is important there are important matters to consider on this day, such as making time for prayer, worship and reflection on the Word of God. But there are also many other matters that now vie for our time and attention on Sunday: sport, shopping, TV, travel, etc. Deciding what to do on Sunday and other major days of the Christian calendar has become something of a challenge for contemporary Christians, some would say even a crisis.

But a crisis or a challenge can provide an opportunity to rethink and refocus, and here the Bible serves as an invaluable aid. In my judgement the Bible itself is an invitation or challenge to think. It does not impose its views because that would be most ungodlike—according to the biblical understanding of God. Much of life is about making decisions and the Bible challenges us to decide where our priorities lie and provides invaluable guidelines. The reflections offered in this book seek to draw out this role of the Bible in a hopefully clear and concise manner. They originally appeared in separate volumes for each year of the Church’s liturgical cycle (years A, B, C) but have now been combined for convenience in this single volume.

The reflections originally appeared in the Australasian Catholic Record over a 3-year period as ‘Reflections on the Readings of Sundays and Feasts’ (2007-9).1 Although not homilies they were composed with homiletic preparation in mind. In the light of readers’ comments and further reflection, some were revised, others rewritten and new ones added in or-

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1. I am grateful to Rev Dr Gerard Kelly, President of The Catholic Institute of Sydney and Editor of The Australasian Catholic Record for the invitation to contribute the reflections.
der to cover all the Sundays of the three-year cycle and make the material more accessible to the general reader as well as the preacher. Those who do not have a lectionary or follow its cycle of readings can easily correlate biblical text and reflection by consulting the index at the end of the book.

It may be of some help to readers to provide an introductory outline of how I read biblical texts as well as an overview of the Bible—a broad context within which to reflect on the particular readings selected for each Sunday. The bibliography at the end of the volume offers opportunities to check the outline and overview offered here and to correct and improve on them where necessary.

All human beings, even inspired biblical authors, communicate something (the content or message) by assembling selected parts of their language in particular literary forms (the ways of communicating). In the Old Testament the preferred literary forms are narrative (story, report, genealogy, etc), poetry (psalms, proverbs, prophecies) and law (commands, prohibitions, instructions); in the New Testament they are narrative (in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles) and letters (of Paul and others). A literary form provides a creative opportunity but also imposes limitations. For example, a story usually involves a plot (such as overcoming an evil) with a limited cast of characters. A storyteller has to develop the plot towards some form of resolution and this means being selective, otherwise the story could become too unwieldy and lose something of its impact.

What authors include or leave out of their compositions is also influenced by their historical and social context. The context in which ancient authors operated had no equivalent to the modern novel with its intricate plots, large cast of characters and elaborate detail—but even these have their limitations. Most biblical stories or parables, songs or prophecies, are fairly short and it is likely many biblical texts are written ‘distillations’ of longer oral performances. Writing in ancient times was time consuming and expensive: it is unlikely a scribe could write down all of an actual oral performance. But they were very adept at recording the key elements of a story or song that would serve as a guide for further performances. Stories, poems, Gospels and letters were written for public proclamation, elaboration and comment. Thankfully, this is still the case for our Sunday liturgies in which a short selection of texts from the Bible is proclaimed for us to listen to, to preach on and to discuss. People in ancient times had excellent memories but they also had a smaller corpus of material to memorise. We now have to rely on computers and memory sticks or flash
drives to store an ever increasing corpus of texts that is beyond our capacity to memorise.

I have been trained in modern western critical methods of reading the Bible but also respect the traditional ways of reading that have been used in the Church and Synagogue since their inception. Both have to operate with the fundamental premise that one can only understand what a text is communicating by paying close attention to the way it is communicating (the literary form employed). We all do this instinctively in our own cultural and historical context and with literature with which we are familiar: we distinguish headline from commentary, editorial from a letter to the editor, advertisement from operating manual. Sporting enthusiasts know that a headline announcing ‘cats maul dogs’ is about a football match not a brawl between pets. When we come to the literature of another culture we need to be aware that two different contexts are coming in contact—our own and that of the other culture.

One could say that the traditional way of reading the Bible gave more weight to the reader’s context. If you study the Old Testament from a Christian perspective or faith stance, it is likely that you will ‘see’ allusions there to Christ and Christian themes. Nothing wrong with this; after all it is what biblical authors in both Old and New Testament periods did. In the light of new experience (the Babylonian exile) Old Testament authors saw aspects of their tradition in a new way. This is how tradition and understanding grow. It is also linked to the metaphorical and symbolic function of language; a change in context allows one to see more in a word or phrase than initially met the eye or ear. The risk is that we become so fascinated with the ‘new’ that we lose touch with the ‘old’ that provides the context for insight into the new. We need to keep it in mind otherwise we can develop a distorted idea of the new. Modern critical analysis of the Bible, which emerged partly as a response to the perceived excesses of the traditional approach, strives to give due weight to the context of the biblical text. It endeavours to read the Old Testament within its own time and culture—insofar as these can be reconstructed—in order to grasp its original meaning. The danger with this approach is that what is perceived to be the original meaning becomes the only acceptable one. We will probably never get the balance between the two quite right but this is part of the adventure of reading and discussing the Bible. We can learn from different perspectives, differing contexts.

When it comes to offering an overview of the Bible what I find helpful is how it conveys much of its message by telling a story—a sound teaching
The Bible story is a dramatic tale of the conflict between good and evil and of God’s efforts to get human beings to live the former and reject the latter. One could describe the Bible as ‘the Great War Story to End All Our War Stories’ or perhaps as ‘God to the rescue of humanity from its own and God’s worst enemy’. It is told in a series of distinct books, commencing with what we call the Pentateuch and what Jewish tradition calls the Torah. This is a Hebrew term that can mean law, a law code such as in Deuteronomy, as well as instruction or catechesis (for example in narrative or story form). The storyline continues in the Historical Books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings or what Jewish tradition calls the Former Prophets (because prophets play key roles in them). These books tell the tale of the chosen people in the promised land to the Babylonian exile. Most of what Christians regard as The Prophets and Jews as the Later Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Minor Prophets) are linked to this storyline in one form or another. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of the people’s return from exile and their re-establishment in the Persian province of Yehud (formerly the kingdom of Judah). For Christians the storyline enters its final and definitive stage with the advent of Jesus and the mission that he entrusts to his disciples. The Bible story is selective because all human discourse, even when inspired, is selective and limited. It draws on existing material because biblical authors, like others, operated within a tradition that preceded them and continued after them. Another sign that the Bible reflects our human context and its limitations is that it often offers more than one angle on things. The moment we see or hear something we are seeking to interpret it, to make sense of it to ourselves. Because of our limited perspective we often need to see things from more than one angle. The Bible’s claim is that the various angles or interpretations it contains provide real insight into the human condition and enable us to identify false or distorted perceptions. We are thereby able to avoid confusing good with evil and vice versa. Reflection on some key aspects of the story may help to illustrate this.

The Bible commences with an account of creation in which God brings about a dynamic world of perfect order from what most commentators would call a ‘primeval chaos’. The biblical notion of creation as order out of chaos rather than out of nothing is common to the myths or stories of creation among Israel’s ancient Near Eastern (ANE) neighbours. According to the faith proclamations of these stories the national god triumphs over rival gods of chaos and disorder (symbols of evil) to forge an ordered world in which the particular nation can live and flourish—as long as it
honours its victorious warrior god in its liturgy and life. In the Bible or course there is no rival or hostile god who is the source of evil and who has to be vanquished in a primeval cosmic battle. Where then does it locate the source or origin of evil? According to another account of creation—the garden story in Genesis 2–3—evil and disorder arise because the human being refuses to operate within the context or boundary established by the creator (cf. the permissions and one prohibition in 2:16-17). It succumbs to the serpent's temptation, believing it can transcend its creaturely status by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (cf. 3:5-6). The monotheistic faith of the Bible means that its authors had to steer a delicate course here. The garden story does not cast the human being or the serpent as a rival god as is the case in many ANE myths. The serpent is ‘more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made’ (3:1, NRSV). It is thus one of God's creatures; identifying it as the devil is a later Christian reading (and the devil is another sinner, not another god). The falsehood of the human being's rebellion is dramatically exposed in the consequences that follow. Disorder and division replace order and harmony (the shame of nakedness, hiding from one another behind ridiculous clothes such as fig leaves, fear of, and hiding from, God).

Again, unlike ANE myths and many modern stories of the battle between good and evil, God takes the side of God's worst enemy in creation—the human being—in order to save it from the monster that it has ‘created’—its disordered self. According to the Bible storyline God does so in two main ways. One is to tell stories of God eliminating evil, as in the flood story. Stories such as these are designed to fuel faith in readers and listeners that God is utterly committed to the establishment or re-establishment of good order in humanity and creation. The second is the story of the chosen people and its God-given mission to bring blessing to ‘all the families of the earth’ (Genesis 12:3). The story of Israel teaches that human beings, who trust completely in God and are empowered by God, are able to overcome evil, both in themselves and in others. Within this story we see the constant struggle by Israel and others to ‘win the war’ and the unswerving commitment of God to these chosen ‘troops’ who frequently fail. Even though Israel is at times portrayed as its own and God's worst enemy—as in the story of the golden calf in Exodus 32–34—God is presented as the epitome of the one who loves the enemy. God is on our side to fuel faith and hope that we can destroy the monster—the evil in ourselves and in others.
Readers will notice that in many stories of the battle between good and evil there is someone or a group (the biblical ‘remnant’) who stay true to God’s purpose and survive the inevitable and necessary destruction of evil in order to continue the story. Without this component there could be no subsequent ‘chapters’ to take the story forward and fuel our faith and hope. Another way in which the story continues in a positive vein beyond an evil episode is via the intercession of a good person or group. A key figure who plays this role in the Old Testament is of course Moses. The faithful individual or group also enables stories to develop another important biblical theme, namely that the one can save the many, such is the power of good. By the same token of course, one evil person or group can corrupt the many, such is the power of evil in the hands of evildoers (for example, the impact of the policies of king Jeroboam according to 1–2 Kings).

Israel’s prophets are an integral part of the Bible’s war story. Even though they emerged at various points in the history of the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah and preached to particular groups about current matters of concern (for example, the impact of Baal worship in Hosea’s 8th century BCE context), within the canonical corpus they are presented as authoritatively interpreting and applying the foundational Torah at strategic points in the storyline. The link with the storyline is indicated in most prophetic books by the superscriptions with which they commence or by the names and situations of those addressed within a book. They monitor and challenge Israel about its commitment to the divine purpose, but more often than not the people are portrayed as unwilling to listen to what we might call the prophetic ‘briefing’ on the conduct of the war.

Despite Israel’s frequent failures and condemnation by the prophets, the Bible does not reverse its conviction that God will ultimately triumph in the battle against evil and that Israel and indeed all the nations will freely (God does not impose) and gladly accept the divine assessment of their condition and the remedy provided (via the biblical teaching). When this happens universal shalom or peace will flourish (see classic passages such as Isaiah 2:2-4 and Micah 4:1-4). The Old Testament does not record the storyline beyond Ezra–Nehemiah’s account of the return from Babylonian exile, the re-establishment of the people in the Persian province of Yehud, the rebuilding of the temple, and the proclamation of the Torah. To have done so would mean telling/recording an increasingly lengthy and unwieldy story—another inescapable human limitation. Nevertheless,
the implied biblical claim is that it is not necessary to write down Israel's story beyond this point because the Law/Torah and Prophets provide the foundational revelation or teaching (the guidebook for life's journey). The subsequent unfolding of God's purpose in human history will be in accord with the foundational revelation and its authoritative commentators. If not, then the Bible's claims are fraudulent.

There is a shift of focus in post-exilic Old Testament literature to the final climactic battle(s) so vividly pictured in what is called apocalyptic literature. This is designed to assure the faithful that, no matter how bad their present situation may seem, God is in charge and will finally and definitively establish the fullness of the divine purpose for humanity and creation. It is not without reason that apocalyptic literature provides a cosmic setting for the final and definitive battle and the triumph of good (God) over evil. To be assured of participating in God's final victory it is essential that both community and individual remain faithful at their particular point in time. Their particular battle(s) is linked to and a sign of the looming final conflict.

The author of the book of Daniel is made privy to God's final military strategy via a series of dreams and visions. This includes the revelation of God's champion warrior, the angel Michael who, unlike Israel's warriors in earlier stages of the story (cf David and the kings), will not fail and will complete the task. Moreover, as apocalyptic literature developed in the so-called inter-testamental period, the drama of the final conflict is heightened by the development of another angelic figure—the Satan—who stands as Michael and God's adversary. There is no devil in the preceding biblical storyline. He is almost a rival divinity but not quite; the Bible ensures that he remains a creature who has, like the human being, rebelled against God's sovereignty.

Along with the Torah or Pentateuch and the Prophets, the Old Testament canon contains the Wisdom Books or, in Hebrew terminology, The Writings. These too are made part of the biblical storyline by being linked to key figures or groups in the tradition. Thus Wisdom literature is broadly linked to the legendary wise king Solomon while the Psalter is linked primarily to king David, the 'sweet psalmist of Israel' (2 Samuel 23:1; King James Bible), but also to other individuals as well as various priestly clans that presumably provided temple choirs.

Christian faith proclaims that God, knowing the final battle and its outcome, as well as the dangers for free but limited and flawed human beings, has sent his Son Jesus with what we might call the definitive mili-
tary strategy for winning the war and a pledge of God's loyalty to those who believe his word and act on it. His ministry and crucifixion provide the definitive sign of his and his Father's commitment to the salvation of humanity and creation—in biblical terms, God's steadfast love—and his resurrection provides an assurance that the faithful will triumph over evil just as he has. The story of Jesus in the Gospels also provides instructions as to how we are to conduct ourselves in the conflict (according to Matthew 5:17-18 Jesus' teaching fulfils that of the Torah/Law and Prophets). The New Testament claims that what look from our limited human perception to be difficulties and even catastrophic defeats of goodness and the triumph of evil are in reality the opposite. The New Testament emphasises a number of times that we are living in the last age, the end of times, and that Jesus' life, death and resurrection signals the onset of the final battle in which we should willingly join because the first and perhaps the prime 'enemy' that we need to conquer is the evil side of ourselves (cf. Paul's Letters). The apocalyptic book of Revelation assures the reader that, as with the book of Daniel, no matter how bad things may be at present, Jesus' final victory is assured. But this is of course not the end of the story of humanity and creation. It is the last stage in the battle against evil, after which there will commence a new and everlasting age of right order among human beings and in creation—what 1 Corinthians 15 and Revelation 21 refer to as a 'new creation'. It is noteworthy that Revelation 21:1 the author sees a new heaven and earth that are no longer separate because God dwells among human beings and so dwells in creation (the human being is always a creature).

As a supplement to these more general comments, the reflections for the Sundays of each year are preceded by an introduction to the relevant Gospel (Matthew for Year A; Mark for Year B; Luke for Year C).
Reflections on Readings for Year A
Each of the four Gospels provides a somewhat different (and limited) angle on Jesus; as the author of John 21:25 points out ‘There were many other things that Jesus did; if all were written down, the world itself, I suppose, would not hold all the books that would have to be written’. Even though Matthew is listed as the first Gospel it is now generally thought to be later than the Gospel of Mark and to have drawn on it and other source material to compose a much longer and somewhat different version. A similar theory applies to the Gospel of Luke. For this reason Matthew, Mark and Luke are called ‘synoptic’ Gospels; that is, they are alike or ‘together’ in containing many of the same or similar stories about Jesus, in the way they are arranged, and in the words that Jesus is portrayed as speaking. Nevertheless there are enough differences to show that each provides a unique perspective on Jesus and his ministry. The synoptic phenomenon can also be observed in the Old Testament when one compares the books of Samuel—Kings with the books of Chronicles. Each tells the story of the monarchy but at times in surprisingly different ways. In the Gospel of John however, the arrangement of the storyline and the way in which Jesus speaks are strikingly different. According to commentators this Gospel reflects a particular tradition about Jesus stemming from the ‘beloved disciple’ John. From the point of view of faith of course, this diversity in unity (the focus on Jesus) is the result of divine inspiration. God wants the story of Jesus to be told in these differing ways and words.

Matthew, like Luke but unlike Mark and John, commences with an account of Jesus’ birth, follows this with an account of his public ministry mainly in Galilee, and concludes with his death and resurrection. A striking feature of the Gospel is that much of Jesus’ teaching is gathered into five major discourses that are located at strategic points in the narrative or story of his public ministry. The first is the ‘sermon on the mount’ in chap-
ters 5–7, located after the temptation in the wilderness and the calling of his first disciples. The second is what commentators call the ‘missionary discourse’ in chapter 10, in the context of Jesus sending the disciples out on their first healing and preaching mission. This is followed by a discourse on parables and their function in chapter 13 and a discourse on community relationships in chapter 18. The series of discourses concludes with one on the final judgement in chapters 23–25, immediately before the account of Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection.

Another significant feature of Matthew’s presentation of Jesus is that he is the one who fulfils Old Testament prophecies and whose teaching completes the Torah or law (cf Jesus’ remark on Torah/law and prophecy in 5:17, part of the ‘sermon on the mount’). Readers will notice that the Gospel provides frequent references to prophetic and law texts, and debates with Jewish authorities about their meaning. The Gospel’s claim is that Jesus does not come to abolish the Torah but to fulfil it. The mystery of God is always unfolding its meaning in our world, a claim that is also made by the Old Testament. Important Old Testament titles such as Son of Man, Messiah/Christ, Son of David and Son of God are applied to Jesus and thereby assume a deeper meaning. While each title reveals something about his identity he transcends them all.

Matthew, and the other Gospels as well, never separate the person of Jesus from his teaching. His whole life—words and actions—proclaim his identity and mission to replace the false kingdom of Satan with the ‘kingdom of heaven.’ The most visible sign of its presence is of course Jesus himself, whose words and actions testify to God’s unswerving commitment to bring to fulfilment the promise and hope of salvation voiced so often in the Old Testament. The foundational church that gathers around Jesus is assured it is one with him in being a sign of the kingdom of heaven on earth and that the rival kingdom of Satan/Hades will not prevail against it (cf 16:18). The church is able to resist the power of evil as Jesus resisted it in the account of the temptation in the wilderness.

Another important, and difficult, aspect of Matthew’s account is that the revelation of God’s purpose in the figure of Jesus triggers hostility and rejection, in particular among Jewish authorities. As this grows, the Gospel presents Jesus instructing his disciples about the nature of the kingdom (cf in particular the prominence of parables from ch 13 on) and warning them of his impending death. Contemporary scholarship holds that the Gospel was written in the late first century CE and may well reflect not only Jesus’ own experience but also the deepening rift between
Judaism and early Christianity. Hostility is signalled early in Matthew’s infancy narrative (Herod’s massacre of the children) and reaches its climax in the plot to kill Jesus when he enters the holy city Jerusalem and preaches authoritatively in the temple. In a last supper with the disciples, he provides them with the gift of himself in the Eucharistic bread and wine before suffering a violent and humiliating death. While those who regard themselves as insiders (chief priests, scribes, elders) mock the one who has been finally ‘eliminated’, those who are regarded as outsiders (the centurion and his squad) profess ‘Truly this man was God’s Son’. This serves as another signal in the Gospel for what is to come. In the final scene (28:16-20), the now resurrected Son of God entrusts his universal mission to the disciples—the embryonic church. The ones who had themselves rejected and abandoned him to a man are still the chosen and trusted ones; an assurance that reconciliation and healing are offered to all no matter how distant they may see themselves, or how others may see them, in relation to Jesus.1

1. For further reading, Brendan Byrne’s study of Matthew in the bibliography is recommended (Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew’s Gospel in the Church Today [Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004]).
As we begin a new liturgical year the church gives us a gospel that talks about the end, or at least the end of this earthly age. This may initially appear a little surprising but there is a reason for it: if we reflect on the end of things a bit we may be better prepared to launch into the new liturgical year and be more confident about the future. In other words it is likely there is more to this talk about our end than initially meets the eye and our readings should help us see something of it.

Jesus likening himself to a burglar provides a good starting point; if you offered people a selection of images of Jesus I doubt whether this one would be a favourite. Yet it makes two important points. The first is that there is no point trying to keep this burglar out of your ‘house’; he is quite unlike any other burglar and can break in at any time, anywhere. So you might as well accept this and get a good night’s sleep. Stop worrying. Why then the injunction to ‘stay awake’? Again I think there is more here than initially meets the eye. The gospel passage begins with Jesus saying that the Son of Man is surely coming to bring God’s purpose to an end or completion even though people may never give it a thought or reject it altogether. The great flood came because it was part of God’s purpose irrespective of what people thought and, according to Jesus’ version of it, most had no idea or couldn’t give a toss. Furthermore, when Jesus comes it will be with a definite purpose, although to the unknowing or uncaring eye it will look like sheer chance, no apparent reason why ‘of two men in the fields one is taken, one left’.

Within this context the injunction to ‘stay awake’ does not mean all night vigils. Rather, it means we should take care to keep two important things in mind. The first is that even though it may not look like it from a human perspective, God is bringing the divine purpose for creation to its completion in God’s good time. This should fuel hope. The second thing is that God knows exactly how and where we fit in and play our role in
advancing the divine purpose (life is not chance or chaos). This should
fuel faith. It also allows a second point to be made about Jesus as burglar.
Unlike the common or garden variety prowling our suburbs, Jesus breaks
into our ‘houses’ only for our good, not to rob or take away but to give, not
to kill but to bestow life, not to instil fear but to tell us not to be afraid and
to assure us that we are all invited to share in the kingdom of his father,
our true home. Jesus will even invade the houses of those who most fear
him and want to keep him as far away as possible, hoping that his words
may convince them to change their lives.
Second Sunday of Advent

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

I wonder how we would react if a person got up in church and spoke—as a new message—those words from Isaiah in the first reading. Would we welcome it or require an implementation ‘time-line’ beforehand? And what if a figure like John the Baptist appeared—again for the first time—dressed in strange clothes and shouting at us about the urgent need to repent as he does in today’s gospel reading. Would we listen or insist first on a decent dress code for speakers in church? Is it because we are so familiar with these passages that we have in a sense ‘domesticated’ them? Or is it because we think, or have been schooled to think, that the period of revelation was a ‘special’ almost magic time when these kinds of things happened? And, thank God, that period is over and we do not expect anything like that now. We live in the ‘post-revelation’ period where things are supposed to be stable and certainly not shocking.

But the same Spirit that stirred Isaiah and John is still in our midst and presumably still stirring the pot. And when you look at the core of their messages it is as fresh and as challenging today as it was in their day. What Isaiah sees that Israel (and the world) needs, and what he believes will happen in God’s good time, is the establishment of God’s justice. For the Judean monarchy in which he lived, this was embodied above all in the anointed king (Hebrew: *messiah*) who implemented God’s justice and made right judgments, as the passage emphasises. If and when this happens, Isaiah believes that Jerusalem, the holy mountain, will become like a marvellous farmyard where the most unlikely crew—domestic animals, wild animals and the farmer’s kids—all get on famously together. Not only that, all the nations will want to join in. In a word, it is all about relationships and in our global ‘village’ the ability to get on together becomes ever more crucial.

If Isaiah hopes for the perfect society, John the Baptist challenges his audience with one of the crucial necessities that will bring it about—change,
or the appropriate gospel term, repentance (there is nothing necessarily positive about change in itself). This can be hard for those who are part of the establishment; in the gospel passages these are the Pharisees and Sadducees whom John singles out and challenges. The tendency is to think that it is the others who need change and repentance. Do we Christians tend to fall into this category at times, tending to think that we have got it together and it is the others who need to change? When I was growing up, the guilty outsiders were the communists, now it seems to be secular society. Whatever the case, John’s call to change may be even more urgent now than in his own day and affects us all, both ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. Modern society faces major challenges on a number of fronts—abortion, medical ethics, family, environment, politics, etc.

If I am right then these texts that, from certain points of view, can appear alien and even ‘ridiculous’ are targeting two very basic things: the challenge to repent and to love one another. They look very ordinary but, as we know, they are in reality very radical because these are the hardest things to do, and to do consistently. It is hard to admit failure and our responsibility for it (repentance) and it is hard to ask forgiveness from those we have wronged (we need to trust them, love them and hope in them). But, as Paul says in the passage from Romans, ‘Everything that was written long ago in the Scriptures was meant to teach us something about hope.’ These texts are in the Bible because God knows that we can do it, providing we trust in the help that God provides. Otherwise there would be no point having them in the Bible. We are called to be fully Christian and to build a fully Christian society on this earth but not for our sakes only, as Paul takes care to point out. Ultimately, the greatest thing we can do in our individual and community lives is ‘to give glory to God’, to show forth the powerful presence of God in our midst.
Prophets and prophecy are the focus in this Sunday’s readings: they begin with a prophecy from the book of Isaiah, the letter of James holds prophets up as an example of patience, and in the reading from Matthew Jesus responds to the troubled enquiry from John the Baptist. Prophets were in a vulnerable situation in society, particularly when they proclaimed future judgment or salvation. They had nothing to rely on except their conviction that they had been called to proclaim a message. Those who proclaimed God’s judgment on a sinful people shortly before the exile could appeal to it as validation, or at least their disciples could. But, it is much trickier when it comes to predictions of salvation and a glorious future, as in today’s first reading. Old Testament Prophets made these grand promises but most never lived to see them realised. Yet they stood by their words. What motivated them to do so? Above all, it must have been their faith in God and in their prophetic vocation. That God had called them to proclaim this word was confirmation enough that this word of God would be realised in God’s good time. If not, they were following a sham god.

The Hebrew term for ‘word’ (dabar) can also mean thing and event. Hence the proclamation of a ‘dabar’ of God is a word that, in the act of being proclaimed, is creating or bringing about the event of which it speaks. The prophet’s task is to maintain fidelity to the one who commands that this creative word be spoken to the people. This is presumably what the letter of James refers to when it says ‘For your example, brothers, in submitting with patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord’. Prophets prophesied and then waited in patience like a farmer—yet they often never had the satisfaction of seeing the fruit. But prophecy, and discipleship in general, is about the fulfilment of God’s word and God’s purpose, not personal satisfaction.

But if one can say this about the prophets and hold them up as an example of faith and endurance, then we should also say the same about the
people of Israel and hold them up as an example. Because it was they who preserved the prophet's words long after his or her death and bequeathed them to us in the books that we now read. In that sense, they were just as inspired as the prophets.

For all their admirable patience and faith, prophets had their doubts at times. Jeremiah wonders about his vocation and Elisha is unsure whether or not he has received the spirit of Elijah in 2 Kings 2. Even worse, he initially botches the job of raising the son of the great lady of Shunem in 2 Kings 4. The reading from Matthew's Gospel records the doubts of the greatest of the prophets, John the Baptist. He believed he had been commissioned to announce the kingdom of heaven as a great judgment and here is his promised judge handing out favours to all and sundry. The striking thing about Jesus' comments on John is that he holds up the doubting, questioning baptiser as a model prophet, indeed more than a prophet. John's doubts and questions arise precisely because he is so loyal to his vocation and his convictions about the message he preaches, and it is this to which Jesus draws the attention of his listeners. What is more, true loyalty to one's vocation from God is not a rigid loyalty; it is open to whatever God wants one to say or do, not what one would prefer God to say or do. So Jesus can send John's disciples back with a message that challenges John to revise his expectations, confident that John will accept it. John and his doubts and questions can help us accept that we receive more than we ever make, we are gifted with more than we can ever give, we are found rather than we find, discovered rather than we discover. We tend to try and make God in our image but Jesus comes to make us in God's image.

Jesus' final comment raises another important point about prophetic preaching and discipleship in general. One's vocation is not about personal status or satisfaction but about advancing the kingdom of heaven, and one's perfection lies in being loyal to this above all else. Prophecy, priesthood, parenthood, etc are there for the sake of populating the kingdom of heaven; hence the least in the kingdom is greater than any prophet, priest or king—and prophets, priests and kings who enter the kingdom will no doubt be the first to affirm this.
One of the more comforting aspects of our faith is that the gospels link Jesus via Joseph to the dodgy Davidic dynasty. You only have to open the books of Kings and read some stories about the Davidic monarchy to realise how many of its members are censured or condemned and how few are praised. In our reading from Isaiah we are given a glimpse of king Ahaz who, according to 2 Kings 16:2—4 was a bad lad indeed. As the verses preceding our Isaiah reading tell it, Ahaz is under siege from a northern coalition of Israel (the northern kingdom) and Syria (Aram) and he is scared (‘the heart of Ahaz . . . shook like the trees of the forest before the wind’). In place of fear, Isaiah urges trust in God (‘if you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand at all’). I wonder whether there is a hint of sarcasm in Isaiah’s offer to ask for a sign ‘as deep as sheol or as high as heaven.’

We know from the Kings text that Ahaz sought protection from the Assyrian superpower in the crisis: something of this may lie behind his evasive reply. Isaiah knows his man and the fears and self-interest that drives him. His announcement of God’s decision shows that God was already planning protection for Judah against the invaders: ‘the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel (God–with–us)’. God is with the chosen people to bring about what is best for them but this may not be what Ahaz or the people have in mind at the time. The comforting thing about trawling through the Davidic dynasty is that Jesus was apparently quite happy to own them all as his ancestors; the bad as well as the good. The implication of this is that he is also happy to own us, despite all the bad we do. Surely a powerful motive to put away our fears.

According to our reading from Matthew’s Gospel, Joseph too was faced with a crisis that made him afraid and prompted him to make a decision. But Joseph redeems the Davidic line here. Unlike Ahaz, his fears were for Mary his betrothed, not for himself and his reputation. The angelic mes-
senger plays the same role as Isaiah to Ahaz and urges him not to be afraid and to change his mind, to see God's presence in a situation that Joseph's culture would view as a disgrace. The basis for making this change adds an important element to the theology of Immanuel (God–with–us): the sign that God is indeed with us is that the child will be called Jesus (saviour) and that salvation will involve freeing his people from their sins. For readers of the gospel, 'his people' are all those who accept Jesus; through him God is with us all, both Jew and Gentile. The way Paul puts it in the reading from Romans, all the nations are called 'to belong to Jesus Christ', that is, to become one family of God's beloved children.

All of us I think welcome the notion that God is with us but what are our thoughts about this seemingly simple and comforting statement as we approach the feast of Christmas? The thrust of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is that God is with us, completely and unconditionally. Despite all the failings of Israel in the Old Testament and the disciples in the New Testament, God never gives up on them. But there is of course another side to this statement that we need to take on board if we are serious about it. Given that God is completely with and for us, we need to be completely with and for God. We do not need to be like this for God to love us; we can only love God because God first loved us. But our response to that divine love should be to give our all to God. Our attempts to be loving may look pretty inadequate to us at times but Paul testifies in his letter to the Romans that the grace of Christ turned him from a hater of the church into a devoted lover and preacher of the good news. When we fear that our love is inadequate, we need to remember that the grace of Christ makes it—our love—delightful and precious in God's eyes.
It is appropriate that Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus gets pride of place in the readings for Christmas—at both the midnight and dawn masses. It is the most detailed account and is fascinating for the contrast it draws between our world and God’s. Luke begins with the census decreed by Caesar Augustus and how the chain of command in the vast Roman bureaucracy operates to implement the emperor’s word. It works its way out from the centre through ‘officials’ to the boundaries of the empire. One has the impression that Luke understands the Roman world pretty well and is not hostile to it. In many ways it is a familiar world to us moderns and our own vast bureaucracies. The number of people who commute each day to work in an office; the intricate chains of command; the names and numbers on computer screens that hopefully correspond to real people out there with their needs and demands. When the boss cracks the whip to get something done, we jump to it. So it is in Luke’s world; the chain of command reaches out from Rome to touch an unknown couple in a distant small corner of the empire and they set out to comply with the census decree. And, like our own systems that sometimes break down, Joseph and Mary ‘fall through the cracks’ of the Roman system and end up without accommodation. And Mary is expecting her first child.

Luke may respect Roman institutions but he sees their limitations. It is at this point that he develops his powerful contrast between the two worlds. Where the Roman world is focused on the centre—the emperor—God is focused on what that world would regard as irrelevant, the fringes. The seemingly insignificant couple Mary and Joseph and their baby become the moment and the locus of a decisive divine action. Whereas the chain of command in the Roman world operates only through tried and tested officials, God’s chain of command trusts everyone. God’s angel does not go scouring the earth to find a trustworthy messenger of the good news of Jesus’ birth: the nearest ones, a bunch of shepherds, will
do just fine. Whereas Roman bureaucracy—and ours as well?—maintains loyalty through fear of penalties, the angel’s first word to the shepherds is ‘do not fear’. Whereas bureaucracies carefully guard their business deals from prying eyes, God has no secrets. The good news of the birth of the saviour is ‘to be shared by the whole people’. Whereas the nations of the world measure their worth in terms of power and wealth, the worth of God’s world is measured by a helpless baby. Finally, and it’s a nice Lucan touch, the shepherds (and the reader) are given a glimpse of the heavenly ‘office’ (the real ‘holy office’) where it’s party time; the whole heavenly host singing and praising God and rejoicing in the good fortune of us lowly human beings.

As well as drawing a contrast between the busyness of Caesar’s host and the heavenly host, there may be another point to Luke’s account here. The Roman empire had to set in train a complex and lengthy process to find out how many people there were under the emperor’s rule; how many over whom he had to maintain control. In contrast, God does not need a census, knowing each creature immediately and intimately; and not for the purpose of exercising control over them but in order to free them from the kind of slavery that human beings impose on others. The shepherds are free to decide whether they will go to Bethlehem or not: they make their decision ‘Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing’. So it is with everyone that the saviour Jesus encounters both in his earthly and resurrected life: he frees us from the things that enslave us, that breed fear and hostility, so that we can make responsible decisions and that is surely what being human means. If we make free responsible decisions like the shepherds and act on them then, like the shepherds, we become part of the treasured staff of that heavenly ‘office’; note how Luke’s account of the shepherds’ glorifying and praising God ‘for all that they had heard and seen’ echoes closely his earlier description of the heavenly host.
One of the most striking features of the readings for Christmas is how differently the gospels describe the ‘advent’ of Jesus. Matthew prefaces his account with a genealogy that reaches back to Israel’s father in faith, Abraham and culminates in Joseph, descendant of the house of David and betrothed to Mary. Luke sets his account of the birth of Jesus in the context of a census of ‘the whole world’ decreed by the Roman emperor. The prologue to John’s Gospel portrays Jesus as the coming into the world of the heavenly, creative word of God. Each of the gospel accounts unveils a key aspect of the meaning of Christmas for us.

Matthew’s account, as I read it, announces Jesus as the one who heals time—our broken individual lives, the frayed threads of the history of Israel and the house of David, the fragmented histories of peoples of all times and places. Matthew’s genealogy is just too neat to be true, and no one knows this better than Matthew. On the surface he provides us with a perfectly structured three-fold set of fourteen generations but let’s look beneath the surface a little. In the first set of fourteen generations, the names that catch the eye are those of women and, when one reads the stories about them, they are unusual women to say the least. There is Tamar who begot children by her father-in-law Judah (Gen 38), Rahab the prostitute (Josh 2), and Ruth the Moabite (according to Deuteronomy 23 Moabites and Ammonites were to be forbidden entry to Israel’s liturgy; they epitomised the unworthy ‘foreigner’). In the second set we have Bathsheba; David raped her and had her husband Uriah, the foreigner, murdered. Then there is Solomon whose infidelities, according to 1 Kings 11, caused the fragmentation of David’s kingdom; readers can consult the accounts of subsequent divisive and disobedient scions of David such as Rehoboam, Abijam, Ahaz (the target of Isaiah’s censure), and Manasseh (a very bad egg indeed, according to 2 Kings 21). We know little about
most of the figures in the third set of fourteen generations because, in comparison to their pre-exilic ancestors, they were apparently nobodies on the stage of history. None of them were able to restore royal rule: they are like the frayed ends of the Davidic line. Yet, these figures are all an integral part of Jesus’ Jewish ancestry and Jesus gladly owns them all, just as he embraces and heals the fragmented lives of our present generation and reaches out to all generations to come. As the angel says, ‘he will save his people from their sins’: his people are all God’s people. For Matthew, Jesus is the only one who can forge a perfect genealogy or family of humanity out of its feuding factions.

In Luke’s account the emphasis is on place. We live our earthly lives in time and place; just as time can unite or divide humanity so can place. Place plays such an important symbolic role in our relationships with one another: as the real estate agents say ‘it’s about location, location, and location’. One can hardly imagine a greater ‘distance’ than that between the Emperor Augustus in Rome, the centre of the then known world, and Mary and Joseph in far away Bethlehem—and not even in Bethlehem itself but apparently in a shepherd’s refuge or hut outside the town. This is living beyond the fringes. Yet the baby born in this ‘no-place’ is the one who, in Luke’s story, replaces the emperor as the central person at the centre of the world. But, in doing so Jesus effectively abolishes any sense of privilege or superiority that people attribute to themselves or others because they happen to occupy a certain position at a certain time. Anyone, anywhere and at anytime is able to become a treasured and loved disciple. Time and place retain their importance because they are the arena of the incarnation, our human arena. But the incarnation takes place or is meant to take place in the heart of every human being who lives his/her time and in his/her place.

If Matthew and Luke break down the barriers of time and place or rewrite their meaning, we might say that John’s prologue abolishes a third barrier that human beings erect, and it is the most important one—the divide between heaven and earth. We tend to think that God inhabits another ‘world’, the heavenly realm that is totally alien to ours. Every now and then God condescends to appear in our world. But I think John sets out to correct this perception. It arises because of the ‘sin of the world’, an affliction that causes a distorted perception of ourselves and of God. But John teaches, ‘all that came to be had life in him.’ This Word of God, the Word that is God in whom we have life ‘was coming (always) into the world’ which is ‘his own domain’ and he ‘lived among us’ as one of us.
There are not two separate worlds or, if in our distorted perception there are, God's purpose is to show us that there is really only one, God's 'world' in which we are to 'become children of God'. For John, Jesus is the only one who can remove the barriers that impede our vision; then we will be able to see the glory of God in Jesus, the Word of God who is with us and has always been with us as he has always been with God. To put this another way, God became in our image and likeness in order to show us that we are in the image and likeness of God.
This reading from Matthew’s Gospel concludes what we may call the story of the ‘Holy Family’. There is a brief reference to Jesus’ mother and brothers at the end of chapter 12 but, significantly, their request to see Jesus prompts him to describe the new family of discipleship that he has been sent to form. When we look a little more closely at Matthew’s cryptic account of Jesus’ birth and childhood what stands out is the series of fulfilments of Old Testament prophecies. As scholars have pointed out these combine with the opening genealogy to portray Jesus not only as a son of Abraham (the genealogy), but as Immanuel (God–with–us) in 1:23, Son of David in 2:6, the new Moses in 2:15, a new Jeremiah in 2:18 (cf Jer 31:15), and probably a new Samson in 2:23. This last reference is somewhat unsure because there is no Old Testament text that corresponds to the quote in 2:23 except perhaps the reference to Samson in Judges 13:5, 7. If this is the case, then Matthew has imaginatively linked the Hebrew term nazir (consecrated) to the town of Nazareth.

It is clear that Matthew has shaped his introduction to his Gospel to evoke key figures in the Old Testament and to allude to some key texts associated with them. Thus the account of the flight into Egypt and Herod’s massacre of children around Bethlehem (omitted from our reading) is designed to evoke Moses and the exodus. The reason for this presumably is that Matthew’s subsequent account will show how Jesus incorporates and at the same time transcends the significance of these great Old Testament figures. This in turn provides a clue about the purpose of his portrayal of the ‘Holy Family’. The focus is clearly on Jesus and not on Mary and Joseph: their roles are to advance God’s purpose as revealed in the child Jesus. Within Matthew’s Gospel one could say that this purpose is expressed most clearly in the passage referred to above: Matthew 12:46–50. God’s purpose, and that of Jesus, is to establish a new family of disciples; the brothers and sisters of Jesus. It is a striking feature of Jesus’ ministry
and the early church that no privileged role is given to members of Jesus’ extended family: they seem to have been absorbed into the new family of the church. So different to the prominent position given to members of Moses’ family (Miriam the prophet, Aaron the priest) in the Torah and to the family of Mohammed in Islam.

Does this mean that the importance of the ‘Holy Family’ and the family in general is demeaned in Christianity and does this create problems for the church’s mission in our world? It seems to me that Christians must find their primary family among the disciples of Jesus (‘unless you hate father or mother you cannot be my disciple’, and ‘where two or three are gathered together in my name there I am in the midst of them’). On the one hand this means that it does not matter whether you come from a stable family with a mum and dad or not. All disciples are equally members of the family of Jesus, no matter what their background may be. On the other hand, one can also say that the natural family of mum, dad and the kids can only find its true identity and purpose within the context of the family of disciples. One might like to see the passage from Colossians as a portrait of how this family should live. If one treats discipleship as a handy accessory that can be ‘added on’ to my family and career, then the gospel warns that such discipleship will wither and die. In seeking to do so, the members of the family are like Mary and Joseph who learned that they had to place their commitment to Jesus and his mission above any expectations that they may have had of their marriage and family plans.

If this is a fair interpretation of the gospel message then it singles out marriage and the family as the truly heroic vocation of our age—at least. Parents (and their children) are called to act on the conviction that their true identity as a family is to be found, not within their own circle and its interests, but within that of discipleship of Jesus—and the disciples of Jesus are not to be identified exclusively with the members of the church. They are called to do this in a world that tends to speak of career rather than vocation, of status rather than service, of the ‘nuclear family’ rather than the family of humanity, and that sees religion as a private matter, a useful ‘add–on’ for weekends perhaps. Families that seek to live the vocation of the ‘Holy Family’ are foregoing a powerful and seductive view of family life for the sake of the gospel.
The famous blessing in Numbers that Aaron and his sons are to pronounce over the people of Israel celebrates the greatest boundary ‘violation’ that the Old Testament could conceive: God dwelling on earth among the people. It is a big moment and the Old Testament provides a long prelude to it.

The Bible begins with a story of boundary violation; Adam and Eve wanting to transcend the human condition and be like God. Paradoxically, this boundary violation creates a barrier between them and God from whom they now hide. Just before the flood story, there is in Genesis 6:1–4 a brief report about the ‘sons of God’ begetting children via the ‘daughters of men’. The report is cryptic but the message is clear enough: this mixing of the divine and human is just not on for the Old Testament, partly because rituals of this kind went on in the cultures round about Israel. The Torah spends considerable effort to ensure that the people know their place in relation to God and keep it. Yet in a typical Torah move, once appropriate boundaries have been established between God and Israel so that Israel knows its place as God’s creature, though chosen by God, the text sets about showing how certain ones can be crossed on God’s authority: intimacy with God on God’s terms. Moses, Aaron and 70 representatives of the people are invited to ascend mount Sinai and dine in God’s presence. Then, in a climactic move (Exod 25:8), Moses is instructed to build a sanctuary so that God may dwell in Israel’s midst—God pitches his tent (shekinah) among the Israelites in order to bring them blessing.

Despite the intimacy symbolised by the tabernacle/tent (God’s dwelling) in the midst of Israel, the feast that we celebrate today would be regarded in Old Testament eyes as the ultimate boundary violation between divine and human, a kind of revisiting of Genesis 6:1–4. The notion that a woman could be the mother of God is an extraordinary, even outrageous, one when you think about it. How can the time-bound, location-bound
and fleeting human life of a woman mother an infinite, eternal, transcendent God? Yet it is due in part to the Old Testament conviction that the transcendent God is thereby able to be completely immanent (and vice-versa) that Christianity is in turn able to articulate its belief that Mary as the mother of Jesus is thereby also the mother of God.

The Church’s proclamation about Mary also stems from its faith proclamation about Jesus. Because we believe he is God, Mary as his mother must therefore be the mother of God (in the Greek church the preferred term is *theotokos* or ‘God-bearer’). Our belief that Mary is the virgin mother of Jesus acknowledges the divine initiative in his conception and his divinity. Hence the frequent use of the phrase ‘the virgin mother of God’.

In an important way therefore, the feast of Mary as the mother of God celebrates the removal of the last boundary or barrier between the divine and the human—done of course on God’s initiative, not ours. Its removal does not mean that the difference between human and divine is blurred or obliterated. Far from it. According to the Old Testament narratives, the attempt to transcend the human condition on our terms ends up creating more problems than it solves. We become more divided from God and from ourselves. Ironically, in our desire to transcend boundaries or barriers between ourselves and the person or thing we desire we end up erecting more in their place. When God removes these barriers through the life and grace of Christ, we are finally able to see ourselves and our relationship with God in its true light, not the distorted feeble light of our own making.

Another important aspect of Mary as mother of God is that she exemplifies the dynamic purpose of this relationship between God and ourselves. Being the mother of God involved her full cooperation in the purpose of God; in other words, her discipleship (‘let it be done to me according to your word’). Luke notes on several occasions that Mary ‘treasured all these things and pondered on them in her heart’. As mother, Mary conceived the Word of God in her womb and brought him forth for the world. Jesus, as son of God and son of Mary gives his life in order to make us sons and daughters of God. Hence, she is not only the mother of God but our mother as well. As disciple, Mary conceives the word of God in her heart and brings it forth in her life for the world. She is not only the faithful disciple of Jesus but our model of discipleship as well.
Most of us have had the experience of cruising along on our chosen path of life when, somewhat unexpectedly, a person appears whose presence we sense may have massive implications for our life. Do we welcome this person as someone from whom we can learn and hopefully change, or do we see him or her as a rival whose potential influence needs to be countered or eliminated in some way? The more we see ourselves as like a ‘king’ or ‘queen’ in our domain, the more we may feel we have to gain from the newcomer—or lose.

The contrast between Matthew’s portrayal of the three wise men and king Herod fits rather well into this scenario. The ‘epiphany’, the manifestation or appearance of Jesus, poses a challenge to those with power and prestige. The wise men are evidently men of standing and wealth in their society and Matthew does not give their number. The traditional number of three is presumably derived from the three gifts (gold, frankincense and myrrh) that they offer the Christ child. But Matthew may have envisaged a considerable number, a large group of prestigious foreigners that would cause a stir in Herod’s kingdom. They come to pay the newborn child homage, are overwhelmed with joy on seeing him and immediately fulfill their commitment. This is the one who will bring true wisdom to the world and they are ready to acknowledge their dependence on him and his teaching.

In contrast, the reaction of Herod to the wise men and their news is one of fear, because they refer to the newborn child as ‘the infant king of the Jews’. I come from a farming background and there is a saying among farmers that there is never enough room for two bulls in the same paddock. Herod is king of the Jews and he is not about to share his domain with another, much less hand it over. Hence, he must move immediately, in a deceptive way, to eliminate what he sees as a rival. But of course, as Matthew portrays Jesus, he is no threat to Herod’s earthly kingdom; Jesus
is the one who comes to enable all, in whatever path of life they walk, whether it be as a servant or a ruler, to achieve their full humanity as sons and daughters of God.

But, in order to fulfill this mission, Jesus must manifest himself to all, even those who reject him and kill him. The fact that his epiphany or appearance is not a threat to anyone but rather their salvation is graphically demonstrated in the way he prays for and forgives those who put him to death. The epiphany of Jesus caused Herod to be afraid and to plan to eliminate the ‘other’ king whom he saw as the source of his fear. But Jesus comes to take away our fear and enable divided humanity to build a new community based on love and trust. As the letter to the Ephesians puts it so well ‘it means that pagans now share the same inheritance, that they are parts of the same body, in Christ Jesus’.

In principle, we are all ready and willing to accept the ‘manifestation’ of Jesus in our lives because we believe, in the words of Isaiah, that he is the light that has come, the glory of the Lord rising in our midst. But of course, it can be tricky to discern just where this presence of Jesus is being made manifest in our lives and in what form. We might think that, after 2,000 years of tradition, we know the score pretty well. But, the Word of God is ‘ever old and ever new’ and has an uncanny knack of surprising us and catching us out. We pray for the wisdom of the wise men to discern the presence of our king and to welcome him into our lives; his presence may not take the form we want but it may be the one we need.
Baptism of the Lord

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

Two key elements of the Bible’s portrayal of God are transcendence and immanence. Only an utterly transcendent God can also be completely immanent, reaching anyone at any time anywhere. By the same token, a God who is completely immanent, totally present to me at this moment, must also be completely transcendent, otherwise a fake god. The feast of the Baptism of Jesus celebrates the immanent side with a vengeance, so much so that Matthew’s account (as do the other evangelists’ accounts in different ways) hastens at strategic points to signal Jesus’ transcendence. It would seem that the tradition about Jesus’ baptism both enthralled and disturbed the early church. How could the son of God participate fully in a rite that identified you as a repentant sinner, at a distance, as it were, from God?

The first signal comes with Matthew’s report that John the Baptist tried to dissuade Jesus by proclaiming that he was the one in need of baptism, not Jesus. Jesus’ reply combines two things. One is that John’s rite of baptism is in no way to be changed for him—he will be baptised like everybody else. The second signals what his baptism means, it is in order to ‘do all that righteousness demands’. It is a sign of Jesus’ complete commitment to God’s will to bring about righteousness for humanity. Hence, Jesus joins in solidarity with all sinners to provide the freedom from sin that the washing in water signifies. As the preface for the feast expresses it: ‘Jesus was baptised in waters made holy by the one who was baptised’.

The second signal accompanies Jesus’ emergence from the Jordan: the heavens are opened and Jesus sees the Spirit descending like a dove. Although in the scene that Matthew constructs Jesus is the only one to see the dove, the reader is made privy to this ‘private revelation’, thereby being assured that Jesus’ entry into the ‘tomb’ of the water is the work of the transcendent God in heaven. The third signal is the voice of God that fol-
lows. The addressee is unspecified and so open–ended but the purpose of the voice is to identify the one who has expressed complete solidarity with sinners as ‘my Son, the Beloved’.

In a subtle touch, these words of God allude to the famous text on the ‘servant’ in the book of Isaiah, our first reading (the Greek word pais can double as ‘servant’ and ‘son’). It is a most appropriate allusion because of the way the manner and goal of the servant’s mission are outlined. Given that, in its Old Testament context, this text refers to Israel, the description of its mission marks a massive shift away from the traditional notion of how God (and Israel) deals with foreign nations. Customary expectations of conquest and glory are overturned. Likewise, the manner of Jesus’ mission shocked his contemporaries, prompting John the Baptist to send a delegation to ask whether Jesus was indeed the one whose coming he proclaimed, and prompting Peter to remonstrate with Jesus (‘Lord, this must never happen to you’).

In a similar vein, the goal of the servant Israel’s mission is not to mount a throne of power and prestige but to enter the dark dungeons of the nations, to free captives and let people see the light. The goal of Jesus’ mission, whom we believe fulfills the mission of Isaiah’s servant, is nicely captured by Peter’s words in the second reading from Acts. God ‘does not have favourites’ and loves all equally. Peter has come to this conviction via his own, at times, troubling experience as a disciple and by witnessing how ‘Jesus went about doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the devil’.

The highly condensed references to Father, Son and Spirit in Matthew’s account of the baptism point to another important theological element. In the rite of baptism, our immersion in water and emergence from it signifies the discarding of our ‘old’ sinful life and the putting on of a ‘new’ life that is a sharing in the life of the Trinity. Father Son and Holy Spirit are equally involved (immanent) in freeing us from our sinful selves in order that we may become heirs to the their divine (transcendent) life.
That first reading from Genesis is about us, that we are all suckers for the advertising blurb in one way or another, all enslaved in some way to the seduction of sin. The season of Lent reminds us of this, painfully at times, but also offers the promise of liberation from our enslavement. In reading the ‘Garden Story’ I follow the modern view that it is about humanity as such; it reflects the mythical way of philosophising via storytelling before the advent of the philosophical treatise. The story form offers more flexibility in some ways than formal argument; as well as this it is always helpful to illustrate an argument with examples (stories). Our Old Testament story supplies both the example and the argument. The serpent’s spiel represents that clever sales pitch that we fall for even as we protest we have seen through it (buy this and you will look divine; eat this and you will live to a 100; read this and I swear you will never see things the same way again). The ironical outcome of the couple’s acceptance of this sales pitch is that things indeed are no longer seen the same way. Humanity’s attempt to transcend its condition or situation on its own terms (to be free) leads to its opposite. The couple that hoped to be ‘like God’ behaves in a very ungodlike way, as frightened, vulnerable creatures who hide from each other behind leaves. Likewise, they try to hide from God, but in vain because God comes looking for them.

The message of the story is that one cannot escape this troubled situation by one’s own efforts; to try and do so is simply to re–enact the story in one’s own life. Our human condition is an enslavement from which we need to be delivered. The one who can deliver us must be supremely free in the biblical sense, where freedom means that one has a right relationship with God and that this relationship infuses all other relationships. Matthew’s account of Jesus’ temptation in the desert portrays him as the

First Sunday of Lent

*Genesis 2:7–9; 3:1–7; Romans 5:12–19 or 5:12, 17–19; Matthews 4:1–11*
righteous one who, though tempted in every way that we are, remains supremely free because he maintains a right relationship with God.

In typical storytelling fashion, there are three temptations (three examples) that provide a torah or instruction for readers. The first clearly echoes the Garden Story with its temptation to transcend the human condition on one's own terms, to ‘turn these stones into loaves’. Jesus’ response to each temptation is to quote a passage from the torah (Deuteronomy) and to act in accord with it. In relation to the first temptation his response is to act only in accordance with God’s will. The text’s claim is that the words God has spoken in the Bible provide enough for us to decide what God’s will is in our lives. We decide what God’s will is because that is what God wants us to do: to listen to the Word and make an honest response. It is part of our dignity as God’s children.

The second temptation attempts to get ‘under’ Jesus’ reliance on God’s word by targeting the trust on which it is based. The temptation to have experiential ‘proof’ that God cares and looks after us can be acute at times but its outcome, like the outcome of the failure of trust in the Garden story, is destructive. If a spouse continually seeks proof of the other’s love, the relationship is likely to collapse under the pressure. How can you demand proof of love unless you first define what you mean by it, in which case you have taken control of the other person and demeaned and enslaved him or her? Jesus will not put God to the proof. The final temptation raises the question of an alternative to one’s relationship with God. Can anything in this world justify such a move? The biblical answer is a resounding no! because of its conviction that no other relationships are really possible without a relationship to God. It forms the basis of all others and is the base on which God wants to build a rich human life.

As in the ‘Garden Story’, God comes looking for us as we hide in the garden, trying to escape—such is our distorted perception of God and ourselves. God not only wants to free us from our affliction and enslavement but to enrich us in a way that makes all the wealth of the world pale into insignificance. The reading from Romans underscores the difference via a series of statements ‘if it is certain that . . . it is even more certain that . . . ’ Seduced by the serpent, Eve and Adam saw God as mean, withholding what was their ‘right’. In contrast Paul, who has been freed from his own enslavement by the grace of Christ, writes of the abundant gifts that God desires to shower on us. We need to face our sinfulness honestly and Lent
is the season for this, but we also need—perhaps even more—to see it is a season in which our generous God seeks us out, bearing abundant gifts even though we do not deserve them.
The transfiguration is a dramatic scene and its context in Matthew’s Gospel is suitably dramatic; a telling one for the season of Lent (Mark’s context is similar, Luke’s somewhat different). It is preceded by Peter’s confession of faith and Jesus’ subsequent rebuke ‘Get behind me, Satan’ when Peter tries to dissuade Jesus from his purpose. Jesus then instructs the disciples about the nature of discipleship—it involves taking up one’s cross and losing one’s life. There is a sense of urgency and finality about the decision to follow Jesus because, as he goes on to say, the ‘Son of Man’ is to come and repay each one for his/her deeds; in fact this will happen to some of those present. Equally dramatically, the transfiguration is followed by the disciples’ question about Elijah and Jesus’ reply that Elijah has already come, has been rejected and persecuted, just as Jesus himself will be.

It is with good reason that Matthew sets the transfiguration as a beacon of blazing light in the midst of this apparent darkness. The very disciple whom a few verses before is referred to as ‘Satan’ gets to join his fishing partners on the mountain and see Jesus in glory, his shining face recalling the way Moses’ face shone whenever he went into the tent of meeting (Ex 34). In the sermon on the mount, Jesus is the new Moses who proclaims a teaching that fulfils the purpose of the Torah. In the transfiguration on the mount, Jesus is again cast as the new Moses whose transformed visage and clothing signals the presence of God. And again there is continuity and fulfillment. Whereas Moses’ face signaled the presence of God in the tent, the completely transfigured Jesus signals the presence of God—in him.

Understandably, Peter seeks to ‘fit’ Jesus within the established parameters of Torah and Prophecy and proposes three tents: one for Moses (Torah), one for Elijah (Prophets) and one for Jesus. But a tent is a temporary home for those on a journey whereas the journey and its goal has been reached on this mountain in the person of Jesus. He is the presence of God among us as indicated by the cloud (the sign of God’s presence in
the tent at Sinai and during the desert journey) and by the heavenly voice that identifies Jesus as ‘my Son, the beloved’. The withdrawal of Moses and Elijah from the scene is another way of pointing to Jesus as the unique presence of God, as the one who now speaks the word of God. As once the people of Israel were enjoined to listen to the Torah (represented by Moses), and to Prophecy as its authentic proclamation and interpretation (represented by Elijah), so now they are to ‘listen to him’.

The context of our gospel invites a further reflection. Is the ‘world’ portrayed on the mountain a kind of magical, ideal world whereas the real world, our world, is awaiting Jesus and the disciples when they descend the mountain? I don’t think this is what Matthew has in mind. As he portrays it, the real world is the one with God on the mountain and Jesus descends the mountain to continue his work of transforming the ‘unreal world’ of sin and corruption that we have made. In God’s eyes it is not fit for human habitation and God is bent on doing something about it.

As Lent comes round again we are challenged, however reluctantly, to face our flawed selves. It can be depressing to realise how little we have advanced since last year and that perhaps we have even regressed. The call to discipleship is indeed demanding and we fail—like Peter and like the disciples. Yet, like Satan Peter, we are invited up the mountain into the company of Jesus as the dwelling place of God. We may be afraid because of our inadequacies and our failures, we may fear that we will never be welcome in God’s presence. But the gospel passage tells how Jesus comes and touches the disciples, assuring them ‘not to be afraid’. The yearly return of the season of Lent assures us in its turn that this invitation is made again and again. It is never withheld because, as the second letter to Timothy says, ‘this grace had already been granted to us in Christ Jesus, before the beginning of time’. The author of this letter, if it was Paul, is supremely confident that the power of God can transfigure us and enable us to step out of the shadows cast by our present and past and live by the light of Christ.

The transforming light of Christ that shines so warmly into the cold and dark of human lives is reflected nicely in the reading from Genesis 12, the text that tells how it all began. The call of Abraham is also set within a context of darkness and human failure—the stories of Genesis 2—11. Abraham’s mission is to be the bearer of blessing to all the families of the earth. The story of Israel begins on a positive note; the mission will succeed. The only negative note is struck by the remark that—in
the Hebrew—‘I will bless those who bless you, the one who curses you I will curse.’ This text envisages the overwhelming majority enjoying God’s blessing.
Third Sunday of Lent

Exodus 17:3–7; Romans 5:1–2, 5–8;
John 4:5–42 or 4:5–15, 19–26, 39, 40–42

One of the challenges of life is maintaining the right distinction between what I would call boundaries and barriers. As we know to our regret in the church, we need to respect appropriate boundaries so that mature and enduring relationships between men and women, laity and clergy, adults and children may flourish. But there are barriers that impede the formation of relationships and which should be removed. Our readings this Sunday deal with two key ones. The reading from Exodus tackles the barrier that is ‘erected’ when trust ‘breaks down’. The reading from John’s Gospel tackles the barrier of religion.

In our Exodus narrative, the people lose trust in the promise that God and Moses are leading them to freedom in the land—despite in the story having experienced deliverance at the sea. Trust can become vulnerable when challenged by fear (no water) or the unknown (the wilderness). Once trust starts to break down, the focus of attention shifts to oneself (note the reference to ‘I’ first, then the kids and the cattle). One also starts to blame the other in the relationship and to make demands: is the Lord with us or not? A distorted perception of Moses and God develops and this exacerbates the sense of a barrier or distance between the people and God. One story even has the people prefer slavery in Egypt over journeying with God through the desert, such is their distorted perception of reality (Nb 11:4—6). The outcome of such a breakdown of trust is that one looks for another relationship: hence the golden calf apostasy at Sinai. The ‘murmuring stories’ paint a brutally honest portrait of ancient Israel, no doubt an urgent ‘torah’ for the reader about the importance of maintaining trust in God, even in the most desperate of circumstances (such as the exile).

If the Exodus text is about the erection of barriers that divide, the Gospel text from John is about the dismantling of them. The barrier between
Jew and Samaritan ran deep; it affected even the most basic things that human beings need to share, such as water. In response to Jesus’ initiative in asking for a drink, the barriers immediately go up via the woman’s questions. The implication is that this encounter will be marked, like other encounters between Jew and Samaritan, by distance, disagreement and even hostility. We can even slip into a mentality where such things are not only expected but enjoyable and we resist any change to the ‘status quo’. But Jesus’ mission is to change the status quo, the way we like to see things however distorted they are. His response is to offer the woman another perspective on things. From this perspective (‘if you only knew’) she would gladly discard the barrier between them because she would see him as he truly is: a messenger from God bearing gifts (‘you would have been the one to ask and he would have given you living water’). As this delightful story unfolds, the woman discovers (or is led to?) the identity of Jesus, first by a question (‘are you greater than our father Jacob’?), then by a request for a share of his gift (‘some of that water’) and thirdly by a recognition (‘you are a prophet’). This follows his ‘revelation’ that he knows her whole life. But Jesus’ revelation of his divinely inspired insight is not done for a negative or hostile purpose (the barrier theme) but for a positive one (he identifies her as one who speaks the truth).

Now that she accepts Jesus speaks with divine authority the barrier between Jew and Samaritan can be dismantled, again by Jesus leading her to see things from another perspective (‘those who worship must worship in spirit and truth’). When she professes her faith in the Messiah to come Jesus reveals his divine identity to her (ego eimi; ‘I am’). The barrier erected in the name of religion is removed and the woman becomes a messenger of the good news to her fellow Samaritans. Jesus’ disciples return and, not surprisingly, operate behind the old barrier. Jesus urges them to look again (from his perspective) and see that the barrier has gone, the Samaritans are thronging across the fields; a great harvest that ‘you had not worked for’. The story ends with the report that many Samaritans believed and that Jesus stayed with them. In Christ there is no longer Jew or Samaritan; in the words of our reading from Romans ‘by faith we are judged righteous and at peace with God’. The absence of peace is marked by division, its presence by communion, above all by communion with God.
Fourth Sunday of Lent

1 Samuel 16:1, 6–7, 10–13; Ephesians 5:8–14;
John 9:1–41 or 9:1, 6–9, 13–17, 34–38

The first half of John’s Gospel has been well named by scholars as the ‘book of signs’. Within chapters 2—12 Jesus works a number of signs that call for faith and challenge those who think they have faith. Our story of the man born blind is a particularly important and intriguing ‘sign’. Jesus says of him that ‘he was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him’. He then cures him and he becomes, in the words of some of the Pharisees, one of the ‘signs like these’. But his transformation from physical blindness to sight is only part of his role as a ‘sign’, one in whom the works of God are displayed. What makes this story particularly important within John’s Gospel is the man’s journey of faith and his proclamations of faith and honesty as his story unfolds. As a model of the true disciple and a reflection of Jesus’ own journey in John’s Gospel, the man maintains faith and speaks the truth in a series of encounters with people who challenge him in a variety of ways—and thereby tempt him to deny or dilute faith. One could almost say that the sequence of highly condensed scenes typifies most of the ‘situations’ that challenge our faith.

We can imagine that the temptation to slip away from his past is quite acute when he realises that even his neighbours are not sure he is the same person. But, he acknowledges that he is the one and names the man who healed him. Likewise, it would be easier to avoid trouble with the Pharisees when they ask for his opinion of Jesus by making the same answer he gave earlier when asked where Jesus was—‘I do not know’. But he does not and confesses that ‘he is a prophet’. According to the third scene, his family effectively abandons him and he has to face the consequences of his professions of faith all alone; the one against the many. In the fourth scene, he is surrounded by the ‘Jews’, the term John uses for those who, among his own people, are most hostile to Jesus and his mission. Here it is a case of the many against the one.
Another intriguing feature of this story is that, as the pressure grows on the man and he is more isolated and surrounded by ‘enemies’ (to use an Old Testament term), the focus on Jesus becomes more intense and the decision to remain or not remain his disciple more acute. The Jews proclaim that Jesus is a sinner; the man replies that his unique healing power is a sign that he must come from God.

Life is about decisions. Paul knows that he cannot address the details of each person’s life in the church at Ephesus: to claim to do so would impinge on people’s freedom. Instead he exhorts them to try and discover what is pleasing to the Lord, a process that involves making decisions. There is no avoiding this basic human reality: not to make a decision is still a decision so why try and avoid it? John’s Gospel today teaches that making the right decisions about Jesus and about ourselves does not ensure an easy ride; more likely it will be the reverse. But just when we may think that our decisions, our commitments, have caused us to be completely isolated and abandoned—perhaps by those whom we love most—this Gospel story from John tells us that the one who matters most, Jesus, is with us in our isolation. When Jesus hears that they have driven the man away he finds him; he singles him out so that this story may be told about him as one in whom the works of God are displayed. He has indeed become a new man, a new creation, something that is perhaps signaled at the beginning of the story where Jesus’ cure of his blindness echoes the creation of the human being from the ground in Genesis 2. Another key component of God’s work in this man is that he stands as a warning to those of us who think that we see clearly but in reality are blind, our vision distorted by the kinds of things that the season of Lent invites us to tackle and assures us can be removed—like cataracts!

But, the Bible does not provide any magic way of making decisions and it tells stories where even the most graced and wise of Israel’s leaders get it wrong—in good faith of course. Take the reading from 1 Samuel as an example. Samuel, one of Israel’s most revered prophets, makes the wrong decision about the Lord’s anointed one. In the story, God corrects him and things come to a satisfactory resolution. We will make blunders at times but as long as we are seeking for the truth and acting in honesty, we grow in faith and wisdom and the works of God are manifest in us.
A number of themes in John’s Gospel converge in the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead and all we can do here is highlight some of them. Whichever way you look at this story it provides plenty of material for a homily.

This is the last sign or work in what many scholars call the ‘book of signs’ in the gospel (1:19—12:50), the sign above all that points to Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection in the ‘book of glory’ (13:1—20:31). In the preceding chapter, Jesus presents himself as the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep (10:11–18). In chapter 11 he risks his life by going to Bethany near Jerusalem to raise his friend Lazarus from the dead. News of this miracle firms the resolve of the Jewish authorities that Jesus must die: and so he lays down his life for his sheep.

A link with the theme of glory is provided by Jesus’ comment when he receives news of Lazarus’s illness: he says that ‘this illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory so that the Son of God may be glorified through it’. There are layers of meaning embedded in this statement. It initially looks misleading because, as the story unfolds, Lazarus’s illness does indeed lead to his death. But, in raising Lazarus from the dead Jesus manifests the glory of God, the one who has power over life and death. This will be manifested fully in the death and resurrection of Jesus himself.

But there is more. As already noted, the act of raising Lazarus leads to Jesus’ own death in being raised on the cross. Paradoxically, this repulsive death will become the great sign of God’s love for the world and will ‘draw all people to myself’ (12:32) because ‘the ruler of this world will be driven out’. The revelation of God’s saving purpose for humanity is the glory of God and in this God’s son is also glorified. The victory over death is not primarily over physical death but the ‘real death’ that the world suffers from because of its enslavement to the powers of this world that are exposed in the ‘sin of the world’.
This connection between the story of Lazarus and the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus ushers in another important theme, the massive difference between resuscitation and resurrection.¹ Lazarus is raised back to life in this world and will die again like any mortal; resurrection is a rising to eternal life free of the powers of death that disfigure and demean our human life. In the story this difference is expressed in two ways. One is via the exchange between Jesus and Martha that climaxes with Jesus’ proclamation ‘I am the resurrection’. The other is the dramatic way in which Lazarus comes forth from the tomb bound hand and foot in the shrouds of death and has to be released. In contrast, when the disciples discover the empty tomb on Easter morning, the shrouds of death are found rolled up and in their place, a sign that the one who was wrapped in them has, without any evidence of a struggle, freed himself from the bonds of death.

Granted that this is a fair reading of the story, there is a danger that this line of thinking demeans the drama and disaster of Lazarus’s illness and death—in short the dissolution that is our physical end. It merely provides a setting, an occasion for the key proclamation about Jesus’ glorification. However, as I read the story, the evangelist is well aware of this danger and deftly counters it by the way he portrays Jesus’ involvement in Lazarus’ death and the mourning that accompanies it. The death of this friend and the grief of his sisters move Jesus deeply to grieve with them. One commentator notes that men in those times did not normally weep at a death; this was the role of women. Jesus’ break with custom is a manifestation of his solidarity and sympathy with the bereaved.² In theological terms, we might also say the story is subtly combining the notions of transcendence and immanence. The transcendent one, the Son of God, is able to enter fully into the profound sorrow and loss that human beings feel at the death of a loved one. If this is the case with Lazarus, then it is also the case with each human life. And if the life and death of Lazarus is the locus of a manifestation of the glory of Jesus and the Father, then so must it also be with the life and death of each one of us, only more so because our death leads not to resuscitation but resurrection.

¹. In an apparent oversight, the New Jerusalem Bible introduces our story with the heading ‘The Resurrection of Lazarus’!
Matthew’s account of Jesus’ passion and death is marked at strategic points by references to the fulfillment of the Scriptures. This is in keeping with the rest of the gospel, in particular the account of Jesus’ birth with which the gospel begins. The account commences with the report that Judas betrayed him for thirty pieces of silver: when Judas returns the money later, prompting the priests to buy the potter’s field, we learn that this is in fulfillment of a prophecy in the book of Jeremiah. Jesus foretells that his disciples will abandon him, again in fulfillment of the Scriptures. Peter and the disciples proclaim (sic prophesy) that they will never abandon Jesus but their prophecy has only human backing and fails ‘to be fulfilled’. Their desertion of Jesus reveals the emptiness of prophecies that do not come from God. How often do we human beings make grand predictions and prophecies about ourselves and our world, only to see the emptiness of them in due course.

Again, when Jesus is arrested in the garden, he appeals to the Scriptures to forbid the use of violence on his behalf. The way of the cross, the way of non-violence in the face of violence, is the way of God and it fulfills the Scriptures. This amounts to a massive claim in relation to some violent Old Testament texts such as in the book of Joshua (Hebrew for ‘saviour’). The servant passages in the book of Isaiah show that ancient Israelites differed in their understanding of how God triumphs over evil and oppression. The fact that these differing views are present in the Bible suggests that those who put the final product together thought it wise to include them for our reflection rather than adjudicate between them.

In the trial scene before the high priest, the key issue is the truth and authority of Jesus’ own prophecies. False witnesses are paraded to accuse the true prophet of false and blasphemous prophecies. In response, Jesus prophesies that they will see the fulfillment of his prophecy about the ex-
alteration of the ‘Son of Man.’ The scene ends dramatically with Jesus being mocked as a prophet. Such disputes about prophecy and its fulfillment are not so appropriate in the trial before Pilate, a pagan. In their place, Matthew portrays Jesus as fulfilling the prophecy of the suffering servant of Isaiah 52:13—53:12 who remains silent before his accusers. Jesus’ silence amazes Pilate, in fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah that nations and kings will be amazed and reduced to silence before the servant. Finally, on the cross Jesus invokes the opening words of the famous Psalm 22, ‘my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ Jesus is one with all those who cry out in lament to God from a situation of powerlessness and oppression. The one who can enter so completely into the situation of lament is the one who can rescue us from our lamentable situations (the fulfillment of the prayer of lament).

Why this focus on the fulfillment of Scripture? No doubt there is more than one reason but surely an important one is to signal that Jesus’ passion and death is more than what it appears to be on the surface—the result of hostility, intrigue, fear and violence. Rather, it is the high point of God’s purpose for humanity and the Scriptures (both the Old Testament and Jesus’ own words) testify that God’s purpose is salvation. The astonishing thing is that even those who betray Jesus (Judah, Peter), those who fail him (the disciples), those who mock him (the priests, the crowds), and the pagans who sentence him to a violent death (Pilate) are all mysteriously embraced within God’s overall saving purpose, as are all those who preceded this moment and all those who follow this moment (who will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power).

Matthew’s account points to the presence of God’s saving purpose by also presenting a number of unlikely or unexpected people who step forward to testify to the truth of Jesus and what is taking place. There is the contrast between those who, at the beginning of the narrative, hand Jesus over to his executioners (Judas, the disciples who abandon him, Peter who denies him) and Joseph of Arimathea, to whom the body of Jesus is handed over by the executioners. Matthew’s brief report even allows one to think that Joseph has become a disciple because of, or in the wake of, Jesus’ death. The disciples who fail to keep vigil with Jesus in the garden are ‘fulfilled’ by women disciples at the end of the account who keep vigil at the cross and at the tomb. Judas proclaims that he is a sinner who has offended against ‘innocent blood.’ The truth of his confession and testimony highlights the bogus testimony of the clergy. Pilate dissembles under pressure from the crowd as his wife sends her clear message that Jesus is an
innocent man. Finally, whereas the crowd mocks Jesus’ identity as ‘God’s Son’, the centurion confesses ‘Truly, this man was God’s Son’. The crowd does not grasp what is taking place on their behalf but the centurion does and so does the earth which trembles at what is a cosmic event. A striking feature of the crucifixion scene is the sign on the cross, ‘This is Jesus, the king of the Jews’. The sign of the cross turns these words into a prophecy and fulfills them in a way that their authors (not named in Matthew) could never envisage.
Thursday in Holy Week

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

Feet may not have all that much symbolic value in our contemporary culture and liturgy; we tend to focus on hands (joined in prayer), lips (singing praise), ears (hearing the word), and so on. But feet were a highly valued symbol of royal and divine power in ancient times. A victorious leader would tread on the prone bodies of his enemies (Josh 10:24); the ark of the covenant evoked the footstool on which the enthroned Lord of hosts rested ‘his feet’; the fleet of foot messenger was crucial for getting messages to their destination (for example, news of the outcome of a battle). Washing a guest’s feet on entering a house was a sign of welcome and hospitality. No doubt part of the reason for the value accorded feet in the ancient world was because walking was how one generally got around. Mechanised transport has caused us to lose sight of our feet, so to speak.

In contrast, the Gospel of John has a profound appreciation of the symbolic significance of feet and outlines it in three passages about foot washing: Mary’s anointing of the feet of Jesus in John 12, Jesus’ washing of the feet of his disciples at the last supper, and his instruction that they should do the same to one another. In John’s Gospel, the anointing of Jesus’ feet by Mary marks the end of his preaching mission. His evening with Martha, Mary and Lazarus is the final stopover before his entry into Jerusalem where his glorification and ‘return’ to the Father will take place. Tired, dirty, calloused feet are the mark of the committed preacher, a sign of total giving, and Jesus gave himself completely to his preaching mission, trudging ceaselessly around Palestine. It is also a sign of his love for those who are troubled or in need, and the anointing of his feet by Mary acknowledges this. Jesus had recently raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. This self-giving that marks Jesus’ preaching journeys will reach its fulfillment in his death on the cross, as Jesus intimates in his reply to Judas who objects to the use of expensive ointment to wash feet.
In washing the feet of his disciples during the last supper Jesus, like Mary, expresses his love and appreciation of his disciples who accompanied him throughout his many journeys. But, more importantly, one may say that now, as he prepares to ‘return’ to the Father, he ‘anoints’ their feet to carry forward his mission of preaching the Good News of salvation to the whole world. In a symbolic sense, their feet become Christ’s feet and their footsteps his footsteps. He now works through them: as Paul says in Romans 10:15 ‘how will there be preachers if they are not sent? As Scripture says: How beautiful are the feet of the messenger of good news. Calloused, dirty, tired but, in the service of Christ, transformed into beautiful feet!

But what is more, the disciples are to become Christ to each other and this is encapsulated in Jesus’ instruction that they are to wash each other’s feet. In a powerful symbolic gesture but one that is somewhat foreign to us, what they do to each other’s feet will be a sign of how they love one another. And, like Jesus who washed the feet of all the disciples, Judas and those who would betray and abandon him, so they are to love one another whether good or bad. As the words of Jesus make clear (‘not all of you are clean’), this does not mean turning a blind eye to evil; what it does mean is extending the mercy of God towards all and sundry, even in the face of rejection.

In relation to this it is significant that the disciples are all washed with the one bowl and the same water. In years gone by a mother would normally run only one bath for several of her children to wash in; not the kind of thing we do nowadays (I would guess that in most of our Holy Thursday liturgies we would pour fresh water from a jug for each participant’s foot rather than do as Jesus did). It is also significant that John uses the broader term ‘disciples’ and not the more restricted ‘the twelve’: we are not told how many feet Jesus washed. In an intriguing way, the text is somewhat open-ended.

While it is nice to have the foot-washing in our Holy Thursday liturgy, the challenge embedded in it is quite beyond us. We can only respond to it by being remade in the image and likeness of Christ. Jesus comes to us in the Eucharist to do just this. In the words of St Augustine: ‘I am your food, but instead of my being transformed into you, it is you who shall be transformed into me.’
The Jewish authorities may have seen Jesus’ execution as the elimination of a messianic fraud, while the Romans probably saw it as an opportunity to remove a potential troublemaker. However, the resurrection of Jesus and the linking of this with his whole life and ministry rendered any such explanations of his death completely false for the church community. To answer the question why did he die the way he did, they turned to the two great ideas or images of God that course through the Bible: the just judge who is rightly intolerant of evil and the merciful lover who forgives. It is difficult for us to harmonise these powerful and dynamic images, and the point may be that we are not meant to in this life, but they provide a crucial context for giving meaning to the life of faith. A brief review of some major attempts to answer the question ‘why’ will illustrate this.

One quite influential line of thought was that, by his death, Jesus paid the penalty for the sins of the world. It was beyond the ability or power of any human being to do so because, being flawed, any human action no matter how good would still be imperfect and inadequate. Only the ‘Son of God’, Jesus, both God and man, could satisfy the divine demand for justice.

This explanation attempts to give due weight to the theology of a just God but ends up with a somewhat bizarre image of God. If God would not forgive us our sins until his Son satisfied him by dying on the cross then God is even less forgiving than many human beings. If we feel that we are somehow compensated for an offence by the satisfaction of watching the guilty party suffer, we are being pretty vengeful and, many would say, infantile. A fortiori it reveals an infantile theology of God. Despite its odd logic, this idea has been popular, perhaps because it touches a vengeful chord in us. We create God in our own image and likeness.
Another explanation, and one that surfaces at times in the liturgy, is that Jesus suffered as the representative of the human race; he suffered *instead* of the human race, and his suffering was a kind of ransom paid to the devil in order to free sinners who had sold their souls to the devil. It does convey the notion of a heroic figure who hands himself over to the enemy to free the prisoners. But, how can God or Jesus be beholden to the devil in any form? The notion of God paying a ransom to the devil in some kind of just transaction looks quite odd.

These answers to why Jesus died pay due attention to the seriousness of sin but fail to pay due attention to the theology of God as merciful lover. Love of course is meant here in its biblical meaning of God’s commitment and loyalty to us. As the Gospel of John puts it, God wants to take away the sin of the world and restore to its full glory the relationship between God and humanity. For us poor human beings to experience this and to make a free decision in response to God’s initiative (if not free then it is not a fully human decision), this restoration needs to take place in the human realm, in a human way. God’s commitment to bringing this about is revealed in the incarnation of his Son who carries out the will of the Father—as such this is a perfect act of love between the Father and the Son, as well a perfect act of love of human beings for whom the Son becomes flesh and gives himself completely.

On this understanding, Jesus’ death on the cross was not something necessary, ordained by God, that he had to endure. It was the Roman method of crucifixion for criminals at that time. What was necessary was that when Jesus was confronted with rejection and hatred—the absence of love—he continued to love unconditionally, even those who set out to kill him by crucifying him. As has been said by many Christians throughout the centuries reflecting on Jesus and his life: being fully human and loving others unconditionally will almost inevitably get you killed. In this sense, one can say that death for Jesus was inevitable because of what he stood for, preached about, and lived. The life of love that culminated in his death is for all of us who cannot love like this and, in the mysterious operation of God’s grace, embraces and empowers us to become like Jesus and love like him.

Where is the justice component in all this? May I suggest that Jesus’ act of perfect love is perfectly just: it is not done for any other motive than love of the Father (obedience to the Father’s will) and love of wounded humanity. The biblical notion of justice/righteousness is a proper relationship and complete loyalty to that relationship. The just judge is one who
is always loyal to right relationships in society; always delivering people from the threat of injustice.

The theologian Herbert McCabe notes that from one point of view the cross is the sacrament of the sin of the world—it is the sign of the ultimate sin that was made inevitable by the kind of world that we human beings have made. From another point of view it is the sacrament of our forgiveness, because it is the ultimate sign of God’s love for us.3 As Psalm 63 says, ‘your love Lord, is better than life’.

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As one listens to the series of Old Testament readings during the Easter vigil, one could be forgiven for thinking that God has an almighty ego. When Abraham passes God’s ‘test’ of detachment from his son Isaac, God does not say ‘blessed are you Abraham’ but ‘now I know you fear God’. According to the reading from Exodus, the whole purpose of the deliverance at the sea is that the Egyptians and Israel ‘will learn that I am the Lord’. There is no let up in the subsequent readings either. According to the two passages from Isaiah, the Lord is ‘called the God of all the earth’, and nations will come streaming to Israel not for its sake but ‘for the sake of the Lord your God’. The reading from Ezekiel is even more strident.

Perhaps a clue to God’s unswerving resolve to be acknowledged by all lies in the first reading from Genesis, which claims that the human being is made in the image and likeness of God. The implication of this claim, when read in conjunction with the subsequent readings, is that we will only be able to live in the image and likeness of God when we know who God is. Hence the Bible expends a lot of text telling its readers about God’s name and nature, as well as identifying false images of God and false gods. For Christians, Jesus is the perfect image and likeness of God who has come on earth to show us how we can become like him. The way Jesus reveals God is a surprising and even shocking one, particularly when one thinks of the crucifixion as an image and likeness of God. Perhaps this shows just how mysterious God is and how little we know, particularly when we think we know. In a sense, it justifies the Old Testament harping on our need to ‘know that I am the Lord’ and correcting false knowledge. With the grace of God we can come to see that the crucifixion is a revelation of the nature of God because the crucified one is the resurrected one. The perfect image and likeness of God bears the marks of his suffering and...
death in his glorified body. These thoughts can provide some background as we now turn to reflect on the gospel accounts of the resurrection.

Matthew’s account begins dramatically: an earthquake, an angel descending from heaven with a face like lightning, rolling the tombstone away. And in contrast, the frightened soldiers ‘like dead men’. As I read Matthew, a key feature is contrast; the contrast between the world of dead men (the world without the resurrection) and the divine, life-giving world that irrupts into it.

Recall the last part of Matthew’s account of the passion. The Jewish authorities request soldiers to guard the tomb of the dead Jesus and Pilate grants their request. They seek to extend into the realm of death the control that they exercised over Jesus during his trial and crucifixion. Such obsession with control over another person reveals a deep unease about whether one is actually in control. The tomb captures the ambiguous and fraught nature of their perceptions nicely. On the one hand it is a place of darkness, of no movement, of silence and so no threat to those outside. On the other hand it has to be barricaded and guarded as if there is a real threat to those outside. Ambiguity and illusions of control are swept aside by the angel who, with a blazing face and great power, rolls the stone effortlessly away. The real place of darkness, of silence and fear is revealed as the world in which people like the Jewish authorities and the soldiers live ‘like dead men’. But the angel is no threat to them, instead of rushing at them as enemies, he sits on the tombstone and speaks to the women: his first words are ‘do not fear . . . he has risen’.

The women themselves are under the fear instilling control of the authorities: they can only approach the tomb with the permission of the guard. The new guard’s word is liberating and empowering. They are now sent as angels (= messengers in Greek) to bear the good news of the resurrection to the disciples. They are no longer guarded but sent in freedom and trust. But fear runs deep in human beings and it is not all eradicated in a moment. Matthew seems to remind us of this when he says that they went away ‘in fear and great joy’. Joy is gaining the upper hand but fear still lingers, perhaps a different kind of fear to the one with which they approached the tomb. A further transformation is needed and it comes in the encounter with Jesus ‘coming to meet them’. Like the angel, he greets them with the words ‘do not fear’.

Their encounter with Jesus is transforming because he himself has been transformed in the resurrection. The one who was rejected by men, degraded and disfigured through his scourging, crowning with thorns
and crucifixion, is now revealed as someone to be embraced and adored, the very image and likeness of God. This transformation is reflected in the tradition of Christian art where one of the most repulsive forms of human torture and death, the cross, is transformed into a most treasured and desirable sign of God and God’s love for us.

It is the encounter with Jesus that banishes any lingering fear from the women. They are now sisters of their risen brother Jesus and can bear a message of hope and reconciliation to his estranged brothers, the disciples: ‘tell my brothers that they must leave for Galilee; they will see me there’. Our faith in the resurrection depends on the message of these women, filled with the joy and grace of their encounter with the risen Christ. Generations through the centuries have emulated their mission and it is largely because of their fidelity that we too can be transformed like them into angels of God’s good news.

People of course must be free to accept or reject the message. But for those weighing the options I think Matthew’s account invites us to consider two things.

1. If we reject the resurrection, do we do so openly and honestly, or are we mounting close guard at the door of our heart so that nothing goes in and nothing comes out that we do not have control over? Do we want to be like an angel or a corpse, the walking dead?

2. If we claim to believe in the resurrection, can we live it in our earthly life, as the disciples were called to do? Can we see and celebrate goodness, beauty and desirability in the pain, suffering and disfigurement of others? Can we see and embrace Christ in our suffering humanity, or accept the embrace of those who see us as suffering humanity? Like Catherine of Siena who used to embrace and kiss those to whom she ministered; covered as they were in sores.
The text from Acts portrays the peace and harmony of the early post–Easter community; a reality that lasts, one might say, only a few verses. Pretty soon there are persecutions, problems within the community (the episode of Ananias and Sapphira), the debate over the Gentiles, and so on. The passage from 1 Peter reflects something of this at times painful growth of the early church, of having ‘to bear being plagued by all sorts of trials’. As we read these texts in our post–Easter setting, it is important to keep the passage from Acts in mind. By describing what we might call an ideal situation it makes the claim that the promises of Jesus are not ‘pie in the sky’ romance. They are part of the church’s experience. A similar move can be seen in 1 Kings 3—8 which claims that the promises of Deuteronomy were realised, if only briefly, in the reign of Solomon. Various factors can intrude to trouble peace and harmony in the community: sin and strife within, persecution from without, an unforeseen disaster. But the memory of the ideal that was experienced fuels faith and hope that it can be realised again—each time of course in its own unique way, a way that meets the times and needs of the particular community.

The letter of 1 Peter reminds us of the faith, hope and love that are the remedy for the pain of trials and tribulations. The passage from John’s Gospel, the famous encounter between doubting Thomas and the risen Jesus, provides us with a model of how to handle one of the most challenging ‘trials’ that the church community can face—the refusal to believe in the resurrection. The way Jesus responds to a genuine doubter like Thomas, not with condemnation and excommunication, but with a genuine concern to meet and help him overcome his difficulties, is something for us to emulate as best we can in our world where faith is such a fraught issue. As I see it, it is not so much a question of faith (religion) or no–faith (secularism and/or atheism). Human beings always need to believe in someone or something: rather it is a question of what kind of faith
will fire peoples’ lives and give them meaning. An atheist believes there is no God but can no more prove this than I can prove there is a God.

Here again the letter of 1 Peter offers some rich reflection on those three central virtues by which human beings live and find meaning in their lives—faith, hope and love. One could almost imagine that the author of this letter had been reading Paul’s great discourse in 1 Corinthians 13. According to 1 Peter, faith in the resurrection of Jesus is accompanied by ‘a new birth as his sons’. This new birth will reach its fulfillment in our resurrection from the dead when we will share fully in the resurrection of Jesus. This faith in turns fuels our hope and enables us to bear all kinds of trials. We have ‘a sure hope and the promise of an inheritance that can never be spoilt’. While our hope is fueled by our faith that we will share fully in the resurrection of Jesus, there is more to it than this. The letter speaks of ‘the salvation’ to be revealed at the end of time; not just my salvation. Our faith and hope in the resurrection cannot therefore be separated from this general salvation; a measure of our faith and hope is our commitment to this universal cause.

But one can only believe and hope in another whom one loves. We are reluctant to trust people with whom we are in conflict and we don’t expect anything from them. Christian love enables us to overcome both these barriers but we are only able to become Christian lovers because God first loved us. Such is the bond between faith, hope and love that we are able, as the letter states, to love Jesus even though we have not seen him. What is more—and here 1 Peter goes beyond Paul’s discourse in 1 Corinthians—this bond of faith, hope and love fills us with joy. This does not mean that I am always on a high; joy here is one of the gifts that flow from faith in the resurrection; it is the conviction of being deeply loved, a certain serenity that enables one to endure the most severe trials, the ones that seek to induce fear and anxiety. The love of Jesus is a power that guards our life. Faith, hope, love and joy: these are the same ‘ingredients’ that filled the community in Acts. They are in us and shine through in various ways both in our community and individual lives—a manifestation of the resurrection.
The hope of the two men on the road to Emmaus was that Jesus would set Israel free. Luke does not specify just what freedom they had in mind but more than likely it was about Israel's freedom from the Roman yoke, leading to the reestablishment of the Israelite state. But the freedom that Jesus brings is something at once more particular and more universal. It is freedom from the yoke of sin that troubles everyone, whether Jew or Gentile, and that turns us into oppressors driven by fear of the other. In order to be free, we need to 'see' our liberator and the kind of liberation that he brings. Luke's wonderful story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus unfolds key stages in this liberating experience.

The story begins in a way that reminds one of the defeat of a cause: the former community of believers is now fragmented and leaving Jerusalem, the scene of Jesus' brutal end. The two disciples are no doubt part of a much larger group that had followed him to Jerusalem—Lk 29:37 speaks of a whole multitude. They now return home in dribs and drabs. There is a sense that it is all past tense ('our hope had been', but not any more). Jesus seeks out those trapped in hopelessness.

The women's report that angels have told them Jesus is alive has astounded them (NRSV; the verb can mean 'disturb') but not changed them. Why? A clue is that there is no report of anyone seeing Jesus 'alive'. The disciples, both those in Jerusalem and those on the way, think of resuscitation not resurrection; it would mean that Jesus has in some way cheated death and come back to them again. We take the doctrine of the resurrection so much for granted that we tend to forget what a revolution in thinking it really is. Perhaps we, like them, tend to think of it in some sense 'like' resuscitation. To grasp something of the resurrection, one's horizons need to be transformed; the revelation that is the resurrection is itself a liberation, an opening of our eyes by God.

How are the eyes of faithful yet blind disciples to be opened? We all
think within a context and these men have been operating within the context of their understanding of the Scriptures (for them of course the Old Testament) and how they linked Jesus, ‘a great prophet’, to the great prophets of the Scriptures. Jesus challenges them to look at the Scriptures again, this time through his eyes, and see that the passage of the Christ through suffering and death to glory is in reality the fulfillment of the Scriptures. In fulfilling the Scriptures Jesus transforms their meaning: the claim of the gospel is that he is the only one who can reveal the full meaning of the Scriptures.

The climactic moment of freedom from hopelessness, from a reluctance to believe the message of the women, from a limited understanding of Scripture, comes in the breaking of the bread. It is well recognised that Luke is here alluding to the Eucharist. As the breaking of the bread in this story is the moment when the resurrected one reveals himself by ‘opening their eyes’, so the presence of the Lord Jesus is ‘revealed’ to the eyes of faith in the Eucharist. It is the same Christ who suffered, died and entered into glory who is present to the disciples on the way to Emmaus and to any community celebrating the Eucharist.

The final scene in this story touches a central aspect of the freedom that Jesus brings—the freedom from sin in all its forms. In a sign of the reestablishment of the fragmented community of Jesus, the two disciples return to the others in Jerusalem and there are told that Jesus ‘has risen and has appeared to Simon’. Note the change in terminology from the disciples’ earlier words about Jesus being reported to be ‘alive’ to ‘he has risen’. A transformation of faith has occurred; the past is seen in a new light and in being seen in this way it can be embraced with all its faults and failings. But the point that particularly strikes me in the context of Luke’s Gospel is the focus here on Simon/Peter. Luke alone of the Evangelists reports how, after Peter had denied his Lord three times, Jesus turned and looked at him. Peter turned away and wept. Jesus has now come to free Peter from a burden too heavy to bear: the realisation that he had betrayed his saviour.
The first part of John’s Gospel in today’s readings is a pretty complex parable with a number of players: there are the thieves and brigands, the shepherd, the gatekeeper, the sheep, the stranger(s). Then there is the gate of the sheepfold. The subsequent explanation of the parable, triggered by the disciples’ failure to understand, springs a surprise by focusing on something unexpected—the gate—before moving to the focus that we were probably expecting—the shepherd. The shift to the shepherd is signaled in the last verse of our reading (‘I have come’) and is developed more fully in verses 11–16.

If this parable is anything to go by, running a sheep farm in those days seems to have been a rather risky business. The sheep need to be penned because of the threat of thieves, there is need for a guard (the gatekeeper), the shepherd has to single out his sheep by name, presumably so that he does not make off with any that are not his. The sheep themselves have to be pretty smart, at least in this parable, knowing the voice of their shepherd and their own names. We tend to have a warm trusting image of a shepherd and this no doubt owes much to the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and to famous psalms such as Psalm 23. But there is evidence, as our parable implies, that shepherds in the ancient world were a mix of good and bad. It was not regarded highly as a way of life (partly no doubt because of the dangers) and so the task often fell to those on the fringes of society. At certain times, settled societies complained of ‘shepherd tribes’ who were notorious as robbers. As so often, the Bible takes an ambiguous or even despised image (cf the cross) and shows how it can be transformed into something that reveals the presence of God.

The metaphor of Jesus as a gate is surprising to the modern mind and difficult to appreciate, at least at first glance. We instinctively prefer the
gatekeeper, the sheep, the thieves and brigands. Many have thought the gatekeeper to be the Father or the Holy Spirit, while the thieves and brigands are the Jewish authorities who are portrayed in the gospel as hostile to Jesus and his disciples and who, according to John 8:44, have the devil as their father. There may be something in these speculations but it is significant that neither the gatekeeper nor the thieves are identified in this passage: perhaps this is to focus attention on the gate and the sheep. And while a gate may not look a very engaging metaphor for a person, the Bible is adept at taking what looks to be unpromising and transforming it.

The parable and the explanation of the gate and the shepherd may be summed up in the statement from next Sunday’s gospel where Jesus says, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’ There is only one way, one gate, to life or salvation and it is Jesus. One has the impression that, in the parable and its explanation of the gate, the thieves and brigands are exposed as such because they try to enter the sheepfold by another gate. But there is only one way in and out and the sheep recognise this. Why are they able to recognise this truth from falsehood? Because this gate is not just any gate to a place where sheep are locked up for fear of marauders. In a characteristic biblical move, the static, somewhat forbidding image of a gate guarding a threatened sheepfold is transformed into a kind of ‘arch of freedom’ through which sheep move from pasture to pasture. In fact, by the end of our reading the image of a gate has been so transformed that it begins to disappear and be replaced by, or blend into, the image of Jesus as the Shepherd. Jesus as the gate opens the way to Jesus as the Shepherd.

No doubt this gospel parable has been located within the liturgy of the Easter season because of its emphasis on life and deliverance from enemies. Also, no doubt, because disciples are called to continue the work of their resurrected Lord by being shepherds of the flock. But a shepherd can turn into a thief, like the ones Jesus condemns. How to avoid this? One way, so the gospel suggests, is to listen to the sheep. They recognise the voice of their Master and will not listen to the voice of thieves and brigands.

A mistake in reading the gospel passage would be to think that one can know who the sheep are. True, they are the ones who listen to the shepherd’s voice but it is the shepherd who knows them even before this. The reading from Acts reminds the Shepherd’s disciples that the invita-
tion should be made to all outsiders no matter who they are or where they come from or what they may have done beforehand. The reading from 1 Peter reminds us in its turn that we are all ‘one flock’ in that we are all freed by Jesus from the burden of sin and guilt.
The building industry should be happy this Sunday (and last Sunday as well); metaphors drawn from their world are to the fore—stones, houses, rooms, etc. All metaphors are limited and although these ones evoke powerful impressions of home, security and permanence, they can appear static, lacking dynamism. The letter of 1 Peter is well aware of this and speaks of 'living stones' in the process of being built into a 'spiritual house'. Construction is going on all the time. A building needs sure foundations and the letter claims that it has the best because Christ is the corner stone. This faith claim is supported by appeal to a number of Old Testament texts that also employ building metaphors. Jesus is the stone to which they refer, the key structural element in the new Zion that is the Christian community.

The reading from Acts provides an example of the kind of dynamic construction that 1 Peter has in mind. The growth of the church creates a problem between Hellenist and Hebrew members. It is resolved by the appointment of seven deacons and the church continues to grow. These new 'living stones' become an integral part of the building, as integral as the apostles who anoint them. As well, they provide a structure or space within this spiritual house where both Hellenists and Hebrews can find their home.

What is the purpose of this spiritual house that is under construction? Two things, and their order is important. The first is to 'offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God'. The Christian community must above all be a focus of the worship of God, celebrating God's presence in its midst. The second flows from this: 'to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you'. The Christian community invites all others to join its household and its worship of God in Jesus Christ.

One might think that 1 Peter is about the church on earth whereas the gospel reading is about heaven where Jesus has gone to prepare a place
for us. In a sense this is true but there is more to it than this and it unfolds in the discourse between Jesus and his disciples. As is characteristic of John’s Gospel, questions from puzzled disciples allow Jesus to expand their limited human horizons and in faith ‘see’ divine realities. Thomas is first up with his question about knowing the way to the Father’s dwelling. He takes literally Jesus’ statement about going ‘to prepare a place for you’ and returning; he wants a kind of road map. He wants to find his own way there, an indication that he does not fully trust Jesus as guide. In reply Jesus tells Thomas that ‘I am the way, and the truth and the life’. Jesus is the ‘way’ to the Father, the only one through whom access to the Father and the Father’s dwelling can be gained. One needs to place complete trust in him. But there is more in the metaphors of the way and the house to unfold. The trigger is provided by the next question, this time from Philip. He presumes that Jesus can point out the Father as one human being would point out another. But this kind of spatial separation of one from another does not operate in the Godhead. The Father dwells in Jesus as Jesus dwells in the Father. One enters via the ‘gate’ that is Jesus to find in him the dwelling place of the Father, the heavenly mansion with its many rooms. Here as elsewhere in John, the text moves smoothly from the metaphors to the reality to which they point: the mysterious indwelling of the Father and the Son.

Because of this indwelling, the works that Jesus does are the works of the Father. In an extraordinary move, the final part of our gospel claims that the disciple will, like Jesus, do the works of the Father. For this to be so, the disciples must share in the indwelling between Father and Son. Furthermore, Jesus promises that disciples will do even greater works than him. How can this be so? Perhaps it is because the disciples will be instruments in bringing about the fulfillment of what Jesus has begun in his earthly life: the salvation of the world.

All metaphors and images are limited; this Sunday’s examples may not appeal to everyone as a symbol of the church community. Some may prefer the metaphor of the vine and its branches or the shepherd and the sheep or the simile of the wedding feast. The Bible provides a rich variety of images so that one can choose what is appropriate for a particular situation—all the time of course, recognizing its limitations by keeping the larger context of other images in mind. Thus the metaphor of the way can create a sense of distance from God and Jesus counters this by pointing to himself as the way. Similarly, the metaphor of a house can create a sense of something elsewhere than here (note how we travel to holiday resorts
(in another place) and the letter of Peter counters this by pointing to the readers/listeners as God’s house, ‘living stones’.
If last Sunday’s Gospel reading from John (14:1–12) emphasises the need to trust/have faith in Jesus, this Sunday’s reading emphasises love. The promise of an advocate/paraclete completes the well-known trio of faith, hope and love. These are the three virtues or values by which I believe all human beings find meaning in their lives, whether they are theists or atheists (an atheist believes there is no god and so has faith). Christianity claims that believers are infused with these ‘theological virtues’ and, according to the principle that grace perfects nature, they inform and perfect human faith, hope and love.

We can link the three readings as follows: the gospel is about the life of the community, in particular its relationship with Jesus and the Father. It is important that this relationship, based on faith, hope and love, be secured before Jesus goes to the Father. The readings from Acts and 1 Peter are about the mission of the community. The gospel reading begins and ends with the statement that those who love Jesus will keep (hold fast to) his commandments. Obedience to Jesus’ commands such as ‘love one another as I have loved you’ is not a way of gaining his or the Father’s love. Quite the reverse. We can only love because God has first loved us (God so loved the world that he sent his only Son). Hence, keeping the commandments is an expression of our love for the one who loves us. The commandments also provide a ‘way’ whereby we can love others as Jesus loves them and loves us. It hardly needs to be said that the biblical notion of love is not the same as the modern western romantic idea. Rather, it means loyalty and commitment. This is not the kind of loyalty that, say, binds members of a sporting club in rivalry with ‘other’ clubs. It is a giving of oneself for others, a sharing of one’s life, of all that one has. And so Jesus promises us that his closest ‘colleague’, an advocate with impeccable credentials, will work tirelessly on our behalf forever.
All this talk of Jesus being with us forever, of an advocate to advise and guide us, of sharing life fully with the Father and the Son, as well as with other members of the community, poses quite a challenge for Christianity in the modern world, obsessed with individualism, personal space, and freedom. Many might feel that it is all too close, too overwhelming and a threat to one's freedom. On top of this there is the call to keep commandments—this surely rules out personal freedom! But our faith claims that it is precisely the presence of Jesus in one's life, of the advocate, of the Father, of obedience to the commands of love, that makes one a full and free individual. What is the basis of this claim? Surely, Jesus himself who, it is difficult even for an atheist to deny, was a supremely free human being. Yet, he obeyed the Father in all things. If we believe this message (faith) and live it in complete loyalty (love), then we are assured that we will become what we really desire to be—fully human (hope), as those weak-kneed disciples, trapped by fear, became free to live and proclaim the gospel.

Another difficulty or temptation that can arise in the modern individualistic world is that I cannot see beyond my ‘personal relationship’ with Jesus who dwells in me. In effect I become a consumer, oblivious of the other and resentful of anything that disturbs my self-absorption. But one cannot become fully human in the Christian sense without, like Jesus, being for others and sharing divine life with others. The reading from Acts tells how the preaching of the Good News forges a new community of those who believe it, freeing it from the divisions caused by unclean spirits, possession, and illness. More importantly, it removes the age-old barrier between Samaritans and Jews. The reading from 1 Peter provides advice on how to respond to those who challenge the values by which a Christian lives (here hope is singled out) or those who persecute one for living by such values. Whether we encounter those who welcome the message or are hostile to it, the principle that guides our actions is the same—the example of Jesus. So we should even be willing to endure the persecution of others for their sake, for their salvation, because a key principle by which we as Christians live is that Christ has done the same for us so that we might enjoy life to the full.
It is a pervasive feature of biblical texts that God’s way of saving us from our destructive ways is to work through human beings. Hence God chose the people of Israel and certain people within Israel. According to their own witness in the Old Testament, the people of Israel stumbled badly at times but kept their faith in the God who had chosen them and lived in hope that ‘in that day’ their God would bring his saving purpose to fulfillment.

For Christians this theme reaches its climax in Jesus who sets out to save us by forming a new community of human beings who will do God’s will. This plan of salvation unfolds in three key stages. The first is the community of disciples, with its core group the twelve apostles. In continuity with the Old Testament, this foundational or first group is Israelite; the number twelve is a clear echo of the twelve tribes of Israel. As the gospel texts make clear, despite all Jesus’ teachings, miracles, and warnings, this core group failed him dismally in its first great crisis—Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection. Two betrayed him openly (Judas and Peter) while the rest fled.

But another characteristic teaching of the Bible comes to the fore at precisely this point. Instead of sacking this bunch of failures, as most leaders or institutions in our society would do, the resurrected Jesus pursues them and reestablishes them as his foundational community. As he meets them in Galilee they are still a broken, fragile group. Only eleven of them now, with Judas dead, and some of them still doubting. In an extraordinary gesture of confidence and trust, Jesus entrusts this unlikely crew with stage two of the divine plan—the establishment of a community of believers that embraces all nations. This fragile, fearful little group will paradoxically become the sign and instrument of God’s universal purpose. Their mission is not to set up a kingdom, a new nation, or a community in their own image and likeness. Rather, they are to baptise all nations ‘in the
name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’. This is the identifying characteristic of the new community, they do not belong to anyone else but God. The ascension supplies the perfect symbol of this universal mission and worldwide community. The ascended, heavenly Jesus is, in the words of the letter to the Ephesians, the one ‘who fills the whole creation’; hence he can, as he promises in the gospel reading, ‘be with you always; yes, even to the end of time’. A sign of Jesus’ ongoing presence and a guarantee that the fledgling community will have the wherewithal to carry out its mission is the promise of the Holy Spirit (‘you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and then you will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth’). Jesus ascends to the Father (an assurance in faith that the resurrected one is with God) so that they may pour out the Spirit on disciples who will then be empowered to carry forward God’s work.

Stage three in this divine plan is the glorious inheritance that the saints of all nations will receive from the God of Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, in the age to come. The pledge that all this will indeed happen is the manifestation of God’s power in the life, teachings and works of Jesus, in particular his death and resurrection. Those eleven scattered and bewildered men, and the other disciples such as the women who followed Jesus, all testify to this manifestation and we are invited to believe their testimony.

The ascension, which stands between the resurrection and Pentecost, expresses in a very appropriate way the triumph of God’s purpose that is the resurrection; it also points to our own exaltation that is achieved through our healing and empowerment by the Holy Spirit. All this has been done for our sake; all we need is to do our all for God’s sake.
Pentecost Sunday


The first reading from the Acts of the Apostles has had, and continues to have, a powerful influence on our understanding of the feast of Pentecost. In particular, two images—which Luke presents as similes—tend to attract our attention, the mighty wind and the tongues of fire. But note how circumspect Luke’s description is: he says ‘they heard what sounded like a powerful wind’, and saw something ‘that seemed like tongues of fire’. It catches nicely the sense of something tangible, able to be experienced, but mysterious and ultimately indescribable. The reading from John’s Gospel tells how Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on the disciples. Two completely different presentations but both deriving from the same Hebrew word ‘ruach’ which, depending on context, can mean wind, storm, breath, spirit. Thus, one can translate Genesis 1:2 as ‘a wind from God’, ‘an almighty storm’, ‘a breath of God’, ‘the spirit of God’. Something of the transcendence and immanence of God is expressed by one tiny Hebrew word. In the story of Israel’s deliverance from oppression in Egypt, ‘ruach’ is the divine wind or storm that blows the sea back, while the pillar of fire provides Israel with light.

The scene in Acts evokes something of this transcendent divine power, but with an immanent touch. What seems like a roaring wind is the Holy Spirit that fills every part of the house, while what seems like tongues of fire settles on each one of them without singing a hair! The two similes emphasise that the Spirit reaches all and is for all—no favourites. All are infused with the Spirit and all receive the same gift—of speaking in different languages. Within the context of the Acts passage, this shows that it is the same Spirit in all. Moreover, as the reading from 1 Corinthians reminds us, this one Spirit or breath is a creator as in Genesis 1:2, not a destroyer or a cloner. Through the power of the Spirit each language is transformed so that it becomes more fully Parthian or Elamite or Greek.
as each proclaims the marvels of God. This also shows that there is no one sacred language in Christianity or, to put this another way, all languages are sacred.

Through the power of the Spirit, each individual is transformed and becomes more fully the particular individual he or she is meant to be. Similarly, each community becomes more fully that particular community. And what is even more amazing about the gift and power of the Spirit, as each individual and community becomes more perfectly itself, so the whole community of the church becomes more perfectly and fully itself. As Paul emphasises in the reading from 1 Corinthians ‘there is a variety of gifts but always the same Spirit . . . working in all sorts of different ways in different people’.

In keeping with the Old Testament similes that it borrows, the passage from Acts focuses on the visible and the aural. The gospel passage deals with what is normally not seen or heard because it is within and is what we like to keep secret—our sin. Here the ‘ruach’ is like the air we breathe: it enters into us and transforms our own spirit, our sinful self. In Matthew 9, Jesus asks some scribes which is easier, to say, ‘your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘stand up and walk’. Then, to show them that he has authority to forgive sins, he tells a paralyzed man to stand up and go home. You can tell someone that their sins are forgiven but there is no way of verifying it: there need be no external change. But, if you tell a paralyzed person to get up and walk and nothing happens, then your reputation as a miracle worker is in deep trouble. Jesus heals the paralyzed man to encourage both him and the scribes to believe that he has the authority to bring about that inner, spiritual healing of which we are all in need. Once we accept this, our relationship with him, and his with us, can never be the same. If Jesus is able to touch our inmost being in this way then he must also know us better then we know ourselves—not to cause us anxiety but to bring us freedom from what causes anxiety. Our transcendent God becomes completely immanent in us to enable us to transcend our sinful selves. A striking feature of the gift of the Holy Spirit in John’s account is that this transforming power is bequeathed to the community in an ordinary human way, by Jesus breathing and speaking.
The feast of the Trinity draws the three preceding feasts together. The Resurrection focuses on the Father as the life-giving one, the Ascension on Jesus as the vindicated and exalted one, Pentecost on the Holy Spirit as the empowering one. The readings for year A of this feast prompt us to reflect on how the Trinity comes to be revealed in the Bible and the challenge that this presents for us who believe it. Thus, the first reading takes us back to a foundational episode in the story of Israel—the apostasy of the golden calf. But this episode presupposes an even more foundational text of the Bible—Genesis 1:26 where humanity is made in the image and likeness of God. Given the iconoclastic stance of the Old Testament this does not refer to a visual likeness. More likely, as the remainder of the verse suggests, we are meant to be an image of God in our dominion over creation. That is, we are meant to emulate God’s just and righteous rule of creation. It is not about how we look but about how we live. However, as the Bible goes on to teach us in the ‘Garden Story’, we tend to reverse things and make God in our image and likeness. The trouble is, the idea of God that we conjure up is a distorted one. In the ‘Garden Story’ the wily serpent tricks the woman into imagining a God who is mean and unjust. When we operate on a distorted image of God, we inevitably end up with a badly distorted image of ourselves (the couple have to hide from each other behind fig leaves, and to hide from God). Same couple, same God but now seen in a different and distorted light. The golden calf story takes this a step further by telling how Israel made what it regarded as an appropriate image of God and how chaos ensued. This happens as God is instructing Moses in the preceding chapters of Exodus to build a sanctuary so that God can live among the people.

Our first reading comes at the end of this story; a crucial step in Israel being reconciled to God is that it be reminded who God is and, just as importantly, how God acts. And so we have the proclamation of what
one might call the divine ‘code of conduct’—how God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Unfortunately, an important element of this ‘code’ is not included in the reading for the feast, namely that God will visit the iniquity of the parents on the children to the third and fourth generation. The Old Testament is here juxtaposing two primary images of the divinity that course through the Bible in a dynamic and at times tense relationship: God who is just and punishes evil and God who is merciful and forgiving. The Torah that has been given to Moses and that Israel has promptly disobeyed, is reinstated via two tablets of stone to replace the ones that Moses smashed. Obedience to the Torah will enable Israel to enjoy the presence of God in its midst and to act in an appropriate way when in the presence of God; namely as a just and merciful society.

However, as the prophets testify, the tendency to reverse the order of things runs long and deep. And so, as the Gospel of John testifies, God makes the extraordinary move of sending the perfect image of divinity, the Son, in our image and likeness: Jesus comes among us as one like us in all things but sin. By listening to him speak and act two revelatory moments take place. We are able, in faith, to ‘see’ the Father from whom he comes and whom he reveals. As well, we are able to see how we are, or rather can be, made in the image and likeness of God. In order to achieve this, two things are needed. We must first accept the judgment that we are in need of being remade because, if we judge ourselves we almost inevitably get it wrong. Along with this judgment, we must also accept the remedy—the gift of God’s grace that transforms us and makes us Christ-like; remade in the image of the Son as the Son is the perfect image of the Father. The sign and guarantee of God’s purpose, a purpose that will be fully realised, is the presence and power of the Spirit. It is through the power of the Spirit that a community is ‘created’ in the image and likeness of the perfect community, the Trinity. As Genesis signals at the beginning, we are not in the image and likeness of God as individuals so much as community (‘male and female he created them’).
Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi)

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

There is a famous Capuchin ‘church of the bones’ on the equally famous Via Veneto in Rome. As you emerge from walking through the gallery of neatly piled bones of the deceased—who desired to be buried for a time in a piece of the holy land that had been brought there—there is a message from the other side of the grave. I hope that I render the Italian reasonably accurately as ‘what you are, we once were; what we are you one day will be’. While it may sound a bit macabre—or brutally honest and realistic—I could not help thinking that those clever Capuchins who composed this message meant it to be read on two levels (at least). The immediately obvious meaning is that it refers to our inevitable earthly demise, in the end we are added to the growing pile of bones. On the level of faith however, one is invited to look at the bones or through them to the eternal life that the ‘speakers’ now enjoy. Seen as such, their words are not a grim reminder but a promise. One can see a similar double entendre in the reading from Deuteronomy; ‘he fed you with manna . . . to make you understand that man does not live on bread alone’. The abundance of manna as food is meant to point to the even greater abundance of spiritual gifts that God bestows on Israel (‘everything that comes from the mouth of the Lord’).

In the Eucharist, we believe that an unbreakable bond is established between us and our risen Lord who was once born like us, grew up and grew older as we do, and died as we all will do. He was like us in all things but sin. Now he is our risen and eternal Lord who comes to us in the Eucharist to feed us for the journey to the same ‘home’. It is as if Jesus says to us ‘what you are I once was, what I am now you one day will be’. Jesus did not offer his followers a program or blue print for transforming society. He did not come to lead a revolution against the Roman occupation. He didn’t even wipe out slavery although no doubt he had the power to do so. What Jesus did was offer himself completely to others in love as he offers himself to the Father and the Spirit. That is, he offered us a share in God’s
community, a life that would free all from the deathly evil that afflicts us. One can say that Jesus’ presence to his earthly community was the very embodiment of love; his physical presence through words, gestures, embraces, sharing food and drink, time and space was a powerful sign of this commitment to others. But, as has been said, if you love like this you will be killed. Jesus’ own death provides the occasion for the greatest gesture of love; the giving of his life for others. ‘This is my body which is given for you; this is my blood which will be poured out for you.’

Jesus dies as all on earth are destined to die but his death and resurrection puts an end to the power of death. That which from a human point of view looks to be an unbridgeable chasm is bridged by the death and resurrection of Jesus, there is now continuity and communion between those of us on this side of death and those on the other side. Our risen heavenly Lord is present to us in the Eucharist and in this sacramental presence is more bodily present than he was during his earthly life. The resurrected body is after all the perfection of the human being. The way human beings are present to one another is through their bodies. The Old Testament catches this nicely by speaking of human beings as ‘living flesh’ with the breath of God in them. As the perfect human being, Jesus is now able to be bodily present in the sacrament to any people whenever the Eucharist is celebrated (it is not a physical presence).

But Jesus comes to us in the eucharistic presence, not simply to be with us on earth but also to bring about our own perfection. In the Eucharist we have the intersection of the present and the future. Jesus comes to us in order that we may be fed with his body and blood, the heavenly human food that transforms our mortal, dying, bodies into the likeness of his resurrected body. ‘Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise him up on the last day’. What he now is we will one day share in fully.
The first Sunday of the year celebrates the baptism of Jesus; this Sunday we move from the baptism to the mission of the one baptised—in John the Baptist’s words Jesus is the lamb of God ‘who takes away the sin of the world’. John then gives an account of his own ‘mission’—it was to proclaim that someone greater than he was coming and that he would baptise with the Holy Spirit. Twice John says ‘I did not know him myself’; it was only via the heavenly voice that he was able ‘to see’ and bear witness about Jesus. John’s admission that he did not know Jesus until his presence and identity were revealed can be linked to his earlier statement to the Pharisees’ delegation that ‘Among you stands one whom you do not know’. Like John, they cannot know Jesus unless he is revealed to them; his identity is an integral part of his mission to take away the sin of the world. There is a distinct echo here of the Old Testament theology that all God does for Israel (God’s ‘mission’) is in order that God’s name may be known and confessed (identity). Once God is acknowledged as God the identity and purpose of everything else can be seen.

This bond between identity and mission in the figure of Jesus is powerfully expressed in the title that John the Baptist uses to describe him, ‘the lamb of God’. Within a biblical context, this immediately links Jesus to the Passover lamb of the exodus and to its ‘mission’ or purpose, which was to be sacrificed for the sake of Israel’s deliverance from oppression. It also links him to the servant passages in the book of Isaiah, the second of which is our first reading (the others are Isa 42:1–4; 50:4–9; 52:13—53:12). This servant will bring God’s salvation to the ends of the earth, not by conquest or violence but by suffering violence and rejection (Isa 53:1–7). In this way the old barriers between Israel and other nations, between ‘us’ and ‘them’ will be removed.

The Bible often portrays sin as a barrier, something that causes a divided self, that divides us from our brothers and sisters and that divides us
from God. The opening verses of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians are a testimony from one who knows these barriers well but knows even better the healing power of the one who takes away the sin of the world. Paul, who saw himself as the worst of sinners, one who persecuted the church, is nevertheless able to refer to himself as one ‘called to be an apostle’ (a new mission that brings with it a new identity). Armed with this personal conviction, Paul is able to greet the Corinthians as those ‘who are the holy people of Jesus Christ’, and ‘called to take their place among the saints’. The grace of Christ provides healing for each divided, sinful self. Equally, Paul conveys to the Corinthians his conviction that the grace of Christ has broken down the barrier between ‘us’ and ‘them’, between Jew and Gentile. Jesus ‘is their Lord no less than ours’. God has no favourites; we are all called to be brothers and sisters in Christ. But our true identity and our fruitful relationship with our brothers and sisters rest of course on our foundational relationship with God: any barrier between ourselves and God will infect the other relationships. Paul highlights its importance by bringing his greeting to a climax with a prayer to ‘God our Father’. Jesus’ identity as ‘Son of the Father’ reveals the ultimate goal of his mission to take away the sin of the world—so that we can all share in their relationship as sons and daughters. This is the grace of God that alone brings us true peace.
Jesus’ first words in Matthew’s Gospel as he commences his mission echo exactly those of John the Baptist in 3:2; ‘repent for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.’ The use of the term ‘heaven’ is recognised as a Matthean substitution for the divine name: hence it is the equivalent of saying ‘the kingdom of God’. There is continuity and development between the preaching of John and Jesus: Jesus is the one who incarnates the divine words proclaimed by John.

Matthew’s account of the commencement of Jesus’ mission is preceded by a report that he settled in Capernaum on the borders between Zebulun and Napthali and that this was in fulfillment of a passage from the book of Isaiah, our first reading. In its Isaian context, the passage proclaims a reversal of the humiliation that these two northern tribes, and other territories of the northern kingdom of Israel, suffered at the hands of the Assyrian invasion in the eighth century BCE. Those who were reduced to virtually nothing by the Assyrian advance will one day flourish again and rejoice.

The location of Capernaum on the border between the two territories allows Matthew to use the Isaian text as part of his ‘portrayal’ of the kingdom of heaven that Jesus inaugurates. Unlike earthly kingdoms which are based in the centres of power—for the northern kingdom this was the tribe of Ephraim and the capital of Samaria, for the southern kingdom it was the tribe of Judah and the capital of Jerusalem—the kingdom inaugurated by Jesus begins on the fringes, where no one expects it or bothers to look. Being on the borders it is almost like ‘no-man’s-land’, identified with no earthly power base. Within the Jewish context, it is as about as far removed from Jerusalem as one could get; within a Roman context, it is even further from the centre of the empire’s power—Rome. Yet, from this insignificant place shines ‘a great light’, the light of the world.
For John and Jesus, the appropriate way to prepare for the coming of the kingdom of heaven is to ‘repent’. The Greek term rendered ‘repent’ challenges listeners to a ‘change’ or ‘conversion’. In our earthly kingdoms we are too often caught up in the struggle to obtain control; control over our own lives, control over the lives of others. We all want to ‘rule’. One can enter the kingdom of heaven only if one gives up all earthly claims to power and receives instead the ‘grace’ of Christ, the power that changes us from pseudo masters into real disciples.

In our earthly ‘kingdoms’, we are careful to select only the ‘right ones’ to advance the aims of the kingdom—whether it be our church, business, education, etc. As Matthew tells it, Jesus seems quite happy to engage the first couple of strangers that he comes across: Simon and Andrew. They are certainly not the type that one would normally find in the halls of royal courts. We tend to spend a lot of time reflecting on the mystery of God’s foreknowledge and plan of salvation and this is good, but it can tie us up in knots. The scene by the sea looks to me similar to the story of the birth of Jesus in Luke. There were shepherds close by and God commissioned them to go and proclaim the Good News of Jesus’ birth. Why not? God trusts them to be loyal messengers as much as God trusts a king or queen, trusts you and me.

God’s trust of fragile, flawed human beings is a theme that runs right through the Bible. Jesus chooses disciples, teaches them and entrusts them with his mission but when the crunch comes at the time of his passion, they all desert him. Yet he does not sack them as we tend to do in our earthly kingdoms; instead they are welcomed back and entrusted with even greater responsibilities. Such is the kingdom of heaven.

One can see this same spirit of trust alive in Paul as he confronts divisive factions in the Corinthian community. Rather than condemn or dismiss those involved in the factions, Paul appeals to them all as brothers and sisters, as members of the kingdom of heaven, and sets out at length to show how the work of each one is part of a larger work that is the salvation that comes through Christ. As Jesus’ disciples had to learn the way of discipleship at times painfully, so also the disciples in the church at Corinth. It is the challenge, and adventure, that greets each generation.
In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus begins his ministry by proclaiming, like John the Baptist, that the kingdom of heaven ‘is close at hand’ (3:2; 4:17). He gathers his first group of disciples and his fame as a preacher and healer spreads. Crowds gather, he goes up the mountain—an echo of Moses in Exodus—and begins to teach his disciples and the crowds about the kingdom of heaven. In relation to this, it is significant that in Jesus’ discourse on the beatitudes the first and last of those formulated in the third person are followed by the statement ‘theirs is the kingdom of heaven’. While each beatitude has an accompanying statement, the context established by 3:2 and 4:17 suggests that the statements about the kingdom form a frame around the list. The ones in between spell out particular aspects of life in the kingdom of heaven. The focus on the kingdom of heaven is supported by the statement accompanying the final beatitude that is formulated in the second person plural. ‘You’, all disciples of Jesus who suffer ‘on my account’, will receive a great reward in heaven.

There is considerable debate whether the beatitudes are to be understood as a kind of ethical guide for entry into the kingdom or a series of blessings pronounced over those who are already heirs to it because they are poor, meek, pure in heart, etc. A sign that they are heirs to the kingdom will be the radical transformation of their present condition. To adopt an either–or position may not do justice to the flexibility of the gospel texts. On balance however, Luke’s version seems to be closer to the second understanding whereas I read Matthew’s version within the context of Jesus’ earlier call to repent; that is, to undergo a complete change or conversion. Those who are willing to be so transformed will enjoy the blessings of the kingdom as their reward. What will this be? The context of the beatitudes would suggest it is presumably the joy of seeing in full the reversal of which each beatitude speaks.
If this is a fair reading, how might we reasonably interpret the Matthean version as a guide for living today within the kingdom of heaven? Some suggestions. The poor in spirit are those who recognise their limitations and weakness, and need for God and neighbour; contrary to the prevailing ethos of aggressive individualism. Those who mourn recognise that every human being is a son or daughter of God and so cannot tolerate their mistreatment or destruction. The gentle are those who do not seek control over others to dominate them. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are willing to forego a secure, comfortable life in order to help those in need. In its biblical meaning, righteousness is primarily about right relationships, the fundamental one that enables all others is the one with God. The merciful are those who see the good in their neighbours despite their failures and weaknesses (they do not indulge in the ‘blame game’). They are pure in heart because they, in their turn, let themselves be seen for who they are: there is no deceit or concealment. Peacemakers are those who are prepared to change so that the barriers that divide human beings can be crossed and communion restored. Those persecuted for ‘righteousness’ sake’ do not take the easy way out, do not opt out when the crunch comes. One could say that all these virtuous paths are summed up in the final beatitude addressed to ‘you’ because discipleship of Jesus is what we believe human life is or should ultimately be about.

Discipleship does not mean participation in a particular programme, learning certain skills, achieving certain outcomes (although it excludes none of these). Jesus takes people as they are, assures them they can do extraordinary things in their seemingly ordinary lives and leaves them free to decide how to do so. The only thing required is that in living the beatitudes, which are about healing relationships, we model ourselves on the foundational relationship—Jesus’ love of us and complete trust in us despite our flaws and failures.

Given that Matthew’s version of the beatitudes is an integral part of Jesus’ call to repent and live the Christian life of discipleship, the reading from Paul provides a timely caution. We need to be wary of measuring ‘our progress’ in the beatitudes—like measuring the stages in a career. Each of them (as Luke’s different version implies) is greater and more challenging than any attempt on our part to live it (for example to be pure in heart). In fact, our attempts to live by the beatitudes, honest and well meaning though they be, will inevitably reveal our inability to do so, will reveal our weaknesses and limitations. If we are honest, we will come to see our need for God’s grace for ‘without me you can do nothing’. We need to be
ministered to as much or more as those to whom we minister. By the same token, in recognizing and accepting our weakness and need, we receive the blessings promised in the beatitudes.
Fifth Sunday of the Year

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

Jesus’ description of his listeners as salt and light are preceded by his proclamation of the beatitudes that commence the famous ‘sermon on the mount’. The message presumably is that if you live the beatitudes then you ‘are the salt of the earth’, you ‘are the light of the world’. As we know, when you put salt into something it permeates the whole thing and changes its flavour, transforming it from being, say, bland to delightful. Similarly when you switch on a light in a room it illuminates the whole room. So Jesus is saying that the person who lives the beatitudes will change or transform the whole earth. It is a massive claim, particularly when you link it with the beatitudes. Being poor in spirit, a mourner, being meek and merciful and a peacemaker do not seem at first glance to be the kind of things that bring about global change. Aren’t those world programmes to eradicate poverty and disease much more effective? Is that not where you can taste the salt and see light shining? What is even more challenging and against the grain of modern global thinking, Jesus’ claim refers to any individuals—‘you’. So you and I can change the world. Indeed, by living the beatitudes, we are changing the world as salt transforms food, as light transforms darkness. Jesus is not just talking about the future.

When we read Jesus’ sayings about salt and light in relation to the beatitudes that precede them, they challenge our expectations of how to go about transforming our world. Indeed his words provide a timely warning about a temptation that we can fall into these days. Because we are so aware of the ‘global’ factor now and the massive programmes that are put into place in an attempt to eradicate poverty and disease, we wonder about the impact of our seemingly impotent individual gestures. We may contribute money but that is our ‘little bit’ and then take no further part in such ventures until the next ‘begging brochure’ arrives. We may also feel that there is no point doing something, such as reducing my use of the car, until there is a sufficient number doing so, the ‘critical mass’ that will
have an impact. But the gospel message is that something should be done because one believes it is right, not because it requires a ‘critical mass’ of participants to be effective. Even if only one individual does what is right, what is the blessed thing to do, Jesus assures him or her that this is being salt of the earth and light of the world. It is changing the world because one good act has taken place. We may not be able to monitor its impact and as trusting disciples of Jesus this should not be our concern or cause anxiety. But he assures us that people will see the good work ‘and give glory to your Father in heaven’. Once people make God the centre of their lives, then things can find their proper place.

The reading from Paul expresses the same thing in a somewhat different way. A major anxiety that Paul had in preaching to and working among the Corinthians was that he would get in the way between them and their encounter with the crucified Christ. The gospel is not something that can be spread through clever marketing and its spread monitored like stocks and shares. It is about a relationship with Jesus that enables God’s work to be fully realised.

The instruction from Isaiah outlines the kind of gestures that enshrine the spirit of the beatitudes and it is evident that the prophet is thinking of the immediate world around us. The passage mentions another important benefit that springs from acting in accord with the beatitudes. It is not only that we contribute to the transformation of ‘the earth’ but we ourselves are transformed. In the words of the prophet ‘your wound will be quickly healed over’. Discipleship, in the manner outlined in the beatitudes, not only brings healing to others but healing to oneself. One way in which this will happen is that the person who is genuinely poor in spirit, meek and merciful will of course welcome this ministry on his or her behalf from others. If not then the genuineness of one’s own ministry would be in question.
One can imagine that Jesus’ teaching on the mount about the blessed life would have raised questions, and some hackles, among the Jewish authorities. How does this teaching relate to their commitment to the Torah, both the written Torah and the oral Torah that became enshrined in the Mishnah? Given that the gospels were written in the latter part of the first century, one could also imagine that Paul’s preaching on the Law would have generated considerable debate and some hostility among Jewish Christians, who maintained their commitment to the Torah. Our readings for today outline some important principles about the relationship between Jesus’ teaching and the Torah/Law. And, as I hope to show in the reflection, this is not simply an intra–Judaism debate or even worse, passé. It is a matter that is very much alive today.

Jesus’ opening statement categorically denies that there is any conflict between his teaching on the beatitudes and the Torah/Law and the Prophets.4 Anyone who keeps the commandments of the law and teaches them will be considered great in the kingdom of heaven. This is the same assurance given to those who keep the beatitudes. But it is important to realise that this denial is set between two other statements that he makes about the Law and the Prophets. The first is that he has come not to abolish but to fulfil or complete them. His teaching claims to show what the ultimate purpose of the law is and that we can for our part fulfil this ultimate purpose of the law—through God’s grace. The second is the statement about the need for true virtue or righteousness. I take it that the Greek word is rendering the Hebrew term for righteousness (tsedakah) that conveys the sense of a ‘right relationship’. Our relationship, our commitment to God and neighbour needs to be one of complete self–giving not one that is

4. It may be worth mentioning that the Hebrew word torah conveys a variety of meanings depending on context. It can mean our word law, a collection of laws or a code, and the more general sense of teaching or instruction. When applied to the Pentateuch or five books of Moses as a whole it carries this meaning.
measured against obedience to a law code. Hence the person who is righteous in Jesus’ terms will keep and teach the ‘least of the commandments’ as an expression of their complete devotion to God and neighbour. And this is the purpose of the law. There is no sense in Jesus’ teaching that the law is an imposition and in this he is echoing the theology of the author of Ecclesiasticus (‘He has set fire and water before you; put out your hand to whichever you prefer’). If it was imposed then we would not be free under the law. It is something that one chooses and follows willingly because it helps one see its greater purpose, a blessed relationship with God and neighbour.

Jesus then takes up a selection from the Decalogue (ten commandments) to flesh out his teaching. In each case his point is to show that the aim of the law is to try and prevent the rupture of right relationships (notice how in the case of murder Jesus uses the term ‘brother’ for one’s adversary) and to foster right relationships. This is seeking righteousness/virtue and maintaining righteousness. Jesus’ concern to emphasise the true purpose of the law implies of course that the opposite is lurking among his listeners. It all depends on one’s attitude and we flawed human beings can use the law to divide rather than to unite what has become divided. Or, to put this another way, we can use the law to gain advantage over the other, to win the case. As our society becomes more litigious the divisive and competitive use of the law seems to become more acute. There is the litigant and the defendant; the lawyers battle on their behalf in court, one gets the money and walks out one door while the other gets the bill or a sentence and walks out the other door. We say that the law has taken its course (or has been manipulated?) but the parties involved remain divided and often enemies for life. There is no reconciliation and one wonders whether the life of the society has been enhanced or demeaned. Paul speaks of having a wisdom ‘to offer those who have reached maturity’. The mature ones will presumably welcome this wisdom and live by it. We have had Jesus’ wise teaching on the law and righteousness for around 2000 years yet one wonders at times how deeply it has entered our hearts and minds? I am not just referring to the law courts here but to our attitudes towards one another in society and church. Does the booming litigation industry reflect our own attitudes in a way? If so, it can only be transformed by a change in our attitudes. Legislation of itself won’t achieve it.
In last Sunday’s gospel reading, Jesus selects a number of law cases to show how his teaching is an integral part of his overall mission to complete or fulfil the Law and the Prophets. Wherever you have law cases you have the issue of punishment: one follows the other as night follow day. Hence, in this Sunday’s reading, which follows immediately on last Sunday’s in the gospel, Jesus challenges his listeners to rethink their understanding of punishment. This will in turn help in their rethinking of the law. Instead of speaking about punishment for crimes committed perhaps we should speak of the appropriate response to sin. The requirement of ‘eye for eye and tooth for tooth’ refers to Exodus 21:24 and was designed, in the judgment of critical scholars, to put a stop to the human tendency to exact revenge by going one better (‘you break my fingers, I will break your arms’). It is a rather graphic way of stating the old adage ‘let the punishment fit the crime’.

While this presumably put a stop to unrestrained violence it could leave the aggrieved parties as much at odds as before. Two guys with black eyes or their teeth knocked out may be an advance over revenge killings and an effective deterrent to other disputants but may also be in danger of exacerbating divisions within society rather than healing them. It could impede the purpose of law which is to enhance the good order and harmony of society.

Jesus’ remedy is to apply the teaching on the beatitudes. A striking feature of this section of his teaching is that it applies equally whether one is the innocent party (the victim of the ‘wicked man’) or the guilty party in a conflict at law. Whichever side of the dock you stand on you are called to be committed to living the beatitudes. Even if you are the worst kind of criminal (and Jesus’ teaching is applicable beyond the courtroom) you are able to become just as effective a herald of the gospel as an innocent party.
Such is the reach and power of God’s grace. Within our flawed system of law we may expel or banish criminals but God does not; the invitation or call is always there, even to the most hardened sinner, to become righteous and to seek the establishment of right relationships. Thankfully, one still reads of cases in which hardened criminals are not only able to express remorse for their crimes but devote themselves to a life of repentance as well.

Jesus’ commitment to righteousness and the formation of right relationships is abundantly clear in the section that follows in which he commands us to love our enemies as God loves them. God hates sin but loves sinners. God is as committed to the salvation of the wicked as to the just and we need to remember that we ourselves are the wicked or were wicked at some stage in our lives and quite likely to become so again. God’s salvation or love is of course never imposed. If it were it would not be love. People are free to reject it and so, as disciples of Jesus, we must respect the freedom of others to reject our offer of love and reconciliation however painful this may be (tellingly symbolised in that double slap in the face). This section of the gospel which, as noted above, ‘returns’ to the theme of the beatitudes, reveals just how radical and challenging it can be to live by them once one considers some particular cases or examples.

The reading from Leviticus contains a refrain that runs through much of what has come to be called the ‘Holiness Code’, the code of laws in chapters 17—26: ‘you shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy’. In levitical thinking holiness is not just a moral quality as we tend to think. Rather it means someone or something is ‘set apart’ or belongs to the sacred realm and manifests the presence of God in a special way. Israel as the chosen people belongs to God and reveals the presence of God in our world in a special way. Paul takes up this notion and applies it to members of the Christian community. They are temples of God and so are a special presence of God to each other. To violently destroy a temple was, and still is, regarded as a sacrilege. Even more so, says Paul, if you destroy the living temple of the Lord in your brother or sister. If we apply this to the gospel reading, we can say that Jesus is urging his listeners to see others, even their enemies, as temples of God. Hence loving their enemies is another way, a very challenging way, of loving God.
We have three powerful images of God as food for thought in our readings for this Sunday. We will take them in the order they appear. The prophecy from Isaiah portrays God as mother to reassure listeners and readers of God’s unconditional commitment to Israel: and this on two counts. The first is that God’s commitment does not weaken or fail. Occasionally even mothers abandon or forget their children but God doesn’t. The second is that God’s closeness to Israel is even more intense and intimate than that between a mother and the baby at her breast. If you want another Old Testament image of the intimately close relationship between God and Israel check out Jeremiah 13 where Israel is pictured like a person’s loincloth. It was that close between you and me, so God says, but now God’s loincloth has become soiled and useless. It is not the kind of metaphor we are likely to use in our politically correct context today but thankfully, Old Testament prophets were freer beings than we, and inspired as well.

The second is that of judge, in the reading from 1 Corinthians. We tend to have a somewhat fearful idea of a judge these days; he or she is likely to put you away for a spell in gaol. We may see them as upholders of the law but do we see them as deliverers? This is how the Old Testament saw the judge. In a society that had no universities or research academies where ‘truth’ is established with as much scientific rigour as possible, ‘truth’ in biblical terms meant more ‘reliability’. A true person could be counted on to speak honestly. Hence the centrality of law and judgment in Old Testament theology, with the law court located at the main gate, the most public part of the town. The judge was not someone to be feared but to be relied on to distinguish truth from falsehood and to deliver the one wrongly accused. Human judges may of course fail but one can count on God, the just judge, never to fail.

Paul was heir to this tradition and so had a very positive attitude to the notion of God as judge. He looked forward to his judgment with con-
fidence and joy. Why? Because nothing escapes the Lord’s scrutiny, even the secret intentions of men’s hearts. So the Lord knows all about Paul, his good and bad, and has already delivered a judgment on him. What is it? That Paul is one of the Lord’s trusted servants, like his fellow Christians, and the Spirit is working through him to advance the cause of the gospel. So why should not Paul, or anyone who tries to live the gospels as best he or she can, look forward to the final judgment when the Lord comes.

The third image or metaphor of God is that of Master in the gospel passage. Let us put this into contemporary terms and call God the ‘boss’. The first thing is that God does not impose. We human beings get to choose our boss but Jesus warns that there is no neutral territory; it is one or the other. You cannot sit on the fence. To be agnostic about it is still to make a decision and it will have an impact on your loyalties. Jesus then goes on to compare the boss he wants us to serve (‘your heavenly Father’) with the one that he says is the very worst you can choose—you yourself (the devil is not mentioned here).

Once we decide that we are in charge or are going to be in charge then, according to Jesus’ teaching, we sell ourselves short. We enslave ourselves (worry about our life) instead of freeing ourselves, and we confuse parts of ourselves with the real self (surely the body is more than clothing). All this worry and search for perfection on our terms ends up demeaning us; we settle for something much less than what we are and, as Jesus says, we are worth much more than the birds of the air that God cares for. If we choose our heavenly Father as the master or boss and become committed to the establishment of God’s kingdom of righteousness on earth, then God will look after us. God is the most reliable and thoughtful boss. To put this another way, once we make God the centre of our lives, then God makes us the centre of divine life. We become temples of the Lord and our Lord is utterly devoted to building us into the most perfect of temples.
Jesus says that the person who will enter the kingdom of heaven is the one 'who does the will of my Father in heaven.' The question is, what is the will of the Father and how do I know the will of the Father in my life? Jesus’ statement comes towards the end of Matthew’s sermon on the mount and one might well appeal to the contents of the sermon as spelling out the will of the Father. In a sense this is true but the sermon is a limited combination of some general instructions and specific laws. An example of a general one is 'let your light shine before others' in 5:16. An example of a specific one is ‘whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery’ in 5:32. One has only to read through these chapters to see that they do not provide a complete blueprint for Christian life. When you think about it, there is no piece of legislation that could hope to cover the details of society’s life, let alone the details of every member of a society. Those who have tried this kind of thing impose what we call totalitarian regimes and, thankfully, the long suffering citizens of such societies eventually get rid of them in the name of freedom.

Some think that the Old Testament is where legalism is to be found whereas we in the New Dispensation have been delivered from all that. But there are only 613 laws in the Old Testament and many fewer in the book of Deuteronomy from where our first reading comes. This is hardly a monument to legalistic control and indeed the Jews have a tradition of the oral torah that enables them to fill in the numerous gaps of the written Torah (a little like the distinction in Catholicism between Scripture and Tradition). Just by way of comparison, the latest Code of Canon Law has 1752 laws yet it provides canon lawyers with plenty of work adapting them to specific cases.

So, what is the will of God for us? From the way the gospels invite and challenge us to a faith commitment, I think God’s will is that we make responsible decisions about our lives; in other words exercise our conscience. God frees us from the slavery of sin and bestows on us the dignity,
the right to make decisions. This is a crucial component of being human. Of course, where there are rights, responsibilities follow closely. We have a responsibility to form our conscience so that we make responsible decisions. This is what biblical texts like the Torah and the Sermon on the Mount are designed to do, and the teaching of the church is designed to do. They provide us with crucial principles and guidelines but they do not take away the right that is ours as disciples to make decisions.

Hence Moses in Deuteronomy sets the alternatives before the people and leaves it to them to make the decision. They are called to obey the commandments he has set before them but note, to also follow ‘the way I have marked out for you’. Moses sets them on their journey into the land but he cannot, and God will not, legislate for every step of that journey. The Torah provides them with the wherewithal to make decisions; God entrusts that dignity, freedom and responsibility to them. Anything less would impugn the theology of God that Deuteronomy is presenting.

In a similar way, Jesus distinguishes between listening to his words and acting on them. The person who makes decisions in accord with Jesus’ teaching to the best of his or her ability is doing the will of God. Even though our decision making may, from a human point of view, look fragile at times and based on limited knowledge, it is the rock solid way to build a life because it is doing God’s will. Moreover God is with us in this endeavour because, as Paul points out to his Roman audience, those who have faith in Jesus are justified by the free gift of God’s grace. We do not have to pass an obedience test first in order to win God’s love (we are not God’s pets). We can only love God because God first loves us. Our obedience is a loving response to God’s creative love.

Much of life is about making decisions and the great thing about our faith is that it gives us the confidence (through the assurance of God’s grace) to make them. Even if we say that we will do whatever the pope or bishop or boss says, we have still made a decision. To say ‘I won’t make a decision on that’ is still a decision. We cannot escape this fundamental aspect of life so why not get involved and make the best decisions we can? We will certainly make mistakes because we are human but this should encourage us to decide to do better next time, something that God surely applauds—it is doing God’s will.
If we take the initial lines of the reading from Hosea that quote the people, they look like a genuine expression of faith, hope and love; those three key virtues or values by which human beings live. There is the faith commitment to God (‘Let us set ourselves to know the Lord’), there is the sure hope of God’s gracious response (‘that he will come is as certain as the dawn’); all this is a genuine expression of love, surely. Yet the following verses mock the people by contrasting their love (like a bit of morning fog, like dew which dries up at the first heat of day) with God’s love (like showers and spring rain). The prophet knows that their hearts are wedded to Baal worship and their profession of loyalty to the God of Israel is a sham that must be exposed for what it is by the prophetic word.

We make professions of faith every week at our liturgies, some of us every day. Do our repeated failures to live up to them make a similar mockery and reduce them to empty words, like the people targeted in the first reading? How would we react if a prophet like Hosea came into our liturgy and condemned our confessions of faith, hope and love? How can we be sure that our faith, hope and love are genuine?

The second reading from the letter to the Romans and the Gospel reading from Matthew provide some help here. Paul’s portrait of Abraham as the great father of faith is a stirring but highly condensed one, designed to fuel faith in his listeners. The book of Genesis, from which Paul no doubt drew his portrait (as well as Jewish tradition), is worth looking at briefly because it reveals a journey of faith that was not easy, and there were failures on the way. Twice Abraham passes his wife off as his sister when in foreign territory, relying on his cunning rather than God’s promise (cf chapters 12; 20). He takes Hagar as a concubine when his wife Sarah is unable to have a child, even though the promise of an heir is to come through her (chapter 16). In chapter 15, he complains to God about his lack of an heir. In the end however, Abraham does come through as a true
father of faith in the dangerous story of the binding of Isaac (chapter 22). What strikes me in reading the story of Abraham is that at no point, unlike the people in the book of Hosea, does he claim to be a man of faith. It is the angel who does this, who steps in to rescue Isaac and who says to Abraham ‘now I know that you fear God’. Perhaps the message of this story is that we should be wary about claiming that our faith is secure and strong. Making such a claim may be a sign that it is weak. Let God and our neighbour be our judge; our role is to be as faithful as we can. They say that in India it is the people who discern that a holy man or woman is a guru; the person never makes the claim, to do so would be a sign that he or she is not a guru.

The message from the Gospel of Matthew is that true faith, hope and love are strongest in those who recognise how weak and inadequate their own faith hope and love are and who are glad and relieved to have this revealed to them and to all and sundry. I refer of course to Matthew the tax collector and his mates from the tax office who are made welcome at Jesus’ table. From one point of view, to be made welcome at the master’s table is a step up in society for these taxmen who were despised by both Romans and Jews. This certainly lies behind the comments made by the Pharisees. And indeed, associating with Jesus is a step up in society, but not in the way that the Pharisees—and perhaps even the taxmen—envisioned. Jesus identifies them as sinners and that he is the doctor who has come to heal them. Far from being put on the medical staff (the virtuous), the taxmen find themselves as patients in the casualty ward (the sinners). Yet they do not get up and walk away from Jesus and his company. They stay, even though they have been ‘exposed’ as sinners. Again, this is true faith, they trust that the one who is able to judge their most fundamental need is the one who can meet that need and who, as judge and healer, acts for no other motive than love. With faith like this, my weakness becomes my strength.
We all love peak or privileged experiences. We believe they have a profound impact on us and can radically change the way we live. But there are two issues that we need to take into account when we reflect on peak experiences—especially when they concern our relationship with God. The first is what constitutes a peak or privileged experience of God? The second is how do we know that it has really, radically changed us?

The reading from Exodus provides some food for thought. The people have experienced liberation from slavery in Egypt and now they are invited into an intimate and privileged covenant with the God who delivered them, who speaks to them from the mountain via Moses the chosen mediator. They are, as a nation, to be consecrated as God’s priestly ministers to the rest of the world. The mountain, the cloud, the thunder and lightning, the voice, all signal a powerful experience of the presence of the divinity. Israel readily agrees to the terms of the covenant and the deal is sealed at the foot of the mountain in Exodus 24. But then Moses is summoned up the mountain and things go quiet. Same God, just as present on the mountain as before (the cloud is still there), but now for those below there is silence and waiting. The people judge that this is an absence of God not a presence and set out to make gods whose ‘presence’ they can control (carry around as a statue). This text invites us to reflect that God is as present in the silence and waiting (the seeming ‘absence’) as in the intensity of the theophany on the mountain. It also invites us to reflect that what the Israelites see as a privileged experience of God does not change them at all. They remain as fickle as they were when confronted by the Egyptian forces at the Sea.

The gospel reading invites reflection on our perceived experiences of God by focusing on the exercise of divine power. As in the exodus story, Jesus has invited the twelve into an intimate relationship and now sends them out on a mission with power over unclean spirits and diseases. We
all thrill to the exercise of power; to exercise the kind of power the disciples enjoyed must have been heady stuff indeed. One would think that this experience would secure their undying commitment to Jesus. But what happens? At the first major crisis (the contrary experience of Jesus as a powerless prisoner of the authorities) they abandon him to a man. Yet, as Paul takes pains to point out to his Roman readers, the experience of the suffering, reviled and crucified Jesus was as much a presence of the God of infinite power as the disciples’ experience of casting out demons and curing the sick. Why so? Because it brought about our reconciliation with God, from whom we were estranged because of our sins. The passion of Christ completely rewrites our understanding of power and how it is exercised. In our modern world we find it difficult to equate power with the biblical notion of love as loyalty, particularly to the helpless and powerless. If we think of love in relation to power, it tends to be romantic love and sex. Our understanding of both words is warped. Only God can show us, through the experience of Jesus and his disciples that the ultimate power, divine power, is love and it is a transforming power.

I remember once being at a lecture given by the great Pauline scholar Ernst Käsemann, at which he said, ‘thank God for the canon (of the Bible), otherwise we would all have our own canons’. We all have our favourite passages of Scripture and the danger is that we will neglect other passages, less attractive in our judgment, or more difficult or even off-putting. Something similar can be said about the experience of God. As devoted believers, we all hunger for the experience of God and rightly so. God entrusts to us the freedom and responsibility of judging whether this or that experience is of God. We all have our ideas of what an experience of God should be like and no doubt we draw on the Bible to forge these ideas. But there is the danger that we will have our favourite ideas, as we have our favourite biblical passages, and that we will forget those other ones that the Bible holds up for our consideration, above all of course that of the suffering and crucified Christ.
The famous passage from the letter to the Romans lends weight to the old saying that ‘the more things change the more they seem the same’. Paul, like his contemporaries in the Jewish world, thought of Adam and Eve as a historical couple, just as they thought the sun circled the earth and that humans and animals had lived together from the beginning of creation. The impact of science and critical analysis of ancient texts means that we no longer think that way. The danger is that we may think we are smarter than folk of ancient times, that their myths (for example, the ‘Garden Story’) are passé. The achievements in science may mean that people one day will fly to a distant planet at warp speed. They may be incredibly well educated by our standards but they will face the same challenges that stone–age people, that Paul and his contemporaries faced—how to relate to their fellow men and women.

For all our technological achievements, are we any better at living the three great values or virtues that inform all human life—faith (in whom do I trust), hope (to whom do I look for motivation), love (to whom will I be completely loyal)? Paul no doubt saw Adam as a historical figure but he also saw the symbolic or representative significance of Adam in relation to humanity as such. In this he shared something with the modern understanding of the Garden Story in which Adam and Eve represent human beings as such. The contrast that Paul draws between Adam and Jesus proclaims his conviction that only the Christ can heal our inability to forge relationships with God and neighbour that are faithful, hope–filled and loving.

The Gospel passage from Matthew presents the same challenge—and the same hope—in somewhat different terms. The context is Jesus’ singling out of the twelve and instructing them about their mission as his disciples. Matthew 10:1–42 is principally a teaching or torah about mission and discipleship, there is no report of the twelve going out on the
mission. The initial instructions about how to conduct the mission (verses 1–15) are followed by warnings about the rejection and persecution that is likely (inevitably?) to accompany the mission (verses 16–33). The final section in verses 34–42 places this teaching within the larger context of Jesus’ overall purpose/mission. Our particular passage (10:26–33) revolves around three occurrences of the command ‘do not fear’. The first command in verse 26 can be related to faith: in the face of persecution, we must trust Jesus our master, work within this relationship and speak the gospel message as he has instructed us (boldly, in the words of Paul ‘in season and out of season’). If we do not maintain faith in Jesus in times of trouble, then it is likely we will cut and run (which means that fear has won) or we will try and take charge on our own terms (which means that we are no longer preaching or living the gospel).

The second command in verse 28 can be related to hope. The persecutions, the violence that we see around us can drain our hope that the kingdom of God can ever be established on earth. Fear can drive me to try and shut out the world and the challenge of preaching the kingdom in the forlorn hope that I can secure the little world of my life. Jesus counters this by warning his disciples that such an attitude will not protect them from the ‘one who can destroy both body and soul in hell’ (I prefer this reading to the alternative, that it is a reference to God’s final judgment). They should ‘fear’ this ‘enemy’; or be on their guard, because to retreat like this is just what he wants them to do. In battle, an army is always at its most vulnerable when beating a retreat.

The third command not to fear in verse 31 can be related to love or, in more biblical terms, loyalty. Jesus assures the disciples that they are precious in his eyes and that he is their ever loyal advocate with the Father. In terms of the disciples’ mission, Jesus will not only be their loyal advocate but—and he cannot be anything else—a true advocate. Hence, if they disown him (through fear), this will be brought before the Father. It does not mean that Jesus ceases loving those who disown him; an integral part of his loyal love is that we must know, and hopefully accept, that we have been disloyal.

One further feature of the mission of the twelve worth noting is that, although they are given power to heal and drive out evil spirits, they are not given power over those who persecute them. Presumably, this is because such power would involve violence and the power that Jesus exercises is not violent, as his passion and death clearly demonstrate. Jesus’ Old Testament precursor here is Jeremiah, imprisoned in the stocks with only
his faith and the conviction of his preaching to sustain him. And so he sings a little psalm. Yes this powerless, imprisoned prophet who preached for twenty-three years against the establishment to no avail (25:1) is the one whose message was in time accepted and treasured as God’s life-giving word.
Jesus says in the gospel passage that ‘Anyone who welcomes a prophet because he is a prophet will have a prophet’s reward’. The same goes for a holy man. The question is, what reward does a prophet or holy man bring and is not Jesus the prophet and holy man par excellence? Well, if we follow the lead of today’s gospel it is certainly not the kind of reward that many would have in mind. You welcome Jesus home to your family and he immediately takes centre stage. At least he does not impose himself but invites or challenges; he calls for a decision one way or the other (note the repeated ‘prefer’). Still a mighty shock to the system and one which Christians of every generation struggle to come to terms with. And it is not just something that affects relationships within a family; Jesus claims that it involves one’s whole life. If you give it up for his sake he promises you that you will find it.

This statement does provide a clue as to how to read his challenge about the family. One cannot add relationship with Jesus onto one’s life as a kind of accessory, the icing on the cake. It must be the foundation of all other relationships otherwise it will not work, nor will they. Only when one has made Jesus the centre of one’s life can all our other relationships find their true meaning and purpose: family, friends, the good the bad, etc. It amounts to a radical rethink of customary priorities. For example, to refuse to make Jesus the centre of one’s life is to be disloyal to one’s parents, family and friends, to sell them short. After all, the best thing for you is the best thing for them. This is a massive challenge for any human being but a merciful God has provided a simple way for us to get under way, and one that provides abundant grace to complete our transformation. According to our reading from Paul, by undergoing the simple rite of baptism we join Christ in his death, which was a death for our sakes, in order that ‘we might live to a new life’. So through baptism we are welcomed into the family of Jesus, a family that lasts forever.
What is our reward then? I think it is this, that when we welcome Jesus as the honoured guest, the centre of our life, he becomes our host who then treats us as honoured guests, and even more than guests, as beloved sons and daughters of his father. But how do we know that we are really welcoming Jesus into our lives, into our families? The last part of the gospel provides an answer. When we welcome someone not because of what he or she can do for us but simply because he or she is a disciple and thereby an honoured guest, no matter how ‘little’, then we have welcomed Jesus into our lives. This is so because anyone who welcomes a disciple in this way ‘welcomes me’.

The reading from 2 Kings introduces a powerful story that touches on this same theme. Let a prophet into your life and it will never be the same again. But there is a nice twist to the end of this story. Not only is the life of the ‘great lady of Shunem’ turned upside down as a result of providing hospitality to Elisha, but Elisha’s status as a prophet is turned upside down too. She gives birth to a son as Elisha foretells but he soon dies and the distraught mother hastens to the prophet and falls at his feet. Elisha dispatches his servant with his staff to raise the child but it does not work. Elisha has botched the job: one cannot presume to have the prophetic charism, it is a gift and God gives it to whomever God chooses and whenever God chooses. In this case, the woman is ‘revealed’ as the prophet, the one who knows the score. Elisha is obliged to ‘follow her’ and return to her house that he has turned upside down in order to resuscitate her son. It is a measure of Israel’s realistic attitude to its tradition that it could tell a critical story about one of the great figures of the tradition.
Fourteenth Sunday of the Year

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

If we can, we like to be in control of things and even other people. It has become almost an obsession in our modern highly individualistic societies where I must plan my life and have it all unfold according to plan, even if this may involve trumping the plans of others. But, this is just healthy competition, is it not? Rich nations spend enormous amounts of money and effort bending nature to their will and bending other human beings to their will. A theme that runs through the Bible is that the more we try to take control of our lives, to have things on our terms, the more entrapped we become. One can see it in the Garden Story. Adam and Eve are promised by the serpent that they will be like God, supremely powerful and free, yet they end up hiding from each other and from God, powerless and afraid. We can see this kind of theme in each of this Sunday’s readings.

In our first reading, the prophet Zechariah sees the arrival of a king who will free the warring kingdoms of Ephraim (the north) and Jerusalem (the south) from the trap of war into which they and other nations have fallen. Neither Ephraim nor Jerusalem can do this; they are completely trapped by the weapons they have made and the wars they have waged—all in the name of gaining freedom from the ‘oppression’ of the other, of gaining control on their terms. Only someone completely free of this trap, the humble peace-bearing king, riding a donkey, not in a chariot or on a warhorse, can free them. He will not return violence with violence. If they do not cede ‘control’ to this king, they will remain trapped.

The reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans is about our futile attempts to control our personal lives and to have things on our terms. Paul knows that we will go to any lengths to try and banish the fear of death from our lives; it is after all the ultimate sign that we do not have control of life and that eventually it comes to and end no matter how hard we fight against it. Our desperate attempts to thwart death lead, according to Paul, to unspiritual lives. Living such lives ‘you are doomed to die’. Paul is not
just talking about physical death here but the death of our spiritual self that is the fruit of unspiritual lives. The antidote is to welcome the Spirit of God who has made a home in us and to recognise that it is the presence of this Spirit in us that alone can enable us to escape the clutches of both physical and spiritual death. Paul’s conviction that the Spirit has made its home in us reminds me of Jesus visiting the home of Martha and Mary. Like Mary, we should sit and listen to the teaching of the Spirit about how to live our lives, rather than try and control things on our terms like Martha.

The gospel passage tackles our obsession with being in control in three moves. The first identifies the ones who can freely and openly receive Jesus’ teaching. They are not the learned and clever who think they are in control but those who like children, accept that they need to learn from ‘the other’. The second identifies Jesus as the sole source of the teaching; the knowledge of the Father that alone can save. To whom does Jesus choose to reveal the Father? The answer comes in the third move where Jesus invites ‘all you who labour and are overburdened’.

Within the context of the interpretation that I am presenting here, the overburdened are not so much those who are crushed by others (although these are not excluded) but those of us who try to take control of our lives on our terms and who therefore have to keep acquiring more and consuming more (the more you have the greater the appetite). In fact we become trapped and in order to be free of this yoke we need to take on the yoke of Jesus. Doing this of course means becoming a disciple. Taking his yoke does not mean that he unloads his burden onto us, rather we form a team with him. The image that comes to mind is of a team of oxen yoked together and ploughing the land. One can come across some very unusual teams in the Middle East among poor farmers; a donkey and ox, a donkey and horse, occasionally even a farmer helping his ox along. This was probably the case also in Jesus’ day. Paradoxically, by taking on the yoke of Jesus, what looks to be the oddest team of all—myself the sinner and the Son of God—becomes the perfect team. What looks impossible becomes easy to bear (because Jesus is with us sharing the yoke) and gives rest and refreshment rather than exhaustion. The yoke of the cross that was imposed on Christ by his apparent victors—the forces of evil—becomes the sign and instrument of his victory over these forces and salvation for all the overburdened and oppressed.
Fifteenth Sunday of the Year

Isaiah 55:10–11; Romans 8:18–23; Matthew 13:1–23 or 13:1–9

We have two views about the word of God in this Sunday’s readings; one that emphasises the transcendence and power of God’s word, the other that emphasises its immanence, its presence in human beings. The reading from Isaiah proclaims that the word that issues from God’s mouth always achieves what God wills it to achieve; its purpose cannot be thwarted. And what is its purpose? The text employs the simile of life giving rain and snow to assert that God’s purpose, as revealed via his word, is to give life and nourishment. Given the setting of the so-called ‘Second Isaiah’ (chapters 40—55) with the people languishing in Babylonian exile, confronted by the claims that the Babylonians no doubt made about the power of their gods over all other gods, this is a bold assertion. One catches glimpses in chapters 40—55 of a prophet striving to overcome doubt and despair among his audience—see 40:27–31 for an example. But this claim about the power of God’s word is an integral part of Israel’s faith; even God’s word of judgment against sinners has this same purpose in mind: once a sinner accepts the word of judgment, life-giving forgiveness follows.

The famous parable of the sower in Matthew’s Gospel explores the other side of the equation: the immanence of God’s word. If we read the parable without the subsequent explanation God looks like a reckless farmer, casting seed on good as well as bad terrain. What a waste from someone who presumably knows the difference better than anyone else! But God will try anything to get a harvest and, as with the Isaiah text, the parable finishes on a confident note: despite what looks to be a terrible waste of good seed on poor soil, there will indeed be a rich harvest. God’s word will ultimately be fruitful. One could almost read the parable as an allegory of the mission of Jesus.

If we take the subsequent explanation of the parable into account, a somewhat different interpretation emerges. The word of God starts to look more fragile and vulnerable. It can be snatched away by the evil one, it can
fail to transform the one who hears it so that he or she succumbs to the first trial or persecution. Is this the all powerful word of God? On reflection however, the interpretation or allegorising of the parable seems to make a subtle shift from the word of God as sown (by God, by Jesus, by a preacher) to the word of God as it enters the receiver, as ‘it is sown in his heart’. In doing so it becomes one with the person, which is in keeping with the theology of incarnation. It does so to such an extent that the text can speak as one of the word and the person who hears the word.

This is evident where the text says ‘what was sown on rocky ground (sic the seed/word), this is the one who hears the word of God and immediately receives it with joy’ (following the NRSV which is closer to the Greek here than the Jerusalem Bible which is used in the Lectionary). The message is that as the word of God is sown in our hearts it becomes or is meant to become our word, an integral part of our life as disciples, an integral part of our discourse as disciples. Hence it enters fully into the fragile, vulnerable world of human beings and as such it can be abused and misrepresented, neglected or treasured. Thus it mirrors Jesus himself who became one like us in all things but sin and experienced abuse and misrepresentation, neglect and rejection (another angle on the notion of God as reckless, going to any lengths, withholding nothing). But, even though the word of God becomes one with us it does not cease to be the pure word of God (a parallel perhaps with the statement that Jesus was like us in all things ‘but sin’). Awareness of this is surely an urge to treasure this word as a great gift, to protect it from abuse and to live it in a way that will reveal to others the source of our life.

An intriguing and somewhat difficult element of this Sunday’s gospel is the section between the parable and the explanation, in which the disciples ask Jesus why he speaks in parables. As part of his answer he quotes Isaiah 6:9–10, itself a difficult passage that is rendered in a number of ways in the New Testament (and the Greek Septuagint). Two brief comments may be made here. The first is that this parable commences a series of seven parables on the kingdom (a perfect biblical number) and this signals an important stage in the unfolding of Matthew’s Gospel. As well as this, the series comes after a number of encounters with Jewish authorities who are hostile to Jesus and his message. This hostility helps explain the exchange between Jesus and the disciples about the purpose of parables, as well as the emphasis in the explanation of the parable on those who reject the word. As the gospel presents it, the prophecy of Isaiah about the rejection of the word is being fulfilled even as Jesus speaks but, in the
divine scheme of things, this is a foreseen prelude to the ultimate triumph over evil of Jesus and his word.
Sixteenth Sunday of the Year

Wisdom 12:13, 16–19; Romans 8:26–27;
Matthew 13:24–43 or 13:24–30

This Sunday’s reading from Matthew contains parables two, three and four of the series of seven that begins with the parable of the sower (see previous Sunday). What binds these three parables together is the theme of the kingdom of heaven (this is widely thought to be Matthew’s pious way of referring to the presence of God). Whenever I read this series of three parables I cannot help imagining a scene in which Jesus tells a story—which is what a parable basically is. The actual telling of the parable may have been much longer than the textual version we have: this could well be an outline, designed to provide sufficient information for preachers to develop into a homily or instruction. One could imagine that as Jesus the master preacher tells his parable questions arise among his listeners which lead to the second parable, which raises a further question or questions which in turn lead to the third parable—and three is a favourite number in biblical story telling. One gains the impression that each parable is designed to stimulate people to think, ask questions and make decisions. It is significant that a number of parables end with Jesus saying ‘listen, anyone who has ears to hear’: in our jargon, ‘think about it folks’. In keeping with the Bible as an invitation to think rather than the imposition of thought, parables are meant to encourage people to reflect and make decisions about their lives. The Bible does not portray Jesus as imposing his teaching or will; to do so would impugn the biblical theology of God.

The first parable about the wheat and the darnel addresses the troubling question why evil seems to permeate and threaten the lives of good, faithful people who believe in a God of justice who is by definition intolerant of evil. If one’s theology did not present God as intolerant of evil then who would be interested in following such a God? According to this parable, God (the sower) is portrayed as well aware of the conflict between good and evil and knows the best way of dealing with it. The wheat will be protected so that it can flourish; the darnel will not be allowed to over-
come and destroy it. Thus, the situation is not out of (God's) control and
good will ultimately triumph over evil at the harvest.

But parables, even those of Jesus, are limited human stories and can-
not cover everything. The parable of the wheat and darnel could give the
impression that good and evil are sort of evenly matched, at least until the
harvest. How can you be sure you are on the winning side (the kingdom)?
The second parable of the mustard seed, in my view, responds to this ques-
tion or limitation in the preceding parable. It assures its listeners that the
kingdom of heaven is the reality that grows vigorously and vibrantly; even
though it may begin like a mustard seed in a tiny way it far outstrips any
rival and becomes a tree that offers protection for all those who seek it
(the birds).

Although the second parable answers a question that is likely to arise
from the first one, it in turn raises another question—Jesus, you say that
the kingdom of heaven grows from tiny beginnings like a mustard seed to
become a highly visible and welcoming 'tree', but I don't see it growing in
any visible way in my life. How do I know the kingdom is here? In answer,
Jesus tells the parable of the woman mixing yeast in flour. Once mixed in
with the flour, the yeast effectively disappears. All one sees is flour. But the
yeast works its way invisible to the human eye and transforms the dough
into something new and highly desirable. Even though the presence of
God may appear at times invisible to human perception, it permeates all
creation and is bringing about its transformation.

Parables are an ingenious way of preaching the word of God and Jesus
was a master storyteller. But words are not the only way human beings
communicate; indeed at times words, even the words that Jesus spoke,
are not the appropriate way to respond to a situation—something that he
of course knew very well. Paul assures his readers that when words fail us
or are not the appropriate way to 'speak' to God, the Spirit enables us to
express ourselves and our needs in the most appropriate way, a way that
is 'according to the mind of God.' God listens as attentively to those who
are lost for words as to those who are gifted with words. No one is left un-
heard. Well aware of this, the author of the book of Wisdom celebrates our
God who 'cares for everything' in a way that is perfectly just and merciful.
We can apply the same kind of interpretation to this Sunday’s group of three parables as to last Sunday’s three. The two groups of three are separated by Jesus’ explanation to the disciples of the parable of the wheat and the darnel. As noted earlier, the parable of the sower makes up a series of seven parables overall in this section of the gospel.

The previous group of parables emphasises the presence and initiative of God that is the foundational principle of the kingdom of heaven. Once this principle has been taught, the group of parables in this Sunday’s reading can explore the various ways in which we human beings encounter the kingdom. The first one envisages someone stumbling on the kingdom ‘by chance’ like someone stumbling on treasure in a field. We can be cruising through life quite comfortably and something happens, we meet someone or have an experience and our lives are changed forever. On reflection, we discern the presence of God in the encounter. We have stumbled on the kingdom ‘by chance’? But, given the previous group of three parables, the gospel is perhaps inviting us to think about whether our encounter with the kingdom can ever be just by chance. We might think so initially but, as they say, God works in strange ways.

Of course the apparent chance encounter with the kingdom may not be many peoples’ experience. What of the person who searches and longs for an encounter with God, some reassuring experience of the divine, and never has it? The second parable about the merchant searching for fine pearls is designed to assure the seekers that ‘seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you’. The kingdom is worth struggling and searching for because it is like precious pearls. Once again, we might add that God always finds or meets the genuine searcher: he or she will not be left stranded or empty handed.
Both of these parables speak of the kingdom as something marvelous and wonderful. When you come across it you are so struck with delight and wonder that it absorbs your whole life. You will give up everything else to have it. But what of those who find that living the kingdom of heaven can often be ambiguous and confusing, full of difficult decisions? The third parable can be seen to respond to them by portraying the painstaking work of fishermen who must sift carefully through their catch and separate what they judge to be good fish from those that are of no use. But their painstaking work is rewarded and they take home a catch of fish. The value of this seemingly ordinary and even arduous living of the kingdom is emphasised by the way Jesus says that it mirrors the work of the angels at the end of time. They will take great care to ensure that the good are singled out and only the wicked thrown away. The theme of the end time links this parable to the earlier one about the wheat and darnel, and in this way a kind of frame is formed around the six parables on the kingdom of heaven (note that the parable of the sower does not itself refer to the kingdom).

As noted in an earlier reflection, parables are an ingenious way of teaching but, like all literary forms, they are limited. No one knew this better than Jesus. In the final section of our gospel he passes the mantle of speaking parables to the disciples. Once they have been schooled in his method of teaching, they are ‘like a householder who brings out from his storeroom things both new and old.’ That is, they will pass on the parables proclaimed by Jesus but also compose new ones and even new forms of teaching to meet new situations. This is an important aspect of being a disciple of Jesus, of loyally carrying on his work. In terms of Paul’s letter, it is according to the purpose of God and God will co–operate with those who love him and turn their work to a good purpose. God will give us the grace to proclaim the gospel in ways both new and old. The old here is not something out–of–date; rather the way Jesus taught and the things that he taught become the foundation on which disciples of subsequent generations build.

One can be graced as a wise preacher and teacher but one can also lose or abuse the gift, just as one can lose the treasure of the kingdom or fail to follow up on a peak experience of God. The first reading from 1 Kings provides a reminder of this with Solomon. According to the text, he prayed at Gibeon and was given the gift of a ‘heart wise and shrewd as none before you’. For a while Solomon used the gift well but he later abused the gift; the outcome was the schism in the united kingdom of Da-
vid, a rift that was never healed and ended up contributing to the collapse of monarchy altogether.
Both Matthew and Mark's Gospels have two accounts of the miracle of the loaves and fish. In the first account of each, there are five loaves, in the second seven. What is fascinating about the accounts in both Gospels is that there is no recorded comment from the people about where all the food comes from. Rather different to the stories of Jesus healing sick people and casting out demons: often these are followed by a comment from the onlookers about who Jesus is and where he comes from. Why the difference? Is it because the feeding stories deal with the ordinary and everyday realities—having a meal, working one's job, buying clothes, cleaning the house, etc. They are not the sort of things that make one stop and think. Are we more likely to do so and turn to God when things are tough, as Paul urges his Roman readers to do, assuring them of the utter reliability of God's love?

Perhaps those who enjoyed Jesus' bountiful bread and fish are a bit like that modern, western phenomenon—the consumer. We have become so accustomed to our consumer world that, at least until scientists recently started ringing alarm bells, we took it all for granted. How many times have I asked myself when I fill the car with petrol, where does this fuel come from and how many people in say, the Middle East, may have been disadvantaged or even killed during its production? As I recall, hardly ever. And until recently, did I ever give a thought to what comes out the car's exhaust? All I am interested in is the availability of the product for which I pay and which I consume.

If my mind is so focused on the particular thing at this particular moment that I am consuming it then it is unlikely I will lift my head to see where it all came from and where it is all heading. It is even more unlikely that I will see with the eye of faith that a miracle has taken place, that in the flow of human life God has privileged me with a moment of grace. But God is kind and merciful and the Bible contains a number of stories
in which God gently (occasionally more firmly) lifts our heads out of the consumer trough and invites us to see what is really going on and how extraordinary the ordinary can be when seen from the right perspective.

A rather nice example is provided by our reading from Isaiah. The text invites all and sundry to a marvelous banquet, one that boasts the best corn, wine and milk, not the shonky stuff that you buy in a market. And it is all free! The prospect of getting something for nothing always arouses human interest and at this point the text makes its real play. It invites those salivating over the prospect of a marvelous free feed to realise that such generosity can only come from God (listen to me and you will have good things to eat). What is more, the banquet of food is a prelude to the real gift that God is offering and that is an everlasting covenant. In a poetic yet subtle way, this prophecy urges its readers to realise that God is the source of any bounty that they enjoy and that it in turn is a pledge of the intimate relationship that God wishes to establish with them. In short, a moment of God's grace should enable them to see more clearly the whole purpose of God in their lives.

Similarly with the gospel. Even though Jesus knows the real plight and need of the crowd he seems happy enough to let them enjoy the moment of their miraculous meal. But it is a different matter with the disciples. His words and gestures clearly reveal this meal as something that takes what appears from a human point of view to be inadequate and turns it into an anticipation of the messianic banquet in the kingdom of heaven. What they cannot do (we have only five loaves and a few fish), Jesus enables them to do with abundance once they follow his instructions (twelve baskets of leftovers carefully collected). The parallel to be drawn is that if they wish to enjoy the kingdom of heaven as pictured in his parables, they should listen to him and do what he says as loyal disciples. But, as so often, they struggle to see beyond the moment and it is only in the light of Jesus’ death and resurrection and the gift of the Spirit that they are able to revisit these events in his ministry and see their purpose and meaning.

If this is the case with the disciples then I would suggest it is even more so in our age where the mood seems to be that the consumer is or should be the model of human life. We may find it even harder than the disciples to recognise the presence of God in our lives. The incarnational aspect of Christianity, being able to immerse oneself fully in the present, is quite a different thing to consumer immersion.
We all hanker for that definitive experience of God that will lift us out of the rut of our daily lives, clarify the direction we should take for the future and resolve those pressing and seemingly insoluble questions. There is nothing wrong with this; both the Old Testament and New Testament contain stories of those who encounter God, are freed from sin or sickness and find new purpose in their lives. Also, our desire is no doubt fueled in part by the promise of heaven. But, our readings for this Sunday sound a counter theme that we need to take into consideration. The encounter with God may not go according to expectations or hopes. But this kind of encounter seems to be just as important as the other; depending on where we are in our lives, it may be more important. Not the kind of experience we want perhaps but the one we need.

The story of Elijah’s experience of God at Mount Horeb might have been expected to follow the one of Israel’s encounter with God at Sinai/Horeb, where a spectacular son et lumiere is followed by the establishment of a privileged relationship with God in the covenant. Not so. God is present in ‘a voice of thin silence/small voice of silence’ (the NRSV has ‘the sound of sheer silence’), signaling something unexpected and almost indescribable. Elijah steps forward to meet his God and is asked a question ‘what are you doing here Elijah’? The prophet proclaims that he is the only faithful one left but is corrected by God who says there are five thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal. Elijah receives commissions that he never gets to carry out and an instruction to anoint Elisha as his successor. It is a very intense and intimate encounter with God but it effectively signals the end of Elijah as prophet. Yet Elijah is celebrated as one of the great Old Testament prophets because he accepts his place in God’s scheme of things, however unpalatable and disappointing it might seem.

In the second reading, Paul pours out his sorrow over ‘my brothers of Israel’ to his Roman readers. It is a measure of how much Paul hoped
that his own conversion and his preaching of the gospel might touch and convert his fellow Jews. But it was not to be. No doubt Paul was completely committed to the Gentile mission and saw it as his calling from God. But his success in this arena seems only to have heightened his sense of failure in the other. Did Paul hope that his work might be crowned by some dramatic breakthrough in his relations with his Jewish brothers and sisters? It did not happen. Paul had to be content to pray for them and hope for them, but without the satisfaction of seeing their ‘conversion.’ One’s vocation is about fulfilling the purpose that God has for us, not about our personal satisfaction.

When we turn to the gospel passage, we find a somewhat similar theme to the first two readings. Peter asks to experience Jesus’ power over water and is invited by Jesus to step out of the boat. The presence of divine power is there; Peter walks on the water. But the experience does not elevate Peter to another realm, beyond that of his fellow disciples. The same man who a few minutes before recoiled in fear before a ghost now walks towards that ghost. Walking with Jesus on land or water does not mean that one is magically transported beyond one’s fears, hatreds, weaknesses or strengths. If anything, it sharpens one’s awareness of these. In Peter’s case it is fear; more than responding to Jesus’ invitation to walk on water, he needs to respond to Jesus’ words ‘do not fear.’ The experience challenges Peter and the disciples to face and overcome, not the forces of nature, but the things that make us afraid to live our lives fully as Christians with all their joys and sorrows, because we do not trust God completely.

A number of commentators hold that this passage was designed to send a message to the struggling early church which was beset with difficulties, persecution and fear (note the earlier version of this story in 8:23—27). Jesus is there to help them but they need to trust him completely, even when the powers set against them seem overwhelming. Those who, like Peter, fail are rebuked but as long as they cry to the Lord in their weakness—again, like Peter—Jesus will not abandon them. The story serves as a call to those who have fallen by the wayside to avail of God’s mercy and walk again in company with the Lord.
We ‘insiders’, the members of the church, the chosen people, tend to think our role and the role of the church is to reach ‘outsiders’ and convert them. Up to a point this is true but it can lead us to make some dangerous assumptions about ourselves as the insiders as well as the outsiders. We are the givers they are the receivers. Our readings for this Sunday, in my view, reverse the direction. Outsiders are portrayed as the privileged ones who, in God’s scheme of things, have something important to offer the insiders. It provides a challenge and healthy counter to the tendency to become complacent or even arrogant.

Take the reading from Isaiah 56. According to modern critical scholarship, this text comes late in the developing corpus of material attached to the great eighth century BCE prophet Isaiah. It reflects the challenges associated with attempts at restoration of the Israelite/Jewish community after the exile. Contrary to another view in Ezra–Nehemiah of how the post–exilic community should be constituted, the passage in Isaiah claims that foreigners are as welcome as Israelites. No separation is required. Their sacrifices will be as acceptable to God as those of Israelites; in fact, this text claims, the restored temple is to be a house of prayer for all peoples. Those who were left behind by the Babylonians and those who returned from the Babylonian exile are challenged to see the foreigner (even Babylonians!) as precious in God’s sight as themselves, the chosen people. Race, history, culture, geography are no longer barriers to inclusion: the only things required for membership of the chosen people are respect for the Sabbath and loyalty to the covenant. Is it surprising that the alternative view tended to win out? Look at our own history, in particular our relationship with Jews and other Christian denominations, at least until recent times.

In a way, one could say that Paul shares some of the sentiments expressed in the reading from Isaiah. His hope is that the success of his
Gentile mission will cause at least some of his brother and sister Jews to change their attitude. The chosen people at times thought of themselves as the envy of the world, not so much because they had better qualities than others but because of what God had done on their behalf. As Moses predicts in Deuteronomy 4:6, when the nations see the impact of the gift of the Torah in the lives of Israel in the land they will exclaim ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!’ In the same way, Paul hopes that when the Jews see what God has done for the Gentiles in Jesus Christ, they will become envious and seek to join this new fellowship. Those who were once regarded as outsiders will help to bring about the conversion of those who think of themselves as insiders. And insiders normally think they have no need of conversion!

This same theme is dramatically captured in the gospel account of Jesus and the Canaanite woman. The word Canaanite was often used to express the opposite of being Israelite. The ultimate outsider (the woman) encounters the ultimate insider (Jesus). The account, as presented by Matthew, is challenging even for the reader. Jesus acts and speaks as the ultimate insider, exclusively focused on his mission as a Jew to his Jewish people and how a foreigner like her has no right to what belongs to ‘the children’—God’s chosen ones.

Interpreters have wrestled with the seemingly cold and aloof attitude of Jesus and have proposed that he is testing her faith. I prefer to go the other way; namely, that Jesus knows her faith (that is why she is there) and wants its greatness to be revealed and celebrated, a faith that is in sharp contrast to the reaction of so many of his people. She is another example of that figure in the gospels (the centurion, the good Samaritan, the sinner, the tax gatherer) whose faith and honesty is a revelation to those around Jesus and to us who read the gospel. Insiders tend to think they have a right to things, this woman recognises that she has no rights, no claim on Jesus. She has to depend entirely on his mercy and is completely willing to do so: it is at this point that the ultimate insider shows that he is equally able to be at one with the outsider; where there is such faith the barriers of religion, race and culture fade away. The relationship of faith between her and Jesus means that she is showered with the same abundant gifts as those God has bestowed on the chosen people.
As I read the famous passage from Matthew’s Gospel, there are seven statements that Jesus makes in reply to Peter’s confession that ‘you are the Christ, the son of the living God’. And within the context of the Bible seven is a perfect number. Each statement says something not only about Peter and his role but also about the church—hence about ourselves.

The first statement is the proclamation that ‘you are a happy man’. One might have expected Jesus to say, ‘you are right’ or ‘you have spoken the truth’. No doubt this element is there but the use of the Greek ‘makarios’ which is translated as ‘happy’ or ‘blessed’ suggests that in making this profession of faith, something has happened to Peter. Jesus is not implying that Peter has better insight than his companions or is quicker off the mark, but that he has been singled out by God and anyone who is singled out by God for God’s work is blessed indeed. In short, it is about election but, as Deuteronomy 7 says, God did not choose Israel because it was better or bigger than other nations but because God loved Israel and had a particular purpose for it in the divine scheme of things. So it is with Peter, so it is with each one of us.

Jesus’ second statement is about the revelation of ‘my Father’ and emphasises that there is no separation between Jesus and his Father. Where Jesus is, the Father is there too. When taken in conjunction with the first statement, it also enables us to see that the intimate presence of the Father does not lessen the fact that this is Peter’s confession of faith. Rather, the grace of God enhances the humanity of Peter.

The third statement involves the change of name. By virtue of God’s grace Simon, as in baptism, becomes a new man with a new name. The fourth statement links his new name with his unique vocation, to be the ‘rock’. The confidence and trust that Jesus has in us human beings is astonishing particularly when compared with the lack of trust that we ourselves place in our fellow men and women. Each vocation is a sign of God’s trust and confidence.
The fifth statement shifts the focus somewhat from Peter to the church’s battle against the forces of evil. These seek to enslave people in sin but the church built on the ‘rock’ will provide a safe haven of freedom for all those within its gates. The metaphor of a rock and of an impregnable fortress with gates can create a somewhat static impression of the church and the vocation of Peter.

As if to provide a balance, the sixth statement shifts to a more active stance by providing Peter with the keys of the kingdom of heaven. He is empowered to step out confidently from the fortress, the forces of evil reduced to impotence, and lead the faithful to their ultimate goal, the gates of the kingdom of heaven. But this kingdom is not some distant place; in Matthew’s Gospel the kingdom of heaven is a circumlocution for the presence of God. Peter and the church usher people, freed from slavery, into the freedom of the presence of God.

The final statement respects a key feature without which the vocation of Peter and the church would not be truly human—decisions will have to be made and they will have to be made for the whole church, otherwise the whole enterprise would grind to a paralyzing halt. No decisions made by Peter or everyone making their own. To give Peter and the church the confidence to make decisions that at times may be painful and difficult, Jesus promises that the decisions will be ratified in heaven. This does not mean that they will automatically be the best or perfect decisions. As Paul says, ‘we see now as in a mirror, darkly’. But God accepts the honest decisions that the church and indeed any Christian makes because they are part of a vocation of discipleship, part of being remade in the image and likeness of God.

If this passage is lifted out of its context, it can give the impression that Peter and the church will live a charmed life. As we know from the gospels and Acts of the Apostles, and our own history, this is not the case. Our passage is immediately followed by the one in which Jesus reprimands Peter and calls him ‘Satan’. To go from a rock to a Satan in a few verses is almost as amazing as the reverse—the trust and confidence that God places in us poor human beings. God should consult a counselor but, as Paul says ‘who could ever know the mind of the Lord? Who could ever be his counselor?’ Only a God who loves in a way that we cannot fathom can keep trusting and forgiving those who continually fail; we certainly cannot.
As noted in the reflections for the previous Sunday, Peter goes from being the foundational rock of the church to Satan in one gospel scene. Perhaps he thought that as the rock he had a ‘mandate’ as we say to take charge of Jesus’ life and mission, to do what was best for him. Jesus’ rebuke is sharp and clear but he nevertheless takes Peter up the mountain of the transfiguration with James and John. Jesus does not give up on the ones he chooses, despite their blunders.

Jesus’ commitment to Peter and the disciples is demonstrated in the way he follows up the rebuke with an instruction (torah) that addresses our desire to be in control—of our own life and the life of others. Our modern technological world can lead us to become absorbed, even obsessed, with the conviction that our scientific know–how and marvelous machines will enable us to secure our lives. My life expectancy can be estimated accurately as such–and–such, I will therefore work for a certain number of years after which I will retire with a sufficient amount of money. I will follow a particular life style that will ensure my health and longevity. There are effectively no unforeseen factors. The inevitability of death recedes into the distance.

But, Jesus asks ‘what, then, will a man gain if he wins the whole world and ruins his life?’ Clearly, Jesus is talking about a different ‘life’ to the one that our modern world holds up as the model. And it is not just eternal life but life here and now; if not then why speak of the incarnational aspect of our discipleship? What kind of life then are we to pursue as Christians? An essential component of it is that each ‘renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me.’ The picture this evokes of Jesus’ staggering along under the burden of his cross is the very antithesis of the modern picture of someone who is in control of his or her life. To all intents and purposes it appears as the ultimate human indignity, complete loss of control.
But in a paradoxical way Jesus’ call allows—better, encourages—each disciple to exercise control and in two key ways. The first is that Jesus gives each the freedom to make a decision (a more biblical term than ‘control’): as he says, ‘If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself’. Discipleship is therefore a call, a challenge, it is not imposed. The second is to be found in the reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans where he urges them to offer their living bodies as a holy sacrifice. In effect, one takes control of one’s life by handing it over to God. All human beings crave a full human life. The Christian claim is that by handing our lives over to God we gain a real human life, not the substitute that our world offers. As our media frequently reminds us in news and stories, this ‘substitute’ for a real life is so often full of anxiety, fear, and isolation—in short, slavery.

In contrast, Christian discipleship does not lead to slavery and death but to freedom and glory because the one who goes before us has smashed the cross of sin and enslavement, a cross that we are unable to bear by ourselves, so that we are now able to take up the cross that we can bear—the giving of our lives in the service of our brothers and sisters. The Bible does not shy away from the difficulties that this real human life may bring—read the passage from the book of Jeremiah where the prophet voices his pain at having to bear ‘insult, derision, all day long’. But by shouldering this burden as part of our discipleship we are one with him whose cross became the sign of victory over all forms of enslavement.
Everything that we humans do or say operates within a context. Without a context within which we can relate and assess things we would be completely lost—as many of us feel when we first arrive in a foreign country where the language and cultural context is quite different to ours. If we take on (for example, children in a family) or are assigned responsibilities (for example, being appointed a parish priest), we need to know the context in which these responsibilities operate. Another way of putting this might be to say that where there are responsibilities there are rights and vice-versa. God’s instructions to Ezekiel in our first reading are about his responsibilities as a prophet—very much in the mould of the prophet as a preacher of Torah rather than a ‘seer’ of the future. His responsibilities are outlined but then, as is required in the human realm and as God understands only too well, the context or boundaries within which the responsibilities operate are outlined (‘then he shall die for his sin, but you yourself will have saved your life’).

Given that Ezekiel accepts the responsibilities, he has a right to know to what extent they oblige him. Otherwise we poor human beings are likely to be overwhelmed. Once the prophet has done his duty therefore by warning the sinner, the text implies that God will step in: the sinner will die but Ezekiel will save his life. It is a bit uncertain as to whether the theologian behind this text is appealing to what is called the reward—retribution schema (God will bless the good and punish the wicked) or the act—consequence schema (good acts have good consequences, bad acts bad ones: that’s the way the world that God created operates). Either option is a faith claim and the great mistake is to try and prove it from experience: Job and Ecclesiastes warn us of our inability to do this.

If the book of Ezekiel deals with specific responsibilities, Paul in Romans sets up a general principle (‘If you love your fellow men you have carried out all your obligations’). Yet Paul knows only too well that how-
ever noble this principle is, it needs to be rooted in specific actions (as in the book of Ezekiel), otherwise his readers will not have an appropriate context. In a typical Pauline flourish, he meets the need for something specific by listing the commandments and then shows that by keeping each one of them his readers are fulfilling the general principle. He cannot be faulted because the general command to ‘love your neighbour’ is in the Torah along with specific commands (cf Leviticus 19:18). The limitation of the theology in Ezekiel is that one may equate righteousness with fulfilling obligations. Paul does not throw away the notion of obligation because it is too central to the gospel: we are commanded to love (be loyal to) our neighbour as we love God. However, he proclaims that this love of our neighbour, guided by the commands, should have a deep and unpayable debt as its goal: the debt (dependence may be a better translation) of mutual love. We human beings love to be in control, even when doing good to others. According to Paul, this is not what it is about, we should end up being happily dependent on the love of those to whom we have done good (as brothers and sisters of Christ) rather than exercise control over them by having them ever dependent on us.

As I read the gospel passage from Matthew, Jesus initially seems to follow the Ezekiel model by outlining one’s responsibilities to one’s brother and then by setting boundaries (the three occurrences of ‘if he refuses to listen’). But it is the final phrase that catches my attention: ‘treat him like a pagan or a tax collector’. This is quite different to Ezekiel’s ‘he shall die for his sin’. When one looks at the larger context of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus’ instruction in this matter becomes clearer and it effectively blows out of the water any neat notion of boundaries in our responsibilities towards our neighbour. First, Matthew (one of Jesus’ apostles and the traditional author of or figure behind the gospel) is a tax collector—how did Jesus treat him? He called him to discipleship. Second, at the end of the gospel Jesus instructs his disciples not to reject pagans (same basic Greek word as in 18:20) but to invite them to become children of God through baptism. It looks as though Jesus is admonishing us never to ‘close the case’ on anyone who is in conflict with the church community. No rejection can be regarded as final; at least not in this life. We are meant to be disciples of Christ and Jesus never gives up on any of his sheep, particularly the lost ones.
Our readings tackle the relationship between a duo that is foundational for our lives: justice and mercy/forgiveness. According to the Bible we cannot have one without the other and we would not need either if there was no sin. As far as I can tell we will not need justice and mercy in heaven because we will finally be graced to love as God loves. Like the other virtues such as faith, hope, courage, etc, justice and mercy will be perfected in perfect love.

Justice is needed to rectify our injustice towards our neighbour and even ourselves in this life; and the same goes for forgiveness. God is of course just and merciful and could not, by definition be anything else. In God they are one with God’s love, goodness and truth. But, the reality of human sin and injustice and God’s intervention against the ‘sin of the world’ reveals them as two sides as it were of one coin. We need a just God to judge where sin and injustice has occurred otherwise we would have no hope—says the Bible—of sorting out our relationships with God or with one another. We often still make a mess of it, despite the Bible and revelation. Once injustice in a relationship has been identified and its perpetrator has acknowledged the wrong then the relationship can be restored to its just state through pardon/forgiveness. Hence there can be no mercy without justice; that is, a judgment that wrong has been committed must first be made, and the relationship must be restored in a proper or righteous way. Similarly, there can be no justice without mercy which seeks to heal what has been wounded, to restore what has been damaged and divided. The relationship between justice and mercy/forgiveness is so close that we can easily miss one or confuse one with the other. This often occurs in our law courts where, despite the best intentions of law makers, the process of litigation results in divisions and barriers between the parties rather than the restoration of just relationships. One is convicted
and taken to prison; the other is freed and, as often happens now, takes the money.

The reading from Ecclesiasticus or, in Hebrew, Ben Sirach can be read as a poetic presentation of rights and responsibilities within the context of Israel’s covenant relationship. The passage ends with the ringing call to the reader/listener to ‘remember the covenant of the Most High’. Within this covenant you enjoy the right to God’s justice and mercy. You therefore have a responsibility to ensure that others enjoy the same rights. The ‘neighbour’ here in the Old Testament context would I think refer to another Israelite rather than include the foreigner. The implication of course is that it can be extended to include all kinds of neighbours. To treat your neighbour in the manner described is therefore not only a breach of covenant rights and responsibilities but an insult to God. A bit like a person who flouts all the rules of a club and is then outraged when he or she is given the boot. An important feature of this reading is that it shows the commandments are meant to serve and enhance justice and mercy/forgiveness (‘remember the commandments, and do not bear your neighbour ill will’). There is no legalism here.

The gospel reading does much the same thing via a parable that contrasts a just and merciful king with his unjust and unforgiving servant. The gracious mercy of the king should have led to the servant being as merciful towards his fellow servant, his neighbour, but it didn’t. This adds an element to the theology of Ben Sirach and it is the sober warning that experiencing forgiveness may not change me, the servant. I may be just as unforgiving afterwards as before. How to avoid this? One way is to listen to this kind of parable; it is a torah or teaching that a just and merciful Jesus provides to help us avoid falling into such a bleak hole. A key component of this teaching is that we are only able to forgive because God has first forgiven us. This forgiveness is of course dependent on our acknowledgment of our sins (God’s judgment); if we do not acknowledge any sin how can there be forgiveness because, from our perspective, there is nothing to forgive or ask forgiveness for. How will I know that the grace of God’s forgiveness has changed or is changing me? When I forgive my neighbour from my heart.

The reading from Paul adds another important ingredient to the justice–mercy nexus, namely that “The life and death of each of us has its influence on others.’ Paul is speaking primarily of the Christian community, the ‘body of Christ’ (‘we live for the Lord’) but it applies equally to the larger context of our ‘global village.’ When two people fall out there is a
much wider ripple effect. The gospel parable catches this with its reference to the distress that the servant’s conduct caused his fellow servants.
A clue to how one might read this Sunday’s Gospel passage from Matthew lies in the final sentence: ‘Thus the last will be first and the first, last’. As a comment on the parable that Jesus has just told, it implies that God will overturn human expectations and rankings—something that we all indulge in at one time or other. What is interesting is that this comment effectively repeats the one that Jesus makes at the end of the preceding chapter. When Peter asks him what ‘we’ who have left everything will get Jesus assures the twelve that they will be richly rewarded for their loyalty by being given a privileged position in the kingdom (judges). What is more, all those who have left all for the sake of Jesus’ name will be richly rewarded. The chapter ends with Jesus saying ‘But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first’. Is this a veiled warning against assuming that in becoming a disciple one has thereby left everything and so is entitled to the reward? Perhaps the presence of this saying before and after the parable is inviting us to read it in relation to those who are disciples and those who are perceived as outside.

The workers who are engaged early in the day (about 6 am) have an agreement or promise with their boss about their pay, the reward of their labours (so Peter and the apostles). Other workers are hired throughout the day, at 9am, 12noon, 3pm and finally at 5pm. Significantly, the parable is really only concerned with the relationship between the ‘last comers’ and those we might call the ‘early birds’ and this suggests a link to the topic of the preceding discourse and the saying about the first and the last. The last comers receive the same amount (reward) from the boss as the early birds. At this point in the parable we have its three key players: early birds, last comers and the boss and we are invited to think about each within the context of Matthew’s Gospel.

Let us start with the boss—God. It is significant that God keeps going out to look for workers, even at the last hour. What is the point of this?
You do not take on staff just as you are about to close the shop for the day and just because they have not been employed. It is not good business sense, and it is even worse business sense to pay them a full day’s wages. Such a business will either go broke or is being run on quite different lines and the boss has resources well beyond our reckoning, with a different attitude to the normal ones.

Next we turn to the last comers. From their point of view they were about to miss out on work, and here they are spending a brief period in the vineyard yet getting full pay. How many times have we heard people lament that they have left it too late to be reconciled to God or to make something of their life? This parable teaches that we can never be too late with God, or too early. The prophecy from Isaiah shares this theology, assuring sinners not to think that it is too late, that it is all over between them and God. The mistake is to transfer their sense of being too late onto God but, as the prophecy says, ‘my thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways not your ways’. For God one moment of repentance reaps a full reward because ‘our God is rich in forgiving’, a generous God as the parable makes clear. This is the sense in which we can truly say that a moment becomes an eternity.

As for the early birds, their mistake is to think that time spent on the job is the main thing rather than being chosen for the job. It is good to celebrate long loyal service and jubilees as long as these do not lead us to think that these win God’s love in return. We can only love God because God has first loved us, has chosen us. Our love of God is a consequence of being loved by God, not a pre–requisite for it. What the early birds and the last comers share, and what should unite them, is that both have been chosen to work in the vineyard.

In being so chosen, each worker should be willing to do things God’s way because it will be the best way. This can take some learning. In the reading from Philippians Paul admits that he is caught between two desires. One (and it seems to be the principal one) is to be free of this world and to be one with Christ in the resurrection. This would bring about his perfection and, after all, this is what Christ desires for him. But his perfection involves being ‘like Christ’ who gave himself in the service of others. Hence, an integral part of Paul being made perfect is doing what Jesus did and desiring to do it as well as he can—serving his brothers and sisters faithfully. If it is Christ’s will that he remain ‘in this body’ to continue working as a disciple, then so be it. Paul is honest, admitting that he cannot set aside his own self–interest while serving his brothers and sisters.
But he is content to live with unresolved tension and leave its resolution in God’s hands. We talk about selfless service and it is a great ideal, but can we—indeed should we—ever claim to act without self-interest? As Jesus says, ‘you shall love your neighbour as you love yourself’.
We like to think that we are adaptable, open to change and ready to make it, the most innovative people in history. Maybe. I tend to think that we are pretty much the same as people throughout history. Like them we resist change unless it is on our terms and to our advantage. There lies the rub. What kind of change is really to our advantage? We need to have a critical or informed attitude about change. After all, change of itself is not necessarily a good thing. Our readings for this Sunday provide food for thought on what kind of changes we need to make.

In the first reading, Ezekiel is in vigorous debate about a traditional proverbial saying or jibe that is quoted at the beginning of chapter 18: ‘the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ The same quote occurs in Jeremiah 31:29. The fact that it is taken up by two major prophetic books suggests it was a hot topic during and after the exile, when it is believed the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel were compiled. Ezekiel quotes the saying in order to refute it by teaching that each person (and each generation) is responsible for his or her sin and must bear the consequences. In this way, he defends God’s justice against his opponents’ accusation and at the end of the chapter urges them to change their theology and their wicked ways. What are their wicked ways? Rather clever ones, as I read the passage, but Ezekiel is on to them. They are appealing to the saying on two counts in order to avoid the challenge of change. Both involve playing the old blame game, putting God in the dock. On the one hand, they say ‘why should we be just, indeed how can we be expected to be just, when God is unjust’? On the other hand they say ‘don’t blame me for what happens to the kids; that’s the way this unjust God has set things up.’ Even though they mock the theology behind the saying, in fact it suits them very well: no need to change at all. This attitude is a bit like voting to keep in the politicians that we love to hate.
In the Gospel passage from Matthew, Jesus deftly turns the correct response of his adversaries into a challenge that they are reluctant to take on board. When asked the question about the little parable that he tells, the chief priests and elders identify the son who made the good change as the one ‘who did the father’s will’. At this point we need to remember that in the preceding scene in the temple the same chief priests and elders challenge Jesus about his authority to teach. For them, the good and necessary change is for others—particularly troublesome characters like Jesus—to become like them. As they are portrayed in Matthew’s Gospel, which is all we know about them, the chief priests and elders see themselves as loyal to the Torah and tradition. But Jesus turns the tables on them by identifying the very ones they reject—the tax collectors and prostitutes—as the ones who make the right changes. They responded to the teachings of the righteous John the Baptist but when the priests and elders saw this, they ‘refused to think better of it (sic. change) and believe in him’. Given their assumption that everyone should move in their direction, they see no need for change and it is therefore unthinkable for them (say ‘impossible’) to take up Jesus’ challenge to follow the example of tax collectors and prostitutes.

The passage from Paul’s letter to the Philippians with its famous christological hymn outlines very nicely the kind of changes that we as Christians need to make. As a wise teacher, Paul outlines the challenge and then provides a portrait of Christ as our model. The hymn presents Jesus as the model of change: he emptied himself and became a servant of all. This did not involve the master ‘playing the role’ of a servant: the master became the servant and submitted to the most challenging change any human being will face—death, and the most momentous change that we will ever undergo—resurrection. Jesus undertook these changes, not because he needed to be made perfect, but in order to show us how to become perfect: it is for our sakes as the conclusion to the hymn indicates.

When Paul urges his community at Philippi to have ‘a common purpose and a common mind’ he does not mean that they are all to become clones of one another. Far from it. Being conformed to our model Jesus means for Paul that we become fully what we are meant to be, what we really desire—fully human both as individuals and as community. What is the sign that we are on the road to achieving these changes? In the words of the letter, the sign is that ‘nobody thinks of his own interests first but everybody thinks of other people’s interests instead.’ This kind of change is beyond us mere mortals, as the Gospel passage from Matthew suggests. It
can only come about as the result of the grace or gift that Christ bestows on his disciples. It is this alone that enables us to make the right changes to our life.
The texts from Isaiah and Matthew show how an inspired mind can take the common rustic image of a vineyard and turn it into a powerful prophetic message. In Isaiah, the poetic account of how God planted a vineyard, cared for it and did everything for it is effectively a review of God’s dealings with his people. There is nothing particularly new in this; it is a common enough ploy in prophetic preaching, designed to defend the justice and goodness of God in comparison to the evils committed by God's people. God cannot be blamed for the evils in society. Where the crunch comes is the following piece of the prophecy. It proclaims what God will do to the vineyard and, for any person with minimal knowledge of agricultural practice, it is disturbing news. What vintner in his right mind would let the investment that he lavished so much care on go to rack and ruin? An incompetent farmer to say the least. What is even more disturbing, Isaiah claims that God will do the same to the chosen people—why? Because the divine purpose driving this massive investment is something more foundational and important than Israel or Judah and if God cannot get a decent return on the investment through these chosen agents, then God will do it another way, so obsessed is the divinity with this purpose. What is God's driving purpose? The last part of the reading reveals it: justice and righteousness/integrity.

This would have been a shocking text to Isaiah’s listeners and no doubt it was meant to make them take notice and think and hopefully change. As the book unfolds, the hope is expressed that Israel will one day be able to fulfill its God–given mission. Isaiah 2:1–4 prophesies that one day Zion will become a beacon of God’s justice and peace for all the nations. By then Israel (and you the reader of the book) will know not to condemn others who fail because God has forgiven it for its failures.
Matthew’s version turns the well-known image into an equally powerful and challenging message, but in a somewhat different way to Isaiah. What strikes me when reading this passage is how the explanation of key aspects of the parable is withheld until almost the last moment. In a real sense, the last line is the crunch line. As we listen to the parable, we are not sure who or what is the vineyard. In the Isaiah version the vineyard is the ‘house of Israel’ and the men of Judah God’s ‘pleasant planting’. In Matthew’s version, we learn right at the end that the vineyard is nothing less than the kingdom of God; for Matthew this is the presence of God. The kingdom of God is not something that you can seize like an inheritance; it is gift. We quite understandably think that the wicked tenants kill the servants because they want the produce for themselves. The chief priests and elders certainly read it this way. We are surprised and perhaps even shocked to learn that there was no produce to take. The tenants had done nothing with the vineyard and that is why it will be given to ‘a people who will produce its fruit’. We understandably identify the ‘son’ in the parable as a reference to Jesus. But Jesus, as the narrator of the parable, springs another surprise by shifting our focus from the evil done to the son to ‘a people’ to whom the vineyard will be given. The preceding quote from Psalm 117/118 hints that this people are not the ones you would expect to end up tenants of a vineyard but God ‘prophesies’ that they will produce the fruit that the ‘chosen’ ones failed to produce.

What is the marvelous fruit of this vineyard that is the kingdom of God? For an answer I think we can invoke both Isaiah and Paul. In the words of Isaiah it is justice and righteousness. In the words of Paul it is ‘everything that is true, everything that is noble, everything that is good and pure, everything that we love and honour, and everything that can be thought virtuous or worthy of praise’. ‘Fill your minds’ with this fruit, Paul recommends and ‘the God of peace will be with you’ because the kingdom of God is among you.

God entrusted the kingdom of God on earth to Israel and looked to it to produce the fruit of this kingdom: a community of justice, righteousness and peace. The harsh claim is that there has been no such fruit. According to this text, the chief priests and elders are warned that the kingdom will be entrusted to a people, an unlikely people from their point of view, who will produce its fruit. As God trusted Israel, so God will trust this people. We in the church like to think we are that people. As disciples
of Jesus we can make the claim but that means we also, like Israel, must take on board the responsibility that goes with being custodians of the kingdom. Have we been any better in living up to the trust that has been placed in us? Thank God for a merciful God.
The biblical tradition liked the image of a great feast to communicate something of its conviction about the ultimate purpose of God. The passage from Isaiah paints a portrait of the final festal banquet around two key notions of God: the utterly transcendent one who is also the utterly immanent one. Only the utterly transcendent one can prepare a banquet for all peoples that is utterly lavish and generous. Only the utterly transcendent God can remove the mourning veil covering all peoples of every time and place. By the same token, only the utterly immanent God can personally wipe away the tears ‘from ever cheek’. A God who is utterly transcendent can at the same time be utterly immanent and vice-versa. The ultimate purpose of this marvelous banquet is that all will recognise that ‘this is our God’. According to the Bible, God acts so that the reality and glory of God will be manifest in creation and acknowledged by humanity. It is only on the basis of this that everything else can find its proper places—our relationships with God, with one another, with creation, etc.

The Gospel passage from Matthew addresses a key stage before the final realization of God's purpose via the parable of the wedding feast—the invitation to come. Those first invited initially refuse and subsequently abuse the king's servants. The two groups of servants could refer to the Old Testament prophets or to a combination of the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament disciples of Jesus. Parables leave things open and invite listeners/readers to fill in the 'gaps'. What is striking about this parable however is that on hearing of the abuse of his servants, the king suspends all preparations for the wedding for his son and deals with those who abused and killed his servants. Some find this a strange intrusion in the parable but, as I read it, it signals that the king regards his servants as equally precious as his son. They are not second class, disposable 'servants'. Hence the king devotes as much energy to righting the awful wrong perpetrated against his servants as he has devoted to the wedding of his
son. Another angle on the transcendent and immanent? Whatever the case, there is a strong message for the ‘servants’ of the king who proclaims this parable. Their suffering will not be forgotten, will not be in vain. Justice for all is an integral part of the king’s preparation for the great feast.

After righting this wrong, the king invites all and sundry to his wedding; good and bad alike. God’s invitation does not depend on how good you are beforehand; God loves all and all are precious in God’s sight. But, one cannot assume to enter the wedding banquet on one’s own terms, without any change at all. The episode of the person failing to don a wedding garment implies that he sees no difference at all between being outside or inside the wedding hall as an honoured guest. Or, even worse, he is deliberately demeaning its significance. The episode adds an important element to the theology of the festal banquet: it is not so much about a party but about our transformation, our being made perfect. We are all invited as we are so that we may become what God wants us to be. And this will be to the glory of God.

On a first reading, one might think that Paul’s statement in his letter to the Philippians is rather presumptuous: this is a man who thinks he is perfect, who knows what it is all about (‘there is nothing I cannot master’).

Two statements in the passage save Paul from such an accusation. The first is his acknowledgment that anything he does is done ‘with the help of the One who gives me strength’. Without that strength, Paul knows how weak and helpless he is. The second is his interest in the welfare of his helpers rather than his own. It was good that they came to help him in his troubles and he thanks them for that. But, more importantly, he gives thanks that this good act of theirs shows how much they are imbued with the Christian spirit. It is a sign that God ‘will fulfill all your needs, in Christ Jesus, as lavishly as only God can’. In a word, they are not far from that final, eschatological, lavish banquet.
Our readings for this Sunday provide an opportunity to reflect on something that is central to our faith—the Word of God. Each reading offers an angle on the mystery of the word of God and each angle challenges and surprises. The surprising thing about the reading from Isaiah is that the Word of God is addressed to the Persian conqueror Cyrus, the ultimate outsider. Even though Cyrus does not know the God of Israel, this is no barrier. God calls him personally by name as he called Moses and gives him the title of Messiah or anointed one, the only foreigner in the Old Testament to be given this title and the only figure in the book of Isaiah to be so described. Not even the Immanuel to come in Isaiah 9 and 11 is called Messiah. And, like David, Cyrus is given a commission to deliver Israel from oppression. In a way, this outsider becomes a favoured insider, Israel’s deliverer personally called and commissioned by God. This may have come as something of a shock to the insiders, the Judean exiles in Babylon. To the outsiders, whether Persian or Babylonian, it would probably have appeared outrageous, even laughable.

Cyrus’s vocation is not simply to deliver Israel. In a further challenge to established categories of thinking, the prophecy proclaims that God has a purpose in this that goes beyond Israel: it is that all may come to know that ‘apart from me, all is nothing’ God’s ultimate purpose is that people come to acknowledge the reality of God. Only on this basis can everything else fall into place.

The First Letter to the Thessalonians is believed to be Paul’s first and therefore probably reflects the early stages of his preaching mission. In reading our passage, one senses Paul’s wonder and delight at the impact that the preaching of the Good News had on the Thessalonians. What astonishes him is the realisation that the preaching of the Good News is not just the communication of a message, a word. It is a personal presence
of the Holy Spirit and an encounter with the Spirit. The presence of the Holy Spirit is encountered in two ways. On the one hand it inspires those preaching the Good News; on the other hand it empowers those who hear the Good News. There are times when being in the presence of a speaker is uplifting and empowering, and it is not just because of his or her words. The words mediate a personal encounter and one knows deep down that being in the presence of this person is a life-giving, privileged moment.

In the Gospel passage from Matthew we encounter the Word himself in debate with the Pharisees. Two things—at least—are surprising and challenging about the behaviour of the incarnate Word in this scene. The first is that although Jesus knows the deceptive motive behind their question and points this out to them bluntly, he does not dismiss them or walk away. The Good News is preached even to those with evil intent who have thereby placed themselves on the outside (‘I have come to call the sinners, not the virtuous’). This suggests that the message or response that Jesus makes is important. But, as one reads it, there is another surprise. The Incarnate Word does not appear to answer the pressing question whether a Jew should pay taxes to the foreign overlord. He seems to leave the decision up to them. This may be meant to indicate that Jesus comes to challenge us to make decisions about our life, not to provide a ready list of solutions to every question that we raise or problem that we encounter. In short, the Word challenges us to speak our word and act on it.

But, a closer look at the passage prompts another interpretation. Jesus prefaces his reply by asking the Pharisees whose image is on the coin. Those things that bear the image of Caesar belong to Caesar and, by implication, those things that bear the image of God belong to God. What in the context of this passage bears the image of God? Surely it is the Pharisees and indeed all human beings. On this reading, Jesus’ word is a challenge, an invitation to his questioners, to look at themselves from another angle, not as subjects who willingly or unwillingly use the Roman system, but who they really are despite their flaws—the image and likeness of God. If only they could ‘see’ that the pure image and likeness of God is the one speaking to them, then they might be able to look at themselves from his perspective.
Jesus’ reply to the Sadducees in today’s Gospel from Matthew draws together two separate commands in the Old Testament Torah. The command to love God occurs in Deuteronomy 6:5 and is part of the famous ‘shema’ (hear O Israel!) prayer that is recited in the synagogue every Sabbath. The command to love one’s neighbour is in Leviticus 19:18. This pithy Gospel from Matthew packs a lot of punch. Three reactions or questions spring to mind (for a start). Why does God command us to love? We speak of ‘falling in love’; do you ever hear our governments commanding people to love? If they did it would be greeted with incredulity or seen as a gross intrusion of privacy. Why does Jesus combine these two commands in response to the Sadducees’ question about the one greatest command? Thirdly, why does the second one command us to love our neighbour as we love ourselves? It almost looks as though there are two commands here. We are commanded to love our neighbour and to love ourselves. The gospel implies that if we do not love ourselves then it is unlikely we will be able to love our neighbour or even to love God.

In answer to the first question, we can take a lead from the text in Deuteronomy that follows the command to love God. It commands Israelites to ‘keep’ the words of the Torah in their hearts, in other words to be completely loyal to it. How is this loyalty manifested? By teaching one’s children about the Torah, by talking about it at key points in the day, and by visibly displaying one’s commitment to it. For the Torah, love of God means loyalty to God according to the instructions or guidelines that God has provided. These instructions are about what one is to do, not how one is to feel about God or neighbour. If one feels good about God that is a plus but the Torah knows feelings and emotions cannot be commanded. The biblical notion of love is rather different to our romantic one.
As for the second question, we can take a lead from the Decalogue or Ten Commandments where commands about loyalty to God are followed by commands about loyalty to neighbour. The implication here is that one who worships the God of Israel will therefore be loyal to his/her neighbour according to the Decalogue. If not, then one’s love of God is a sham. Or, if one starts from the laws about neighbour in the Decalogue then I love my neighbour according to these laws primarily because I love (am loyal) God who established the covenant relationship and these laws. These in turn reveal God’s love for my neighbour and for me. What greater reason or motivation can I therefore have for loving my neighbour? Moreover, the command challenges me to see my neighbour from God’s true perspective rather than my own warped one. That the Torah regards one’s love of neighbour as a sign of one’s love of God is abundantly clear in the first reading from Exodus. The severe punishment threatened in this law suggests that the theologians who drafted it found it hard to imagine that a person who claims to love God would do such things to a neighbour whom God loves.

In relation to the third question, one could reply that the text is not commanding us to love ourselves, rather it assumes that we love ourselves. Hence this command is another version of ‘do unto others as you would want them to do unto you’. However, I prefer to see it as a command that issues the same challenge about how I should see myself as I should see my neighbour—and act accordingly. That is, I should be loyal to my true self because I love God who is the one above all who knows my true self and loves me unconditionally, despite my flaws and failures. Again, what better reason or motivation is there for loving oneself?

When reflecting on these commands to love it is well to keep in mind the covenant context in which they occur. According to the Torah, God establishes the covenant relationship because God loves Israel. In response to this divine initiative, Israel is called to love God and neighbour. To put this another way, we are called to love because God has first loved us. We are called to give but we can only give what we have first received.

Some might think that being ‘receivers’ and obeying commands cripples one’s individuality and creativity. Not so, says Paul in the second reading. The Thessalonians indeed began by being imitators (how else does one begin) but they in turn became ‘a great example to all’ by their own unique response to persecution and opposition. The imitators themselves
have become worthy of imitation. The gift of God’s love is creative and liberating. Paul only ‘started the work’ among them, they then developed it in a way that radically changed their lives.
We all need authority in our lives and these readings can help us get some things right about it and how it should be exercised. Our English word comes from the Latin *auctoritas*—source or origin. An ‘*auctor*’ or author begins or originates something. The reason we all need authority is at base very simple: we are not the originators of our lives and, generally, we do not end them. As well as this, we have to rely on authorities (*auctores*) for our life’s journey: we are limited human beings and cannot monitor or assess all the phenomena of a single life, let alone humanity and its history. Authority therefore involves faith: in order to live we have to trust the information and judgment of others in a host of areas.

The Bible claims that the only one who is able to monitor and assess everything in creation is God because God, being outside creation, can ‘see’ it all. Because God is the only true ‘*auctor*’ or author of life we are all God’s sons and daughters. Therefore, we should treat one another as brothers and sisters. This is what Jesus teaches in the reading from Matthew and what the reading from Malachi appeals to: ‘Have we not all one Father?’ It seems so obvious that everyone will see it and act accordingly, but of course we don’t. Why not?

One reason, within the Jewish–Christian tradition, is the Bible’s teaching that God acts through intermediaries to whom authority is delegated. God does not impose this mediation, it is an invitation and challenge to which people are free to respond. If it was imposed then it would not be biblical. Hence hierarchy or structure is an integral part of the Bible message. But once you bring temptation prone authority figures into contact with temptation prone subjects then things can go wrong. The call to true freedom within the context of God’s law can be skewed by the figures in authority; the response to the call can be skewed by a distorted perception of freedom. The passages from Malachi and from Matthew charge the
figures in authority with abuse of their role but there are other passages in the Bible that are equally critical of the people. In both Malachi and Matthew the charge is that the delegated authorities have not only failed to represent their authority, God, but they have distorted God’s message as well. The passage in Malachi issues a warning to the priests as if there is still time to repent and change: ‘if you do not find it in your heart to glorify my name’. In contrast Jesus sees that the distortion perpetrated by the scribes and Pharisees is so bad people need to be warned about it: ‘do not be guided by what they do; since they do not practice what they preach.’

The reading from Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians provides the model by which all authority figures in the community should operate. Attitude is a key: Paul and his co–workers came to Thessalonica not to dominate but to love (and love is always free), not to take but to give (to hand over to you not only the Good News but our whole lives as well). They were able to do this not because of winning qualities in themselves but because of the grace of Christ working through them. What Paul is really relieved about is that the Thessalonians heard their preaching as ‘God’s message’ rather than their own thoughts and words. This means that, thanks again to the grace of Christ, their presence and their work pointed not to themselves but to Christ, the true ‘author’ of all that they did.

The point of the readings may be enhanced a little if we compare their notion of authority with alternatives that humanity has tried over the centuries. One is the individual who claims to be the source of all authority—whether it be king, tyrant, priest, prophet or ‘president for life’ figures. The claim is illogical because this person is just another human being after all, not a true ‘auctor’. Another is the group or party that takes control and claims all authority, modern examples being Nazism/Fascism and Communism. Even though these movements mouth the slogans that ‘we are all brothers and sisters’, the reality is generally the complete opposite. Members of the party may enjoy some brotherly and sisterly status, the rest are merely servants of the machine. The third is the very modern one of the individual who does not wish to impose on anyone else or be responsible to anyone else. This person claims to exercise authority only over his or her own life. This may be well intentioned but in my judgment it too is illogical as well as unreal. Not only does it suffer from the same flaw that a person is not his or her own ‘auctor’, but one can only be an individual ‘I’ by contrasting oneself with others who are not ‘I’. The others are there whether an individual likes it or not and it is unreal and dangerous to try and ignore them. The individual will have an impact on others and vice
versa. In contrast, the Christian attitude should be: our greatest dignity is to live as creatures of our creator, our greatest temptation is to try and become creator.
Thirty Second Sunday of the Year

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

There are a number of passages in the gospels in which Jesus exhorts the disciples to ‘stay awake’ because he will come at an hour they do not expect. The lectionary selects a number of these passages for the Sundays leading up to the end of the liturgical year. Reflection upon them in their respective contexts shows—to me at least—that they are not all to be understood in the same sense. The call to ‘stay awake’ can take on different shades of meaning depending on context and I comment on the other occurrences in their respective contexts. Like other treasured sayings of Jesus such as ‘the kingdom of heaven,’ ‘your faith has saved you,’ ‘listen anyone who has ears to hear,’ it is an invitation and challenge to think about its meaning in this or that passage.

What then of its occurrence in the famous parable of the bridesmaids with their lamps? A clue to how to read the command to ‘stay awake’ is that all ten had a good nap while they waited for the bridegroom’s arrival. The point of the parable therefore is not to literally stay awake because this would mean censure for the wise bridesmaids as well as the foolish ones. The mention of ‘wise’ provides a second clue to the meaning of staying awake. The wise ones had made the best preparations they could for the climax or purpose of their role as bridesmaids: being ready to accompany the bridal party (even though they had fallen asleep as they waited). Translate the parable into the language of Christian vocation and it is designed to remind us of our complete dependence on God our beginning and our goal. If we have this perspective we are wise indeed and well prepared for whatever eventuates.

Talk of being wise turns our attention to the first reading from the book of Wisdom. We can see here an Old Testament version of the play on the meaning of words and phrases that characterises a number of Jesus’ sayings in the gospels. This is a very late book in the pre–Christian Jewish tradition and written in Greek (it is in not in the Hebrew canon or list of sacred writings). But it has the advantage of being able to draw on
a wealth of Jewish tradition that reflected on divine Wisdom in the guise (as a metaphor) of a woman. The writer lavishly celebrates the benefits of Wisdom but there are a number of important caveats that caution those who think they may have it or perhaps have been disappointed in their search for it. The first is that one must love her; then she will be found. But when can you say you truly love wisdom? An invitation to reflection. The second is that one must watch for her early, which may well mean that learning wisdom from God involves a life–long commitment. There is no crash course in it. Finally, the writer claims that Wisdom seeks ‘those who are worthy of her’, but who would claim to be worthy? Perhaps to proclaim one’s unworthiness is a sign of being worthy in the eyes of Wisdom.

While this writer is rightly celebrating the importance of wisdom he is gently but firmly hosing down expectations that it provides ready answers or quick fixes. He is too immersed in his tradition and the lesson of his own experience to think there are ready made answers. Perhaps the author of Psalm 73 catches the Old Testament attitude to wisdom well. This is a psalm by a person who after a long and bitter search for answers that would explain and satisfy his questions about good and evil came to see that the most important thing was the faith conviction that ‘my flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever’ (NRSV translation). Psalm 63:3 says simply yet powerfully ‘your steadfast love is better than life’.

The passage from 1 Thessalonians (Paul’s first letter) provides another angle on staying awake. Understandably, there was a strong expectation in the early church that the ‘second coming’ of Jesus would occur soon. This led to the conviction among some that those ‘awake’ at the time would be better off—they would see Jesus in his glory and receive their reward as he promised. Did this mean that the death of members of the community in the ‘between time’ was some sign of failure on their part as Christians or a judgment against them? It seems members of the community were worrying and grieving about their dead. Paul seeks to ease their anxiety by assuring them that being ‘awake’ when the Lord comes is no advantage over those who have died. All will enjoy the resurrection, those who are ‘awake’ and watching when the Lord comes (that is, being faithful disciples according to their vocation) and the dead, as long as they ‘died in Jesus’ (that is, as long as they ‘stayed awake’ by being faithful disciples during their lives).
As I have noted before, parables are powerful but like all literary forms, they are limited. Every form or way of communicating provides us with an opportunity to be creative but imposes certain limitations. Parables tend to highlight one or two points and that is their power: they focus the mind. But once one shifts to a broader focus, gaps can start to appear that require explanation. That is why I think parables in the gospel are often presented in a collection or series in which one bounces off another. The preceding parable in Matthew 25 is about the bridesmaids who need to ‘stay awake’ in the sense of being wise about their preparations, otherwise they are likely to miss out on joining in the wedding celebrations. This kind of watchfulness focuses on the culmination or goal of the journey of faith. It is one of the aims and objects of contemplative prayer. But, it does raise a question about the relationship of the various stages of our journey to the goal (the Mary and Martha debate?), of how one's seemingly insignificant life contributes to God’s plan. It can also imply that the bridesmaids are not part of the show until it gets under way with the arrival of the bridal party.

Our parable of the talents (a valuable unit of currency not a human skill) answers these kinds of questions. It highlights the contribution the servants are meant and able to make to the master’s business while he is away. It is not his money but his; hence, they are busy on his behalf, not their own. Each one is given an amount ‘according to his ability’ (each vocation is unique). The master knows the ability (gifts or talents) of his servants but does not impose any conditions on them, any levels of achievement that need to be attained. They are entrusted with the money and that is that. The first two servants use their God–given skills, take risks and make decisions about something that is not their own. They are successful. An interesting implication in this—not explicit in the parable—is that they succeed as long as they are using their talents in the service of
their master. The parable leaves open how one might apply this (because parables are meant to be applied to our lives), however one can reasonably say that it implies that God’s community of believers and the spread of the gospel will increase. When the master returns for the reckoning, the faithful servants who put their lives in the service of their master’s property now get to share the property. What was not theirs now becomes theirs. And what is this property that is now shared with them? Nothing less than the life of the master (‘your master’s happiness’).

In contrast the third servant does nothing yet blames the master for effectively obliging him to do so. That is, he created an atmosphere of fear via his fearsome reputation. It is an attempt to take control of things and put the master on trial, to reverse the role of servant and master. The master who put complete faith in his servant according to his ability is accused of being untrustworthy. For the sake of truth (proved by the freedom and initiative shown by the other servants) and the welfare of the ‘property’, this false order must be exposed and the true order of things reestablished. We are God’s trusted agents going about God’s business. If we don’t trust God in return or try to go about God’s business on our terms then, the parable implies, we will make a mess of it. The business of salvation is so central and important God will not let it be hampered in this way. A passage from Nicholas Lash catches for me very succinctly the relationship between the parable of the bridesmaids and the parable of the talents; ‘The distinction to be drawn lies not, I think, between action and passion, between “doing things” and having things done to one, but rather between behaving as if we were the centre of the world and learning that we are not’.5

Paul’s letter about knowing ‘times and seasons’ can be read in the same vein. One who desires to know when the Lord will come is in danger of being untrusting and of seeking to be in control of things. If I know the ‘day’ then I can plan things to suit myself. I might think that this will help me to be better, to see things more clearly, but for Paul it is a sign that I am still in the dark, unwilling to be led out into the true light of day.

The reading from Proverbs provides yet another angle on our theme. In chapter 9, Lady Wisdom invites pupils to her school to learn wisdom via the proverbs that follows in 10:1—31:9. Graduation as a wise person means ‘marrying’ Lady Wisdom, the perfect wife of course, as our passage affirms. By making her the centre of your life and being absolutely devoted

to her teaching (‘her husband’s heart has confidence in her’), she makes you the centre of her life (‘advantage . . . she brings him all the days of her life’).
The famous ‘last judgment’ picture painted by our text from Matthew evokes, and probably draws on, the grandeur of an ancient Near Eastern royal court. The sovereign, accompanied by a mightily impressive retinue, summons the vassal states (all the nations are assembled) to report on their conduct. On such occasions, as in our own times, the representatives of the nations have carefully prepared reports that will not only flatter their sovereign but also enhance their own standing. But, as we have found in the Bible, expectations tend to get turned upside down. Instead of being summoned to give their reports (recall the parable of the talents), the king here hands out rewards and punishments for things that shock and surprise both the sheep and the goats. In dramatic stories or scenes like these, someone or some animal has to stand in for all the wicked and here it is the goats. Goats fare somewhat better in the reading from Ezekiel and, according to Exodus 12:5, goats are just as acceptable as sheep for the Passover meal.

What strikes me about this Matthean text is that Jesus does not note how many times one has celebrated a liturgy in his honour and how grand or solemn they have been, Nor is there any mention of how many times one has praised him in song or asked him for favours. What he is primarily concerned about are the deprived members of his kingdom, and there seem to be plenty of them. Indeed, this kingdom sounds rather like the gospel’s description of the Palestine province of the Roman empire in which Jesus carried out his ministry: full of the poor, the thirsty, the hungry, the naked, the sick, prisoners and strangers. Has anything changed?

Our text seems to imply that Jesus entrusted the kingdom to disciples (recall again the parable of the talents) in whom he had complete confidence. They were to give themselves completely in the service of any who
were in need because this is the example that the king himself gave them. The king, the master, became the servant of all and gave himself for all those in need. It does not matter what family or nation or race they belong to; they are all part of Jesus’ kingdom, his brothers and sisters, his family. We can see that the customary notion of a kingdom is being thoroughly rewritten by the gospels.

Jesus’ disciples have been made kings and masters of his kingdom on earth: this means that they are to exercise their kingship by being servants of all, like Jesus. It does not mean that they play the role of a servant for a time and then revert to what they really prefer—being the masters. No, it means that they really become servants, something that only the grace of Christ can empower them (us) to become. Service in this kingdom does not involve doing what earthly kingdoms would regard as ‘fitting’, the implementation of grand projects, conquest of rival kingdoms, acquisition of wealth, etc. No, the most treasured service in this kingdom is the ordinary, daily task of looking after those in need—among whom the servants of the kingdom must also number themselves.

There is of course a reward for services rendered: our passage promises that Jesus’ servants will be invited to share nothing less than the fullness of his kingdom. Jesus recognises and welcomes the human desire for the good, the desire to be perfect. When people ask him in the gospels how to become perfect or how to gain eternal life, he invites them to follow him and learn how to do so. A measure of our perfection will be when we can serve our brothers and sisters in some way as Christ did—for their sake and for Christ’s sake, whose brothers and sisters they are—rather than for our own sake.

While there is a great reward for the sheep there is a grim punishment for the goats, the ones whose neglect has exacerbated the sorry state of the kingdom of God on earth and for which they must (in the theology of a just God) be called to account. We don’t preach about hell much these days perhaps because it was overdone in days gone by. The church has never preached that anyone has been damned to hell: its brief is to preach salvation. Nevertheless both gospel passage and the church warn that eternal alienation from God is a possibility. How might one preach about hell in relation to the notion of a just and merciful God? One approach that I have explored is to use the analogy of a marriage relationship that breaks down in such a way that one partner hates the other deeply or,
what is worse, both parties hate each other. In such a situation what is the more just and merciful thing to do: to oblige them to live together in a way that does violence to their own desire or to respect their freedom and let them separate?
Extras for Year A
Year 2014
Presentation of the Lord

Our reading from Luke’s Gospel portrays Mary and Joseph going to the temple to do what the law required every Jewish couple who had a son as first born to do, namely, to consecrate or dedicate him to God and then to ‘receive’ him back from God via a sacrificial offering. In the case of Mary and Joseph who were poor people, a pair of birds sufficed. Such simple rituals, like our own, would have been a common sight in Jerusalem and no doubt, like us, the people of those days tended to take them for granted. But this ritual celebrated a massively important aspect of Israelite tradition, and, in the way Luke presents them, the arrival of Mary and Joseph with their little baby foreshadowed a massively important future for Israel and all the nations.

Why was this ritual dedication so important? Because, as the book of Exodus tells us, Pharaoh and the Egyptians refused to let God’s ‘first born son’ (Israel) go free, dooming it to the death of slavery; hence God vowed to destroy Egypt’s first born (Exodus 4:22–23) and rescue Israel. In the story of the exodus this is recounted as the tenth or last plague that afflicts Egypt while the Israelites are eating the Passover. A simple meal by slaves in the ghettoes of Egypt becomes the moment of their deliverance, their new life, but it is the moment of death for the Egyptians. From one point of view the biblical text paints a disturbing picture of God but I think our appreciation of it can be helped if we consider that this is Israel’s paradigm story about overcoming the monster or evil. All cultures have versions of this kind of story, our cinemas, TV’s and computer games are full of them. A common feature is that the monster (whether animal, human or alien/divine) is destroyed and the good escape the threat of death. Whatever may have happened historically in Egypt can no longer be recovered to
the satisfaction of scientific analysis. The book of Exodus proclaims in
dramatic story form Israel’s faith that God is its deliverer from the threat
of ultimate destruction. Hence it is crucial that each generation be re-
mined of this faith and confess it; a ritual way of doing this was to offer
one’s first born son to God, as well as the first born males of flocks and
herds. It enabled the faithful to acknowledge their complete dependence
on God and their conviction that God will deliver them at any time as
God did in the exodus story—as long as one has faith.

Our reading from Luke’s Gospel acknowledges the faith proclaimed
by the exodus story but at the same time transforms its Old Testament
horizons. The child who is presented or dedicated in the temple ritual is
God’s first born son in a unique way that was in due course expressed in
church teaching via the doctrine of the Trinity. Moreover, Luke claims
there is something much more going on here than completing a treasured
ritual and then getting on with the normal routines of life, as we tend to
do after our rituals. Mary and Joseph ‘receive’ Jesus back from God to un-
terdake his Father’s business—as the next account of him teaching in the
temple while still a boy signals. Finally, while the book of Exodus is, in my
view, a dramatic proclamation of faith in God as the one who overcomes
the monster, Jesus sets out to overcome the real monster that threatens us
all. And the monster in his ‘story’ is not a highly mythologised portrait
of Pharaoh and Egypt but you and me, or rather the sins that afflict you
and me and everyone—as Israel itself came to realise and expressed in the
stories of its rebellious journey with God to the promised land (book of
Numbers).

The other readings for the feast allow us to pursue this a little further.
The passage from the letter to the Hebrews tells how Jesus rewrites the
pervasive human view of how the monster is to be overcome—not by an
act of violence against others in whom we identify sin and evil (playing
the blame game), but by suffering violence without retaliating, and dying
so that all might live. The reading from Malachi, the last prophetic book
in the Old Testament proclaims the hope that God will eventually cleanse
all evil from our lives. In the vision of this book the last, but in its view
the most important, place that needs to be cleansed by God is the temple
itself. Evil can enter even into temple worship, as it can enter the inner
sanctum of our hearts. We may be too afraid to enter there or may reject
any suggestion that evil is there but our faith teaches that Jesus is able to
enter and begs us to let him do so, because it will only be for our benefit,
to remake us in his image as first born sons and daughters of God.
In a way it is a pity that the readings for this feast do not contain Paul’s memorable account in his letter to the Galatians of his clash with Peter—how he confronted him over his duplicitous attitude to circumcision. One senses two quite different characters in conflict and, when you think about them a bit, perhaps not the kind that a modern employment agency would engage for the crucial job of getting the fledgling Christian church off the ground.

A comforting feature of the New Testament portrayals of Peter and Paul is that being a saint doesn’t necessarily mean that you must be a stable, nice person. Take Peter for example. From the texts, which is about all we have, one has the impression that he was a likeable but unreliable person. When Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is, Peter comes up with the right answer. Jesus tells him that he has been chosen to make this confession by the Father and that, as a result, he will be the rock on which the church will be built. Peter is given a privileged position among the disciples but then blows it within a few verses. He remonstrates with Jesus about his prophecy of the passion and goes suddenly from being the ‘rock’ to ‘satan’; what is worse, he subsequently denies three times the one who gave him everything. But then, according to the last chapter of the Gospel of John, he is reinstated by Jesus and given the task of shepherding the flock. Here is a fellow who was given every opportunity, blew it all, and emerges a winner nevertheless. Furthermore, there is no hint in the New Testament that the other disciples were ever jealous of Peter. They might squabble among themselves about who is the greatest but their target is never Peter. Was there something intrinsically likeable about him or was there something more? Or rather was it his awareness and acceptance that, left to his own devices, he was a complete failure and that anything that he had to offer came not from him but from Christ? Is this the real winning characteristic of Peter, the factor that makes him a great saint—
and leader?

If being a stable, steady person is not equivalent to being a holy person then neither is being a nice person; just think of cranky old St Jerome for instance. How does Paul rate in the nicety stakes? As I reflect on the texts about Paul he strikes me as something like the convert who disturbs us stable cradle Catholics. A real nuisance. He comes in with his enthusiasm and enormous energy, with plans that reach well beyond the comfortable horizons that the establishment has set (to wit, the Gentile mission). He is completely dedicated to his task, at once affectionate and irascible, not suffering fools gladly and fighting with Peter, Barnabas and others. What is it about this prickly character that makes him a saint? Is it his brutal honesty and openness? Is it because Paul is always ready to give an account of his actions, to hold himself up for scrutiny as he holds others up for scrutiny? Or, rather like Peter, is it his awareness that all that he is and does comes from the grace of Christ ‘who called me through his grace’ and freed him from hatred of the church to become a loyal servant of the church?

A feature of the Old Testament is that it has no heroes in the romantic sense, at least not until one gets to the quite late post–exilic literature of Tobit, Esther and Daniel. The major figures of the tradition such as the ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, David and Solomon, are all portrayed as real human beings with their strengths and weaknesses. In the main, the Old Testament has its feet too firmly fixed in the reality of human life to slip into romantic sentimentality. So also with the New Testament, if the portraits of Peter and Paul are anything to go by. They too have their strengths and weaknesses. It was God’s wisdom to choose those whom the world would probably have passed over as inadequate, unreliable or too difficult. They would need to have had some counseling beforehand, done some courses to acquire people skills, etc. If these men can become the saints we celebrate today, then so can we, flawed disciples though we be.
Triumph of the Holy Cross

(14 September for 24th Sunday of the Year A, 2014; Numbers 21:4–9; Philippians 2:6–11; John 3:13–17)

The story of the fiery serpents in Numbers is a strange one; hence it exerts a certain fascination on readers who try to fathom its meaning. However, if we take a lead from its use in the Gospel of John, there is one meaning that I think we can justifiably give it—what is repulsive and death dealing from a human point of view, can with God’s power and grace become life giving and something that we look up to. So the people in the Numbers story are told to look at the bronze serpent that Moses made and put on a standard. The death dealing bites of the serpents are neutralized. As well as this the story combines in a rather abrupt manner the two great ideas or theologies of God that run through the Bible: one is the just judge who is intolerant of evil and moves to root it out and punish those who perpetrate it. The law court was a crucial institution in ancient and small societies such as Israel for establishing the truth and making sure that justice was done and seen to be done. They had no universities or academies. Hence the judge became a symbol of justice and the model of how justice—righting wrong—should be administered. God above all is the righteous judge. The other is the merciful God who is all forgiving to those who call upon him. So the just judge intervenes against Israel’s sin but is more than ready to show mercy to a repentant people who look up to the bronze serpent.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus draws a parallel between his passion and death and that of the bronze serpent. There is no need to labor the point that crucifixion was the most brutal and repulsive form of execution that the Romans were able to come up with. Crucifying a person and then hoisting the cross up high was supposed to be the ultimate sign of rejection and condemnation: It was a sight designed to repel onlookers and dissuade them from any association with the crucified. In a powerful reversal of how human beings see things (a theme that runs throughout the Bible), Jesus prophesies that his own crucifixion, his being lifted up on the cross, will become a sign of eternal life rather than earthly death, a sign of love.
and welcome rather than rejection, a sign that attracts rather than repels.
How can this be so? Because in Jesus the divine and the human, the heav-
enly and the earthly, meet and are reconciled. This is also the thrust of the
famous hymn from the letter to the Philippians. Without losing anything
of his divinity (it was not something that he had to cling to in case it could
be lost), Jesus enters fully into the human condition. Indeed, it is because
Jesus is God that he is able to enter into the human condition in a way that
no other human being can. The sign of this was his total acceptance in love
of the most hateful form of death that the powers of his age could impose.
The transforming power of this love—which from a human point of view
looked entirely powerless—is manifest in the transformation of the cross
from a hateful and deadly thing into a symbol of love and life.

The transformation of the cross wrought by Jesus transformed human
lives and the symbols that express the value of human lives. The initial
step was the word: the courage of Christians to proclaim their faith in
Jesus’ victory over sin and death and their conviction or faith that through
the cross they are able to triumph over their worst fears and failings. Next
came the gesture: the sign of the cross to visibly express their fellowship
with their crucified and risen Lord and with one another. The third step
was the visible representation of the cross for display in churches and
homes. The most repulsive symbol that the Roman empire could ‘create’ is
‘recreated’ and becomes one of the most venerated and revered symbols of
Christianity, a thing to look up to and place one’s faith, hope and love in.
The oldest surviving artistic representation of the crucifixion is apparently
the one adorning a door panel of the church of Santa Sabina in Rome (4th
century).
Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed
(02 November for 31st Sunday of the Year A, 2014; Readings from Masses for the Dead)

All Souls Day’ as this used to be called was, for me as a boy, quite a fun day and rather satisfying. We got out of some school, marched across town to the church and vied with one another in the number of times we could duck in and out of the church and recite the required prayers to get another soul out of purgatory. It was a friendly competition with, we believed, a good outcome, however naïve our theology. Its new name, ‘the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed’ looks like one of those titles where the authors have tried to pack as much meaning as they can into as few words as possible. Can we unpack it a little to get some idea of how we are meant to commemorate this important day now?

According to the dictionary, to ‘commemorate’ is to preserve in memory via some celebration, particularly a sacred ritual. The word therefore carries much the same meaning as when we ‘remember’ Jesus or commemorate him in the Eucharist. In doing this within the ritual of Christian liturgy and within the framework of our faith and its theological articulation, we believe that he is really present to those so commemorating him. It is not simply an act of memory, the recalling of something now past. Remembering in this way is a confession of Jesus’ real but mysterious presence. Because the faithful departed are with God then whenever and wherever we remember the presence of God in this sacramental way, the faithful departed are present too. Even though the Eucharist is celebrated in this or that locale, it is not only a celebration by and for those of the pilgrim church but also by and for all those who have been here before us. And so we commemorate the dead in our Eucharistic prayer. This link between our daily commemoration and November 2nd is important. Otherwise the dead tend to drift out of our consciousness and our prayer. Sure, we will remember and pray for them on that one day of the year but then forget about them for the rest of the year.
When I was a boy, I thought that my prayers actually had an effect on God and that he (sic) went and opened the gates of purgatory and let another soul into heaven. Then theology got in the way with the notion of an all-knowing God who has decreed things from all eternity. I learnt that we can hang on to the notion of intercessory prayer for the dead in the sense that if the prayer we pray is for a good it is thereby part of God's eternal decree—that what is good for human beings is not withheld from them. There is also the notion that our prayer as the church is part of Christ's advocacy with the Father on behalf of all the faithful and his advocacy is, by definition, efficacious. However, I still hold onto that biblical image of God who, like a devoted parent, listens to the prayers of the children and gladly does their bidding. As Isaiah 25:8 says, God will wipe away every tear.

I like the reference to 'all the faithful' because it suggests a vast number of people, more in keeping with the sunny view of Genesis 12:1–3 than the other, more gloomy, view that only a few will be saved. It also challenges us about our selective and selfish criteria of friendship here on earth. We may like to think that we are moving towards the friendly global village but, in reality, we remain pretty choosy about our friends. Just who is included in 'all the faithful departed'? Probably a host of people who we would rather not have known or associated with if we had to share our earthly life with them; people whom we may have looked on as outsiders, the ones who were in the wrong. Yet, they are God's people and God is presumably happily bringing about their perfection (a notion of purgatory). Awareness of this may help us overcome some of our jaundiced views of others here on earth.

Finally, our commemoration speaks of the faithful as 'departed'. It is always difficult to try and describe the 'other side'; as Paul says, 'eye has not seen nor has ear heard'. We can say that the faithful have departed or 'left us' in that they are no longer present to us as we are present to ourselves, in time and space. But, as members of the church who are with God as much or more than we are, they are still very much with us. They have not left us and never will. This element of our faith enables us to look at death differently, to see that there is something binding ourselves and the faithful departed together that death cannot rupture; God's love for us.
As the Song of Songs proclaims ‘(God’s) love is stronger than death’ (8:6). Psalm 63:3 puts this another way when it says of God ‘your love is better than life’. Why is this so? Because God’s love is the source of life; our life on earth and our life as ‘the faithful departed’. 
Dedication of the Lateran Basilica

(9 November for 32nd Sunday of the Year A, 2014; Ezekiel 47:1–2, 8–9; 1 Corinthians 3:9–11, 16–17; John 2:13–22)

When you walk into a massive basilica like St John Lateran’s in Rome, you can’t help but feel the contrast between something that has endured for hundreds of years (although this one was rebuilt several times) and the tiny ephemeral human being. One feels insignificant—is the building designed to create this impression? No, no! I can hear the Italian guide saying; it is designed to evoke the glory of God, not to demean human beings. Fair enough but this only heightens my sense of insignificance in contrast to the grandeur and glory of God. Of what worth are we? As a feast in the universal calendar, this celebration of the church of the pope as Bishop of Rome is also designed to evoke the sense of one world-wide Roman Catholic communion. At this point the choice of readings for the feast begins to make some sense and to resonate with a rich theology.

As we move through the readings, we get a sense of what a temple or church building is meant to evoke and symbolize and we realize that the Bible—as it often does—turns our impressions and expectations on their head. We are the enduring symbols of the glory of God; it is the buildings that are ephemeral and pass away. To state this is not crowing on our part: it is what the Bible claims is God’s view of us, not ours. As Psalm 8 says ‘When I look at the heavens . . . what are human beings that you are mindful of them? Yet you have made them little less than God.’ The first reading provides an ideal starting point. Ezekiel’s vision is of a wholly new and wonderful temple building but, even as he describes it in great detail, one senses that he has something more than a building in mind. Almost like the garden of Eden, the temple becomes the source of life-giving water that will sweeten and bring life to the most barren piece of water and land that an ancient Israelite could conceive of—the dead sea. The water has this creative power not because of the temple itself but because God assures Ezekiel that ‘I will reside among the people of Israel forever’ (43:7). The primary purpose of the temple is to symbolize the presence of God.
If one reads the passage from John’s Gospel up to the point where the disciples remember the words of Psalm 69:9 (68:9), we are still within the theology of the Old Testament, of Ezekiel. The temple is meant to symbolize or evoke the presence of God (‘my Father’s house’); turning the temple into a market place turns it into a false symbol of God. For the sake of truth, it needs to be cleansed so that its true purpose may be seen once more. However, while there is this continuity with the Old Testament, the rest of the passage presents a new and challenging symbol of the divine presence—a new understanding of the meaning of ‘temple of God’. The temple had been an enduring sign of God’s presence and commitment to the people; as the Jews note, ‘it has taken forty-six years to build this sanctuary’. Jesus now stands over against the temple as the definitive presence of God. Perhaps it might be more accurate to say that he stands over against the Jews’ perception of the temple and its purpose. If they could stand inside the cleansed temple and accept that this is how it should be then, John’s Gospel implies, they should be able to see that Jesus is the fulfillment of all that the temple symbolises.

Jesus, a human being who can and will be killed (destroyed) is the enduring sign of God in creation. But the purpose of the incarnation is not just to draw attention to Jesus as the temple of God that has been ‘erected’ in our midst. Paul tells his Corinthian Christians that they too are part of this temple. Jesus is the foundation stone of God’s building of which they are all a part. This ‘building’ made up of human beings is a continual work in progress. Becoming one of the ‘stones’ is not the end of the matter, far from it. As Paul writes, everyone needs to work carefully on this building that will grow as long as Jesus remains the sure foundation stone. This ‘temple’ of human beings is the most enduring thing in creation. Our world will pass away and all that we have built on it, but the communion of saints called church will never pass away. As a final thought for this feast, one might add that if we human beings were able to be to one another (and to creation) what God made and meant us to be—the image and likeness of God—then there would be no need for temples and churches. In a way, they are a sign of our own inadequacy and failure as human beings.
When you are continually disappointed despite your best efforts, or when people keep telling you that you are a nobody and a failure, it can be hard to keep your spirits up, to look beyond the ever decreasing world in which you live. The amazing thing about a book like Daniel (a nom-de-plume of an anonymous author) is that although it was written at a time of great trial and suffering for the Jewish people it nevertheless confidently asserts the ultimate triumph of God's purpose, a purpose that will transform all nations, even those that oppress Israel. Here is an author who seeks to enshrine the message of the great prophets via a series of visions (a recognition perhaps that the prophetic word is at present silent) apparently without the slightest personal evidence to confirm that their prophecies are being realized. Something akin to the Carmelite spirituality of the dark night of the soul.

The book of Daniel proclaims its conviction that the prophecies of God's triumph over sin and evil will come true, the Christian claim is that the life and teachings of Jesus reveal how this takes place. The transfiguration can be seen as a kind of down payment on it, or a glimpse of it. Somewhat like the visions in Daniel it takes place at a fraught stage in Matthew's Gospel when Jesus begins to tell his disciples about his coming death and resurrection. Moreover, it is almost a private occasion with only three of the disciples with Jesus on the mountain, who are forbidden by him to tell anyone about the transfiguration until after 'the son of man has risen from the dead'. The implication is that otherwise people will not understand it; even the three disciples will need to take special care that they do not misunderstand it when Jesus enters his passion and death. Jesus and the disciples then rejoin the others at the foot of the mountain and are immediately embroiled in a dispute about an exorcism. Jesus casts out the
demon and then reiterates the prophecy about his death and resurrection. The transfiguration is clearly linked to Jesus’ death and resurrection via these repeated references or prophecies, something that the Lucan version makes explicit by the way it presents Moses and Elijah speaking with Jesus about ‘his passing which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem’ (Lk 9:31). For us who read the Gospel in the light of Jesus’ death and resurrection, this means that Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross is as much a revelation of his unique status as God’s beloved son as the transfiguration itself. What happens at the place/mountain of crucifixion may not look like it but to those enabled to ‘see’ it is as much a transfiguration of Jesus as what happens on the mountain of transfiguration. Both reveal the fulfillment of the prophecies and thereby assure us that God’s plan of salvation is coming to fruition. What will enable one to ‘see’ and understand this? Listening, as the voice from the cloud says on the mountain of transfiguration, to the words of ‘my beloved son’. The importance of this, not only for the disciples in the gospel but for disciples of any generation, is underscored by the reading from the second letter of Peter. The writer, whether Peter or a disciple writing in his name, appeals to the transfiguration to assure readers that they can rely on the prophetic word as a lamp that will light their way. Why is this so? Because the prophetic word, cast in visionary form in the book of Daniel, was confirmed by nothing less than the words and actions of Jesus.

Of course we will fail like the disciples in the gospel. But Jesus is merciful and welcoming despite our failures. This is shown by the way he invites Peter to accompany him up the mountain of transfiguration even though Peter has rebuked him about his prophecy that he must go to Jerusalem and die, and is dubbed ‘Satan’ by Jesus for his pains. It is also shown by the way the resurrected Jesus instructs the women to tell his failed and frightened disciples to go to Galilee where they will meet him on the mountain (28:16). Matthew does not specify whether this is the mountain of the transfiguration or of the beatitudes. Given the context of the resurrection, one may presume it is the former because it is there that the eleven disciples see the risen Lord in his glory and worship him, another transfiguration scene as it were. There too they receive Jesus’ commission to make disciples of all nations, not by turning them into Jews, Persians, Greeks or Romans but by baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. A new identity that transcends the old divisions
and creates a new family of humanity. The promises of the great prophets about the gathering of the nations, the visions of the seer in the book of Daniel are being fulfilled, even though we may at times—like the author of Daniel—lack evidence that it is advancing in our day.
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Reflections on Readings for Year B
Introduction to the Gospel of Mark  
(for Year B)

The Gospel of Mark is the shortest and, in the opinion of many, the earli- est, even though it is customarily listed second after Matthew. It is thought to have been composed in the 70’s CE by a disciple of Peter and may have originated in Rome. It is also thought to have provided the basis for Matthew and Luke’s more expansive versions. Its style is crisp to the point of being cryptic; its author is adept at constructing powerful scenes with an economy of words.

In order to get some grasp of a whole such as a Gospel we need to iden- tify its constituent parts. I will provide a brief outline of what I regard are the constituent parts of the Gospel and how its message unfolds, bearing in mind that readers’ identification of parts and their relationship to the whole vary: we tend to see things from somewhat different angles.

What we might call the Gospel’s prologue in 1:1–13 portrays John the Baptist proclaiming the coming of Jesus and then baptising him: there is no birth narrative in Mark. According to 1:14–15, the ministry of Jesus commenced after the arrest of John (a foreshadowing of the fate in store for Jesus himself). In my estimation, Mark presents the life and ministry of Jesus in three main stages. There is the initial stage that runs from 1:16 to 8:21 and is located around the sea of Galilee; the second stage runs from 8:22 to the end of ch 10 and involves Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and the climax of his ministry. The third stage, from 11:1 to 15:47 tells of his ministry in Jerusalem culminating in the account of his passion and death. Some analysts prefer to break this into two sections, the account of his ministry in Jerusalem in 11:1–13:37, and his passion and death in chs 14–15. The Gospel originally concluded in 16:1–8 with a characteristically spare Markan account of the resurrection. This was later supplemented by 16:9–20, material drawn from other Gospels and which do not appear in the earliest manuscripts of Mark.
A closer look at the first main stage of Jesus’ ministry (1:16–8:21) suggests that it initially unfolds via a series of scenes that take place on Israel's side of the sea of Galilee (cf 1:16; 2:13; 3:7; 4:1). These scenes tell of Jesus calling the disciples, healing the afflicted, especially those possessed by demons, of emerging conflict with Pharisees, and of a series of parables in 4:1–34 about the kingdom of God, first proclaimed by Jesus in 1:15. The mystery of the kingdom is revealed/to be revealed to the disciples but will they understand (4:11–13)? Jesus then makes a stormy journey across the sea to the other side. The sea of Galilee seems to serve both as a natural and as a symbolic boundary in the Gospel. This is Jesus’ first journey ‘outside’ Israel where he heals a deranged demoniac. As on the Israelite shore of the sea, hostility develops and Jesus is obliged to leave, but Mark leaves us with a powerful and confronting image of the former lunatic being entrusted by Jesus with a mission to the Gentiles (5:19–20). Back on the Israelite shore, Jesus performs two healings in which faith is identified as the key (5:34, 36); in contrast, those in his hometown show no faith (6:1–6a). Mark follows this with an account of the first mission of the 12 (6:6b–30); it frames the account of John’s arrest and execution, another foreshadowing of what is in store for those who follow the way of Jesus. This section ends with Mark’s first report of Jesus feeding a crowd. As Jesus can transform the sick and possessed, so he can nourish the many with a few loaves and fish.

A section involving another stormy crossing of the sea of Galilee follows, and is in turn followed by more intense disputes with Pharisees and the healing of another Gentile or foreigner: the daughter of the Syrophoenician woman. This rather tense section concludes with another account of Jesus feeding a multitude, further disputes with Pharisees, and misunderstanding by the disciples (6:45–8:21).

The second major section commences in 8:22 with the healing of a blind man. On a number of occasions in the first section people ask who Jesus is. Now, in 8:27 he asks his disciples ‘who do people say that I am’. The identity of Jesus and the nature of his mission is a key motif in Mark’s Gospel, what has been called the ‘messianic secret/mystery’. Jesus now instructs his disciples about the suffering of the ‘Son of Man’, the one who is identified as ‘my Son, the beloved’ in the transfiguration scene that follows (9:2–8). Associated with Jesus’ teaching about the fate awaiting the Son of Man, there is now a decisive move in the Gospel from Galilee to Jerusalem (10:32). As this section begins with the healing of a blind man, it ends with the healing of another blind man (Bartimaeus in 10:46–52).
The implication is that the ones who are really blind are the disciples and others around Jesus, who need his healing grace in order to ‘see’ who he is. Only then can they become loyal disciples.

The third major section is the account of Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem that culminates in his death. As Jesus healed the sick and exorcised demons on his ‘way’, so he now cleanses the temple, an act that, as with his earlier cleansing ministry, triggers anger and hostility among the authorities. The remainder of Mark’s account of Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem focuses on his teaching, in particular about the end-time; the coming of the Son of Man in power and glory to judge the earth. This section draws on Jewish apocalyptic literature with its graphic portraits of the final battle between good and evil and the triumph of good (in the figure of Jesus). The actions of Jesus and the claims he makes in his teaching drive the authorities to plot his arrest, trial and death. As they plot, Jesus gives himself to all in the eucharistic last supper with his disciples (14:17–25). A striking feature of Mark’s passion narrative is how, after the disciples have abandoned Jesus and the authorities and crowd condemned him, another outsider, the centurion, sees Jesus die and proclaims ‘Truly this man was God’s son.’

While Mark’s Gospel proclaims the resurrection there is no encounter with the risen Lord in 16:1–8. This may be, as Brendan Byrne perceptively notes, because the resurrection vindicates the Gospel claim that Jesus is the exalted Son of Man who will appear at the end time in power and glory.¹ The resurrection fuels hope in the final triumph of God’s purpose and courage to remain a loyal disciple whatever the cost.

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First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 63:16–17; 19; 64:2–7; 1 Corinthians 1:3–9; Mark 13:33–37

Just when another busy year is drawing to a close and we are looking forward to the holiday season, a chance to get some rest from the busyness of our work, the Church has the cheek to present us with a Sunday Gospel about staying awake. And just when we thought how nice it will be to escape all those workplace inspections, performance indicators and best practice monitoring, Jesus warns us that the master will come at a time we do not expect and he had better not find us asleep!

If we take this reading literally we are in trouble on two counts. First, no human being can be continually ‘on the job’ without a break of some kind. We are not machines that simply need fuel to keep going around the clock. Second, to take the text literally is to turn God into a tyrant and I don’t think that is what the Bible is about.

How might we understand Jesus’ charge to ‘stay awake’ in a way that is hopefully responsible and resonates in some way with our Christian life? A clue may be found in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians where he says of Jesus, ‘he will keep you steady and without blame until the last day, the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, because God by calling you has joined you to his Son, Jesus Christ; and God is faithful’. This bond between Jesus and ourselves enables us to be faithful as God is faithful, that is, to be loyal to God as God is loyal to us—in Gospel terms, ‘to stay awake’. When speaking of the period between his earthly life and his definitive coming as the Son of Man, Jesus says that ‘it is like a man going on a journey’. Similes like this help us to appreciate something that we cannot conceptualise or describe directly, but they are limited. Jesus may not be with us as he was in his earthly life but he is very much with us in spirit. Jesus is not absent during ‘our time’, the time of the Church. His presence, his being ‘joined to us’ enables us to be loyal disciples at any stage of our life, ‘to be awake’. This doesn’t mean that we have to be continually running around, filling our days with good deeds. To attempt to do so is to try and take control,
perhaps even to justify ourselves on our terms. It is the same kind of desire to be in control as affects those who try and predict the last days so that they can arrange their lives accordingly. As in all things, God does not take control of our lives but trusts us to make honest (loyal) decisions about what we can and cannot do.

Given that this is a reasonable interpretation of the charge to ‘stay awake’ we can now apply it to our lives. Rather than seeing the text as a threat, I think Jesus is teaching us something fundamental about discipleship, namely that there is no time in our lives when we cannot be faithful disciples and we should never think that there is such a time. The bond with Jesus is never broken or weakened, unless through our sins. We can be just as faithful and effective whether we are young, middle aged or old. One does not have to pass a health check to be an effective disciple; the blind, the lame, the diseased can, through the grace of Christ, be just as active a disciple as the healthiest, most vigorous and hardworking minister. Nor is there any retirement plan in Christianity; the aged, even those dying can bear powerful witness to the reality of God’s grace. In this sense, one can say there is no holiday from being a Christian. You can’t take a break from God. God is always with us, working through us to our good and that of our neighbour.

Just as we should never think that our days as disciples are past, so—the reading from Isaiah indicates—we should never think that the time for repentance and God’s forgiveness is past. The author of this passage reviews Israel’s long history of infidelity with brutal honesty. But he does not distance himself from his flawed ancestors, instead he stands with them in the solidarity of sin: ‘we had long been rebels against you; we were all like men unclean.’ Despite this, he has complete confidence to place himself and his people in God’s merciful hands: ‘we the clay, you the potter, we are all the work of your hand’. As we begin a new liturgical year, our readings give us the confidence to own our sinful past: it is never too late to acknowledge our sinfulness and God is merciful. At the same time, our readings encourage us that we are able to be God’s valued disciples no matter what stage of life we may find ourselves in at year’s end; in Christianity there is always more future tense than past tense.
The readings for our Second Sunday of Advent are primarily about epiphany, the manifestation of the presence of God in our lives. The reading from Isaiah prophesies how God will come to deliver Israel from exile in Babylon; the first verses of Mark’s Gospel announce God’s messenger John who in turn announces the imminent appearance of Jesus. The passage from the second letter of Peter provides instructions for its readers about how to prepare for ‘the day of the Lord’.

What is striking is that each reading goes against the grain of what one might expect.

According to modern critical analysis, the reading from Isaiah commences the prophecy of the so-called ‘Second- or Deutero-Isaiah’, an individual or group that operated during the Babylonian exile, well over a century after Isaiah of Jerusalem (whose prophecies are identified throughout chapters 1–39). The picture of God’s deliverance of his people and their return to Zion evokes the grand victory processions of ancient Near Eastern conquerors. This would have warmed the hearts of Israelites, given their experience of the superpowers Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. God will vanquish these enemies in a mighty display of divine power. But, as we come to the end of the reading, what is the nature of God’s power; how is God’s army described? It is a flock of sheep and the divine warrior is its shepherd. Instead of wielding thunderbolts, the shepherd tenderly carries lambs in his arms. Our prophet is radically rewriting the time-honoured understanding of Israel’s God as Lord of history and creation, the one who wins the battle against the rival nations of the ancient Near East and their gods. The challenge is, which understanding or description do we turn to in our times of trouble, our imprisonment? Do we pray for triumph over our enemies or for personal transformation?

The Gospel of Mark is just as radical in a somewhat different sense. John the Baptist, the voice in the wilderness, calls for repentance in prepa-
ration for the coming of one ‘who is more powerful than I’. A great crowd gathers, presumably in expectation of a dramatic manifestation of this powerful figure before which the trackless wilderness will be turned into a right royal road. But, when Jesus does arrive in the following verses of the Gospel, no one notices him as he is baptised along with all those seeking repentance and renewal. Mark does not even record that John noticed his presence, a marked contrast to the scene in Matthew. There is no clear sense that the dove descending upon him and the heavenly voice are directed to anyone else but Jesus himself. Such is how he first appears in Mark’s Gospel, as a humble pilgrim in solidarity with his brothers and sisters.

The second letter of Peter indicates that there was plenty of speculation in the early Church about the time and nature of the ‘day of the Lord’, fueled in part no doubt by reading apocalyptic literature. The author hoes down speculation about the delay of the second coming of Jesus by reminding readers that with God there is no passage of time: how can you accuse one who is outside of time of being slow or late? All the same, the author of the letter does not attempt to dilute the nature of the ‘day of the Lord’; it will be an earth shaking and shattering experience. But for believers this fearsome ‘day of the Lord’ is not a day to fear and if possible avoid but one to long for because it is the beginning of the ‘new heavens and new earth’, the triumph of God’s saving purpose and the definitive establishment of righteousness and peace. The eye of faith enables believers to see the imminent arrival of all that is best for human life whereas others see only the end of their selfish and therefore distorted idea of life.

As we prepare for Christmas, we can bring these two sharply contrasting images together by contemplating a baby whose humble birth sets the heavens (in Luke’s Gospel) rejoicing.
Faith, particularly religious faith, is a fragile yet extraordinary phenomenon. A person claims (that is, believes) that he or she has had an experience of God, the claim is proclaimed in word and deed (a manner of life) and others are impressed and accept (that is, believe) the faith claim being made. A new community is formed, a tradition develops, all on the basis of one person’s claim that can never be proved to be true: if it could it would no longer require faith. From the point of view of an outsider this is too fragile a foundation on which to build a life. From the point of view of an insider, it gives meaning to life and becomes something for which believers will give their life. Faith, like hope and love, can be fickle and fleeting but it can also be strong enough to move mountains. The right faith can transform lives, the wrong faith can destroy lives.

As we approach the feast of Christmas, our readings offer three models or ways in which we can live our faith. There are of course many other ways but today we are invited to consider just these three. What is common to each way or model is that faith in the Jewish-Christian tradition is never a private matter. It is meant to be proclaimed and lived out in the public domain. To put this another way—the way emphasised in the reading from John’s Gospel—we are meant to bear witness to our faith. This is important because it enables others to discern the truth of our faith and to help us when we have gone wrong. It is also a measure of our trust in the community that shares our faith and of our trust in the wider community. We do not simply instruct them or correct their error; we also learn from them.

The first model or witness is the figure that steps forward in the reading from Isaiah. There are three main elements in the passage. The figure, which may reflect a combination of prophetic (the spirit of the Lord) and royal motifs (anointed), first announces his divine commission (it is a claim). He then backs up this commission by proclaiming in a series of
metaphors and similes how he has been a beneficiary of the good news that he now announces (‘he has clothed me in the garments of salvation/ he has wrapped me in the cloak of integrity’). He was as much in need as those to whom he is sent and he is prepared to offer himself as a kind of visual aid in order to convince his audience of the truth of his message. If they do not see in him the impact of salvation and righteousness, a transformation like that of a bridegroom or bride, then he is a fake. One could add that this text also proclaims the conviction that God is prepared to stake the truth of the divine word on the fidelity of one person. God is that crazy, or that trusting. The passage ends with a proclamation that confirms the speaker’s complete confidence that what God says God will do (in God’s good time).

Our second model does not place the emphasis so much on witnessing to one’s experience or conviction of being saved by God but of maintaining loyalty once one has been saved. The previous one has the power of what we might call a ‘peak experience’ whereas Paul’s letter is about perseverance when one needs to ‘hold on to what is good and avoid every form of evil’. This is a different form of witness; the way one lives the ordinary affairs of life becomes its own extraordinary witness of the presence of God in the community. Paul may be dealing with a problem that can emerge when the ordinary is seen as the norm: there can be resistance and suspicion of the extraordinary or unusual. Hence the instruction not to suppress the Spirit or prophecy. There are many ways in which one can be called to give witness.

The third model is that of John the Baptist. John’s witness looks to be almost at the opposite end of the spectrum to that described in the book of Isaiah. There the speaker steps forward to proclaim good news to others. In contrast, John is under scrutiny from the Pharisees and it is a potentially dangerous position to be in. From one point of view it might be advantageous for John to claim that he is the messiah, or Elijah, or the prophet. It could give him enormous status. From another point of view, it could be a trap. Even if he denies he is any of the above, can he be sure how the authorities will react? This is the most difficult form of witness: one has to speak what one believes to be the truth in a context of uncertainty and even hostility, and this John does. Bearing witness to the light of Christ that illuminates our dark world is a key theme in John’s Gospel. By doing so we become lights ourselves; like flickering candles perhaps but light nevertheless. As Jesus says about John in 5:35, ‘he was a burning and shining lamp’.
Our reading from Romans claims that all of history is unfolding according to the divine plan, ‘the way the eternal God wants things to be’. And who can gainsay the eternal God? Thus, in our reading from 2 Samuel, David plans to build a house for God. But David’s plan clashes with God’s plans and this is communicated to him via the prophet Nathan. In the Gospel reading, the angel Gabriel interrupts Mary and Joseph’s plans about getting married and raising a family to tell her of God’s plan. As in the case of David, God’s plans must take precedence.

If this is what our readings are about, it is no wonder many in modern society recoil from religion. With our heightened appreciation of individual freedom, these readings smack of a domineering, tyrannical God who treats us like pawns on a divine chessboard. There is even a contemporary cosmological theory that we are elements in a computer programme, inhabiting a virtual universe among a myriad of virtual universes within the programme, the product of some cosmic mind playing the definitive computer game.¹

Is there a way in which we can responsibly interpret this Sunday’s readings that respects both God’s sovereignty and human freedom? I don’t claim to be able to offer a definitive answer; we are after all dealing with, as Paul puts it, ‘the revelation of a mystery’. Nevertheless, the following few thoughts may serve as a basis for a homily on this last Sunday before Christmas.

An initial response is that human freedom is something God has created: it is an integral part of creation, of being human. Of course, we are creatures and so our freedom will by definition be limited. It will always operate within a context that includes historical, psychological, social and other elements (such as faith). But we are also, we believe, in the image

and likeness of God, and so we are also creators—albeit in a suitably hu-
man fashion. God’s creative act provides the context in which we are our-
selves creative, creating the context in which we can make decisions and
act as free human beings. In fact, to argue otherwise would be to impugn
the biblical notion of God. God is not a God of coercion. Hence, the mes-
sage of the angel Gabriel creates a new context for Mary’s life; yet, as Luke
tells the story, it is up to her to freely say yes or no; her consent is essential.¹

A second response is that, as the Bible presents it, God ‘enters’ our life
not to dominate or restrict our humanity but to enable it to achieve its full
potential. At times God’s plan may appear disturbing but this, the Bible
says, is due to our distorted perception of reality and ourselves. Our idea
of what is the best thing for ourselves or others may be skewed. We can
sell ourselves short. The Bible’s claim is that God always calls us to what
is truly best for us. And so David thinks of a house for God whereas God
challenges David to expand his horizons and think of a different kind of
‘house’, one that God wants to build for David; an enduring dynasty, one
of whom (Solomon) will build the house for God.

A third response is to challenge the popular view that God inhabits a
different world to us, the divine world. But this seems to me to place the
creator within something created—a world—however magnificent our
imaginations might conceive it to be. But God does not inhabit a world
different to ours so that from time to time God ‘enters’ our world as a
kind of alien environment in order to do a job or to bring things into line
with the ‘plan’. Heaven is not a ‘world’. Rather, God is simply present to
us, the being that sustains all things in being. And because God creates
our world, God knows the best way to indicate the presence of the divine
to us fragile human beings who are easily spooked. A human life is built
up of discrete experiences that we link together in various ways. Hence,
the Bible describes how God is manifest at different times in various ways
so that human beings can gradually, in time and place, develop a correct
understanding of the divine plan or purpose for creation. We come to be-
lieve we are under God’s ever attentive care, as a loving parent, rather than
under surveillance, as the ‘watcher of men’ in Job 7:17–19. The wisdom of
the incarnation is that God lives among us as one of us, so much one of us
that most did not see or refused to see the divine in Jesus. Yet Jesus is, as
Paul says, the ‘clear’ revelation of the divine mystery, the divine plan, ‘the
way the eternal God wants things to be’.

². As noted by Sts Jerome, Cyril, Ephraem, Augustine and others.
The reflection on Luke’s narrative of the nativity for Year A explored how Luke contrasts the way Caesar rules his kingdom with the way God rules God’s kingdom, as manifested in the birth of Christ. Another aspect of this contrast that Luke’s account develops concerns the shaping of history. Luke’s contribution to the New Testament corpus is a two-volume work—Gospel and Acts of the Apostles. The evangelist unfolds his account of the life and ministry of Jesus in the Gospel, and the life and ministry of the Church in Acts, as the fulfillment of God’s purpose in and for human history. When one gets to the end of Acts, Paul has arrived in Rome, the centre of the then known world. He is a bearer of the good news that will transform this world. Such is the Bible’s claim.

By commencing his account of Jesus’ birth with the decree of the Roman emperor Augustus, Luke draws our attention to a ruler who was supremely confident that he was the one in control of events; he was the one making and shaping history. The whole empire was obliged to respond to his decree: the populace was at his service, from those in the imperial capital to the farthest reaches of the empire. Palestine was on its fringes and in the emperor’s estimation, if he ever thought of it, Joseph and Mary would be like any other insignificant couple on the fringes yet still expected to obey the decree without question. So they have to make a long and difficult journey—Mary is pregnant with her first child—to Bethlehem to be registered.

Yet, in a telling irony or reversal, Luke claims that Caesar’s imperial plans are really at the service of God’s plans, the one who is actually shaping history. The imperial decree is made at precisely the moment that God has foreordained for the birth of the Son, saviour and true ruler of the...
world. In a sense, the whole of the Roman Empire unknowingly ‘prepares’ for the birth of its saviour and ‘announces’ it, from the emperor to those he would regard as the least of his subjects. Even the imperial order that obliges Joseph and Mary to journey to Bethlehem becomes part of God’s plan, for it is in fulfilment of the prophecy of Micah 5:2 that ‘from you (Bethlehem of Judah) shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel’.

What is also striking about Luke’s understanding of history as the arena in which God’s purpose is manifested and fulfilled is that it does not cancel out or negate the history—the lives—of those who think they are in control or who deliberately set out to thwart what they perceive to be God’s purpose. People are free to make their plans and to try and leave their mark on history but Luke’s implied claim is that it all falls mysteriously within God’s overall guidance of history. One way of glimpsing how this occurs is to remind ourselves that in creating our world and our humanity God creates and is always creating human freedom. Without this creative work of God, there would be no human freedom at all. A second point is that human freedom, being part of creation, is limited; it always operates within a certain context or environment that has been provided by God. Later in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus assures us that ‘not a hair of your head will perish’ (21:18). God’s care embraces every aspect of human life, from the general to the seemingly insignificant particular. It is a faith claim; one cannot prove it because no one can monitor every instance of a person’s life, let alone a whole society. What the Bible does is make the inspired claim that certain instances—events, people, etc—reveal God’s presence to and guidance of all human history.

A related point is that if God is able to take the plans of the mighty and turn them to serve the divine purpose, then God is equally able to take those who think they are completely insignificant in terms of history and have nothing to contribute and transform them into disciples who can change the course of history. Within Luke’s account of the nativity, one can single out the shepherds as belonging to this category. Here is a group of men who would not dare to think they mattered in the great scheme of things, nor probably would anyone who observed them and their work. Yet God turns them into the first bearers of the good news of the birth of Jesus to all the world, the one who comes to save the world. As God was able to so transform the shepherds without imposing on them—they are invited to be bearers of the good news—so Jesus is able to transform each and every one of us into trusted disciples; even more, into treasured and loved sisters and brothers.
One of the most striking features of the readings for Christmas is how differently the Gospels describe the ‘advent’ of Jesus. Matthew prefaces his account with a genealogy that reaches back to Israel’s father in faith, Abraham, and culminates in Joseph, descendant of the house of David and betrothed to Mary. Luke sets his account of the birth of Jesus in the context of a census of ‘the whole world’ decreed by the Roman emperor. The prologue to John’s Gospel portrays Jesus as the coming into the world of the heavenly, creative word of God. Each of the Gospel accounts unveils a key aspect of the meaning of Christmas for us.

Matthew’s account, as I read it, announces Jesus as the one who heals time—our broken individual lives, the frayed threads of the history of Israel and the house of David, the fragmented histories of peoples of all times and places. Matthew’s genealogy is just too neat to be true, and no one knows this better than Matthew. On the surface he provides us with a perfectly structured 3-fold set of 14 generations but let’s look beneath the surface a little. In the first set of 14 generations, the names that catch the eye are those of women and, when one reads the stories about them, they are unusual women to say the least. There is Tamar who begot children by her father-in-law Judah (Gen 38), Rahab the prostitute (Joshua 2), and Ruth the Moabite (according to Deuteronomy 23 Moabites and Ammonites were to be forbidden entry to Israel’s liturgy; they epitomised the unworthy ‘foreigner’). In the second set we have Bathsheba; David raped her and had her husband Uriah, the foreigner, murdered. Then there is Solomon whose infidelities, according to 1 Kings 11, caused the fragmentation of David’s kingdom; readers can consult the accounts of subsequent divisive and disobedient scions of David such as Rehoboam, Abijam, Ahaz (the target of Isaiah’s censure), and Manasseh (a very bad egg indeed, according to 2 Kings 21). We know little about most of the figures in the third set of 14 generations because, in comparison to their pre-exilic ancestors, they were apparently nobodies on the stage of history. None of them were able to restore royal rule: they are like the frayed ends of the Davidic line. Yet, these figures are all an integral part of Jesus’ Jewish ancestry and Jesus gladly owns them all, just as he embraces and heals the fragmented lives of our present generation and reaches out to all generations to come. As the angel says, ‘he will save his people from their sins’: his people are all God’s people. For Matthew, Jesus is the only one who can forge a perfect genealogy or family of humanity out of its feuding factions.

Although Luke’s account also claims that Jesus is the one who shapes, makes and heals our fragmented history, one can see another important
dimension in his account, and it involves place. We live our earthly lives in time and place; just as time can unite or divide humanity so can place. Place plays such an important symbolic role in our relationships with one another: as the real estate agents say ‘it’s about location, location, and location’. One can hardly imagine a greater ‘distance’ than that between the Emperor Augustus in Rome, the centre of the then known world, and Mary and Joseph in far away Bethlehem—and not even in Bethlehem itself but apparently in a shepherd’s refuge or hut outside the town. This is living beyond the fringes. Yet the baby born in this ‘no-place’ is the one who, in Luke’s story, replaces the emperor as the central person at the centre of the world. But, in doing so Jesus effectively abolishes any sense of privilege or superiority that people attribute to themselves or others because they happen to occupy a certain position at a certain time. Anyone, anywhere and at anytime is able to become a treasured and loved disciple. Time and place retain their importance because they are the arena of the incarnation, our human arena. But the incarnation takes place or is meant to take place in the heart of every human being who lives his/her time and in his/her place.

If Matthew and Luke break down the barriers of time and place or rewrite their meaning, we might say that John’s prologue abolishes a third barrier that human beings erect, and it is the most important one—the divide between heaven and earth. We tend to think that God inhabits another ‘world’, the heavenly realm that is totally alien to ours. Every now and then God condescends to appear in our world. But I think John sets out to correct this perception. It arises because of the ‘sin of the world’, an affliction that causes a distorted perception of ourselves and of God. But John teaches, ‘all that came to be had life in him’. This Word of God, the Word that is God in whom we have life ‘was coming (always) into the world’ which is ‘his own domain’ and he ‘lived among us’ as one of us. There are not two separate worlds or, if in our distorted perception there are, God’s purpose is to show us that there is really only one, God’s ‘world’ in which we are to ‘become children of God’. For John, Jesus is the only one who can remove the barriers that impede our vision; then we will be able to see the glory of God in Jesus, the Word of God who is with us and has always been with us as he has always been with God. To put this another way, God became in our image and likeness in order to show us that we are in the image and likeness of God.
The emergence of a new family is an important and joyous event in the life of a society, and never more so than in a highly religious society such as Israel was in the time of Jesus. Time-honoured rituals of initiation that Luke records in our Gospel reading marked the occasion; a key element of the ritual for a male child was his consecration in which the parents ‘presented’ or offered him to God. The arrangement of Luke’s account is significant. It begins and ends with references to fulfilling the Torah or law of Moses, to Jerusalem the holy city, and to the temple in the heart of the holy city. These references frame the holy family’s encounter with the prophets Simeon and Anna. Thus the arrangement of the text captures nicely the way the new family is embraced by the long and rich tradition of Israel. Adherence to this tradition will ensure the kind of family life espoused in the first reading from Ecclesiasticus. It reflects the accumulated wisdom not only of Israelite society but of the larger ancient Near East.

This Gospel passage is also read for the feast of the Presentation of the Lord and readers can consult the reflection for this feast in Sunday Matters. Reflections on the Lectionary Readings for Year A (pp 175–76). For the feast of the Holy Family the reflection will focus on the encounters with Simeon and Anna and the words that Simeon in particular speaks. Both Simeon and Anna are presented as loyal Israelites who look forward to the ‘comforting of Israel’ and the deliverance of Jerusalem. Again, time-honoured hopes of the people. But the words that Simeon then utters point to something more. In seeing the baby Jesus, Simeon proclaims that he has already ‘seen’ the salvation that God has prepared for ‘all the nations’. The community or family of Israel that gladly embraces Jesus through its rituals of welcome and dedication will itself be embraced by Jesus, the ‘glory of Israel’ and the light of the pagans. Within the context of Luke’s Gospel,
Simeon’s prophecy heralds the formation of a new family that transcends the barriers of race and religion, a family that embraces all of humanity.

On reflection, this is a radical rewrite of the traditional notion of the family. Jesus is now the centre and source, the one who gives each member of a family his or her true identity and that identity is to be a unique son or daughter of God, one of the children of God. From now on the purpose of the traditional family is to build up this new family of God’s children. One gains a sense of this from Paul’s letter in which he addresses the members of the Church at Colossae as ‘God’s chosen race, his saints’. He then outlines the kind of life that this new race of saints, this new community, is meant to lead. Included in this passage are instructions for wives, husbands and children. All the families that form the Church at Colossae are now equal and integral members of this new family, this race of saints. The barriers that can divide one family from another, one clan from another, one tribe from another, one people (Israel) from another (the pagans) are removed.

It is a grand vision for humanity but, in typical biblical fashion, Luke’s account has its feet too firmly planted in human reality to romanticise. The centre of Luke’s account is Simeon’s second prophecy which tells Mary (and the reader) that the path to the salvation of Israel and the nations will be a painful one, marked by division. This is so for two reasons. One is that God who creates human freedom will never abuse it. Salvation is offered, it is not imposed; people may accept it or reject it. The second is that the division arising from Jesus’ preaching is part of God’s overall saving purpose. It is essential that the sources of human division and rejection of God’s offer be revealed. Unless the secret thoughts of many are laid bare how can we human beings know our true selves and be in a position to make a truly free decision to embrace Jesus as the centre of our lives and the source of our identity?

Simeon tells Mary that this painful path to salvation will also cause her pain (Joseph is not mentioned, presumably because he died before Jesus began his mission). Like every disciple, like every member of Jesus’ family, Mary is called to play an integral role in the preaching of the Good News, whether in season or out of season, whether in joy or sorrow, pleasure or pain. Like every disciple she is free to accept or reject God’s call. As the first disciple and as the one who responded fully to God’s call, Mary becomes a model for all of us as we struggle to play our role in building the family of Jesus.
The early Christians found themselves in competition with a powerful religion of Egyptian origin, the cult of the goddess Isis and her consort Osiris, and their divine child Horus. Isis was believed to be the mother goddess or bearer of the god (a theotokos). She was the ideal of motherhood, of simplicity and fertility. To counter this with the claim that a simple Jewish girl called Mary is the one who became the virgin mother of God was a bold move and a somewhat risky one. Mary could easily be confused or identified with Isis. The Christian theology of Mary as mother of God needs to be, and can only be, appreciated within the Jewish–Christian framework, of God who became flesh and dwelt among us. In the words of Paul’s letter, ‘God sent his son, born of a woman, born a subject of the law, to redeem the subjects of the law’.

Mary’s motherhood provides a powerful testimony to what the incarnation means; that the Son of God became ‘like us in all things but sin’. He was conceived, grew in Mary’s womb as an embryo, was born, bawled as babies have to do, was washed, nursed, had to be circumcised, to be toilet trained, to learn to walk, learn to talk. Mary was, like all mothers, completely absorbed in the daily (and nightly) details of raising a baby, a child, a youth, and a young man. The Gospels focus on the period of Jesus’ ministry, passion, death and resurrection and, in terms of the message of salvation, rightly so. But there is enough in the Gospels, particularly those of Matthew and Luke, to signal that all those other details of human life are an integral part of the incarnation of the Son of God, of being son of Mary mother of God. How else could the infant Jesus have become an adult, filled with wisdom, the preacher of the Good News? The dramatic beginning of Mark’s Gospel notwithstanding, Jesus did not suddenly appear on earth as a mature adult, preaching the Gospel. Like all of us, he experienced the stages of human growth with their joys and sorrows. It is astonishing to think that the utterly transcendent God can become so im-
manent, so intimate to the human condition, without losing anything of divine transcendence. Indeed, it enables us, however obscurely, better to appreciate the mystery of God.

Not only does the motherhood of Mary allow us to appreciate the meaning of the incarnation, it also enables us to appreciate what it is to be a disciple. Once a mother, always a mother (the same goes for a father). For Christian faith what begins at a particular time—giving birth to a child—becomes something divine and eternal. The child is born a son or daughter of parents but also destined to become an adopted son or daughter of God. A measure of Christian motherhood is how well a mother helps her child to become aware of this destiny and seek it with all his or her heart. A mother becomes a disciple of her child. No mother epitomises this vocation so well as Mary the mother of Jesus. By following her vocation as it is outlined in the Gospels, we gain a profound insight into what it is to be a disciple of her son Jesus. There is the initial call that promises to completely transform her life. There is the promise of salvation and eternal life. But, Mary then learns the path that one must walk from the initial invitation towards the goal. Much of it is lived in obscurity, in the struggle to be faithful and trusting in the ordinary details of life. There may be some peaks but more often perhaps troughs. One may be tempted to flee the troughs or drum them out of one’s consciousness. But, says Luke ‘as for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart’. For her there was no flight from reality.

There may be hostility and rejection, and one may have to experience a shattering and painful blow, as Mary did when she witnessed the cruel death of her son. In such cases, one begs for the strength to believe that this is somehow part of God’s saving purpose, a step on the path to salvation. In fulfilling her vocation as a disciple of Jesus through all its ups and downs, Mary completed perfectly her vocation as the mother of Jesus, as the mother of God. As far as we know she died in obscurity. But in time, what may have seemed to her contemporaries to be insignificant is revealed as essential, what looked to be transitory is revealed as eternal, what looked to be so particular—time and place bound—is revealed as universal, what looked to be so human and vulnerable is revealed as divine and all powerful.
Matthew’s linking of the star to the feast of the Epiphany is a nice touch. In ancient times the appearance of a star was sometimes seen as a sign, an ‘epiphany’ or manifestation of something significant that had happened or was about to happen—the birth of a person of destiny, a cosmic or historic event. This motif is most appropriate for the Incarnation but I think our passage from Matthew is also exploiting another more basic function of stars, and that is navigation. Before the advent of modern guidance systems, people relied on the stars to navigate their way over long distances. One can imagine them, in pitch-black darkness, trudging along and relying on that tiny point of flickering light in the sky. At any time it could disappear behind clouds, hidden from view. But ancient people knew that that tiny light would continue to flicker faithfully and they also knew that if they followed its path across the sky they would eventually arrive at their destination. Their confidence in the star’s light and path gave them the courage to step out on lonely, dark and unknown roads. So different to our way of navigating. We sit in well-lit vehicles with powerful lights that penetrate the darkness of our well-made roads. We even have GPS that sit on the dashboard of the family car: you programme your desired route in and an ever reliable and unfailingly polite voice tells you where you are and where to go. All this helps to create the impression that we are in control of our lives, mapping everything to the last detail, arriving on schedule.

Matthew’s portrayal of wise men following a star invites us to reflect on our lives, particularly our lives as disciples of Jesus, from an angle that can challenge some of our modern assumptions and certainties. We believe that Christ is the light of the world and the guiding star in our lives. But if we follow this star as faithfully as we can, we will probably find ourselves on some surprising and even disturbing pathways. The Carmelite tradition has written powerfully about the dark night of the soul, the spiritual journey in which even that tiny flicker of starlight seems at times to have

The Epiphany
Isaiah 60:1–6; Ephesians 3:2–3, 5–6; Matthew 2:1–12
been snuffed out or unable to be discerned. One stumbles along in the
darkness, desperately searching for signs until, at times, one simply has
to sit in darkness and wait for a glimmer of that light that Isaiah claims is
rising on you ‘though night still covers the earth and darkness the peoples’.
Our expectations of certainty and clarity may also be challenged. Like the
wise men when they arrived in Jerusalem, we may have to search and ask
questions. Like them we may have to make crucial decisions, trusting the
knowledge of others when our own is inadequate. There is no escape from
decision making, to avoid or refuse to make a decision is still to make a
decision.

We moderns are consumers, the capitalist system has seduced just
about all of us. We tend to market and consume religion as we market
and consume other goods. And the customer demands personal satisfac-
tion. But, the reading from Ephesians teaches us that, as disciples, we are
part of God’s overall purpose of salvation. Paul was not entrusted with the
knowledge of the mystery of Christ just for his own benefit or personal
satisfaction. No, it was ‘meant for you’ and for the pagans so that they
could share the same inheritance. Being a disciple is about the fulfillment
of God’s purpose, not personal satisfaction as I may conceive it.

If we do get into the situation of thinking that our path, our vocation,
is a lonely, poorly lit one with no real ‘epiphany’, then the passage from
Ephesians invites us to look again with the eyes of faith. If we do so, we
will find that we are far from alone. There are others walking our path
and all kinds of paths are intersecting, joining us with people whom we
would never have thought were part of our journey or on our ‘map of life’.
The passage from Isaiah makes much the same claim in dramatic fashion
by exhorting the holy city Zion to ‘lift up your eyes and look around’. If
she does this she will experience a magnificent ‘epiphany’: a vast assembly
approaching from all over the world to worship and give praise to God.
God’s purpose is being fulfilled.
The readings for this feast signal a number of important reversals or transformations that are worth highlighting as points of reflection for preaching. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is the transformation that occurs when Jesus undertakes the baptism of John. The people undergo John’s baptism as a sign of repentance; as Mark’s Gospel says, ‘all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins’. It is a gesture of faith and hope. When Jesus enters the waters of the Jordan however, things change dramatically. As John himself prophesies ‘I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit’. The sinful people desire to be healed and transformed in the image and likeness of God. The only one who has the power to bring this about is the one who is completely uncontaminated by the sinful situation of the people. Through Jesus’ participation, John’s baptism now becomes not just a sign of repentance for sin but a sign that one is washed clean of all sin.

This leads to a second point, better described as a reversal. Human beings tend to shun those whom they think are contaminated or beneath them. We live in a divided world where we struggle for solidarity. In contrast, by undergoing John’s baptism, Jesus expresses his complete solidarity with our sinful humanity. He is one of us yet not one of us: Jesus is the Son of God, the one whose identity is completely other. But in his reversal of the way human beings act, in his solidarity with the ‘other’, the sinful human being, he brings about a massive transformation of our identity that has been distorted and fragmented by sin. We are invited to share his identity by becoming the adopted sons and daughters of God—here we find our true identity. And, as the reading from the Acts of the Apostles makes clear, all human beings are invited to become Jesus’ brothers and sisters, God’s sons and daughters. ‘God does not have favourites’.
The significance of this transformation is further underlined by the way the Gospel portrays the Spirit. As Jesus emerges from the Jordan ‘he saw the heavens torn apart’. This is the all powerful Spirit of God, creator of heaven and earth, the one who in the following passage of the Gospel ‘drives’ Jesus into the desert. But how does this Spirit enter our fragile human world: in the form of a dove, a clear echo of the dove that signals the end of the cosmic flood in Genesis 6–8. The gift of the all-powerful Spirit that comes with baptism is perfectly attuned to our fragile humanity and its needs. In an even more astonishing sign of the transformation of human life wrought by the coming of Jesus into our world, this gift of the Spirit is entrusted to the community of disciples, the fledgling Church. Baptism inaugurates a life that is celebrated at key stages by the gift of the Spirit, a gift that perfectly meets the needs of each stage of our life as disciples.

In Mark’s Gospel, the baptism of Jesus announces the beginning of his public ministry, a ministry that will achieve its fulfillment in his passion, death and resurrection. In Luke 12:50 Jesus speaks of his death as a ‘baptism’. As Jesus’ baptism at the Jordan inaugurated his earthly ministry, so his baptism on Calvary inaugurates a universal mission, no longer bound by the constraints of a particular time and place. Through our baptism we become ministers in this universal and public mission, because all sacraments are public manifestations of the gift of the Spirit and the salvation that this brings. Granted this is the case, our public ministry as disciples of Christ can begin in our infancy. The Church has long practiced infant baptism and there are no stipulations in the New Testament as to just when one is or should be baptised. In an age when infant baptism has become customary, we tend to place the responsibility of ministry on parents and Godparents. But it is worth remembering Psalm 8 that claims ‘Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark . . . to silence the foe and the avenger’. It is important to have parents who are dedicated to bringing up their children in the faith, and it is important to have dedicated Godparents who can assist them in this task. But the thought that our ministry begins with (infant) baptism is equally important for reminding us of the transformation wrought by Jesus’ baptism. A baptism is a grace of God, meant not just for the infant but for the whole community of believers. Parents and Godparents can only give the infant what they receive through their participation in this sacrament.
The early chapters of the book of Genesis juxtapose two competing views of the human being. On the one hand, the Bible claims that we alone of earth creatures are in the image and likeness of God. According to Genesis 1:26 God created us to be the wise stewards of creation, ruling over it as God does. Thus, we should be the most life-giving creatures on earth. On the other hand however, the flood story warns that we can become the most dangerous and destructive creatures in creation—not at all in the image and likeness of God. Nevertheless, our first reading from Genesis proclaims in story form Israel’s conviction (its faith) that, despite this destructive tendency, God is unconditionally committed to us (the covenant with Noah and the sign of the rainbow). No matter how bad we are, and the subsequent stories of Noah’s garden and the tower of Babel testify that humanity is of itself unable to change, God maintains this commitment. Given contemporary awareness of our propensity to wreak havoc on one another and the environment, it is comforting to have the Bible’s expression of God’s commitment.

For the Bible of course, our lamentable situation is not the end of the matter but an opportunity to teach us how we can escape it and transform our lives. Hence, it goes on to tell how God chose Israel through the ancestors Abraham and Sarah to bring blessing ‘to all the families of the earth’ (Gen 12:3). The Torah or Pentateuch teaches Israel that it can live in the land in a way that transforms it from a potentially destructive rabble to a life-giving community. It can learn to live in the image and likeness of God. To do this, Israel must rely on God’s power, not its own—what we would call grace. The remainder of the Old Testament is in many ways Israel’s brutally honest assessment of its failure to live up to its vocation except for a few notable exceptions. Despite its failures, its conviction about God’s commitment remains unshaken.
The Gospels in their turn claim that Jesus is the one who above all has the power to bring about our transformation. In a dramatic portrayal of this divine power at work, Mark’s Gospel tells of Jesus being driven by the Spirit (the almighty power of God with which Jesus is fully in tune) into the wilderness. There, where according to the book of Numbers, Israel failed to live up to its God-given vocation, Jesus is portrayed being tempted to follow the age-old human tendency to rely on its own or a false power (Satan), the kind that leads to chaos and destruction. But, in Mark’s cryptic prose, Jesus is described living ‘with the wild beasts’. At last there is a human being who is ‘good news’ for all of creation. There is a clear evocation here of the ideal relationship between humanity and creation in Genesis 1:29–30 and a reminder of its opposite in Genesis 9:2–5 (the existing fear-filled relationship between humanity and other creatures). Jesus is the one who brings about that harmony with creation that is the God-given task of the human being. As one who is perfectly in the image and likeness of God, there is harmony not only with creation but also with God. Appropriately therefore, Mark says that the angels ‘looked after him’. In the presence of Jesus, heaven and earth can again be at one. But one ‘wild beast’ still needs to be dealt with, potentially the most destructive creature in creation.

Hence this cryptic but dramatic narrative in Mark is immediately followed by the report of Jesus ‘re-entering’ society to heal our flawed humanity and to transform us into the image and likeness of himself. Jesus wields divine power in a perfectly human way and it is a power that contrasts sharply and tellingly with the way we tend to exercise or rather abuse divine power (given that all our power is a gift of God in some form). What is the most telling and effective manifestation of divine power in Jesus? In the words of 1 Peter it is that Jesus, ‘innocent though he was, died once for sins, died for the guilty, to lead us to God’. By refusing to exercise power in a violent way to counter violence, Jesus is able to lead us through the death of our destructive, violent nature to our new life in the image and likeness of God. The sign of God’s enduring commitment to flawed humanity is the rainbow in the clouds. The sign of our commitment to share in Jesus’ death in order that we may be created anew is the water of baptism. As we commence the season of Lent for another year, in response to God’s promise made visible in the rainbow, we are invited again to accept the power-filled, life-giving love of Jesus that alone can transform our lives, both as individuals and as a world community.
Second Sunday of Lent

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

The readings for the First Sunday of Lent present God’s unconditional commitment to us flawed human beings, to transform us into the divine image and likeness. However, the question inevitably arises as to what such a transformation involves; how can we imagine or think about it taking place? The readings for this Second Sunday provide us with some material to do just that—to think about it. God is a mystery but not a secret because God has nothing to hide; the mystery of God and of our relationship to God continually unfolds.

The first reading in which Abraham is told to sacrifice Isaac is a powerful yet disturbing story and readers have struggled with it over the centuries, offering a variety of interpretations. For this reflection we will explore the understanding of Abraham that can be drawn from considering the passage within the larger context of the story of Abraham and Sarah. In Genesis 12:1–3 Abraham is called by God to become a great nation and bring blessing to ‘all the families of the earth’. Nevertheless, he is initially portrayed as an untrusting character: passing his wife off as his sister to protect his skin (12:10–20), complaining to God (15:1–5), and readily agreeing to Sarah’s own plans for an heir (16). Yet, in Genesis 22 he obeys God’s seemingly terrible command without question; an astonishing transformation has taken place. He is now a worthy father-in-faith—as the angel announces (for the reader’s benefit): ‘now I know that you fear God’. The story of Abraham and Sarah can now draw to a close with the death and burial of Sarah in Genesis 23 and the provision of a wife for Isaac in 24.

There is however another aspect of Abraham and his relationship with God that one can explore. God’s command is a challenge that Abraham is free to accept or reject. His acceptance is appropriate for the theology that the book of Genesis is developing. But the story of Abraham, and indeed the larger Bible, allows one to ask what would God have done if Abraham
had refused? Modern biblical analysts would tend to phrase the question this way; what kind of reaction would the inspired storyteller attribute to God? The preceding account of Abraham and Sarah provides ample evidence that God does not abandon them in favour of other ancestor despite their failures and foibles. Presumably therefore, one could tell a version of the story in which Abraham refuses God’s command, yet God would not destroy or abandon Abraham. To do so would create a contradiction with the merciful and patient God of the preceding narratives. Yet, one would expect that the storyteller would also seek to ensure that God’s mercy is aimed at ultimately bringing about a right relationship between Abraham and his God and that this would involve acknowledgement of his failures. Abraham’s story is after all, part of the larger story of God’s enduring commitment to a flawed Israel and humanity.

The transfiguration scene in Mark is set within the context of Jesus rebuking Peter because he tries to dissuade Jesus from the path of suffering and death and his teaching about the price of discipleship. Jesus then warns that those who are ashamed of him and his teaching will themselves be shamed when he comes in the ‘glory of his Father’. The clash with Peter is the most serious confrontation between Jesus and the disciples so far. Jesus’ warning is a sign of the tension and what is at stake. At this moment of Peter’s failure (renamed Satan by Jesus) and tension over discipleship, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up the mountain for an exclusive and intimate experience of the glory of the Father, an experience that is so powerful that Peter wants to keep it going forever. Like Abraham in the lead up to Genesis 22, like us, Peter fails to heed the message but Jesus never flags in his loyalty to Peter and the other disciples. The transfiguration is a sign of Jesus and the Father’s complete commitment to the disciples (and through them to humanity), despite their flaws and misunderstandings. An integral part of this commitment is to lead them back down the mountain to our troubled world and on the path of true discipleship. Much of this path is hidden; the disciples cannot foresee all its twists and turns except that, as Jesus forewarns them, the journey will involve losing their old life. Only in this way will they be able to arrive at the new life, their share in the glory of the Father.

Another disciple who walked this path and came to appreciate Jesus’ utter commitment in all his successes and failures is Paul, and in our reading he speaks for the disciples in the Gospel and for all disciples. Even though others may condemn us, could God or Jesus condemn when they have acquitted us all through the death and resurrection of Jesus? Paul
utters a resounding No! Jesus is always standing at God’s right hand to plead for us. How can we hesitate to cast our lot with God when we have an advocate like Jesus completely devoted to winning the case for us hopeless cases?
We are called to walk the path of discipleship, which at times may seem daunting and obscure, even difficult. But the Bible does not leave us without guidelines to help us on our way—both in the form of laws and stories (examples). The ten commandments provide a concise introduction (and summary) to the laws that accompany the Sinai covenant. What is of particular interest for our reflection is the reasoning that operates in these laws. While there are separate commands about one’s conduct before God and neighbour, they are all designed to secure and manifest one thing—loyalty to God. Those who truly worship the God of Israel according to the Decalogue commands will thereby treat their neighbours according to the commands. To do otherwise is to be disloyal to this God. The same principle operates in the reverse direction, those who treat their neighbours according to the Decalogue are no doubt doing so because of their loyalty to the God of Israel. Thus, loving one’s neighbour is an act of obedience—being a loyal disciple by loving as God loves. Within the Sinai covenant, one’s life is not divided up into the sacred and social or secular bits. Each command is a sign of one’s loyalty to God and of one’s status as a member of the covenant community. The divine and the human are, as it were, bonded together.

Some think that our modern separation between the sacred and the secular would have been unthinkable to the theologians behind the Torah. Perhaps. I prefer to think that they were only too aware of our tendency to compartmentalise things to suit ourselves and they sought to counter this as best they could with their legislation. Old Testament prophets frequently criticised Israel for separating the worship of God from social responsibilities.

Jesus stands squarely in this prophetic tradition with his dramatic cleansing of the temple. The very place that should be a key sign of the
unity between one’s relationship to God and one’s relationship to neighbour has become a damaging counter sign. The authorities with whom Jesus is in conflict may think that the temple trade is a legitimate part of the cult—it is where people can purchase their animals for sacrifice, exchange money for cultic gifts and so on. But in Jesus’ eyes this sacred space has been profaned because what is taking place is no longer out of obedience and loyalty to God but in obedience to the laws of the market. And the two can appear the same. One can ‘keep the commandments’; that is, refrain from stealing, lying, committing adultery and murder but without any sense that these are integral elements of one’s relationship with God. Or, one can see the personal ‘profit’ they can bring as a sign that all is right between myself and God; a distorted perception of reality.

The desecration of the sacred space of the temple can also be a manifestation of the deeper divide within—the temples of God that we are meant to be. Our human side becomes absorbed or overwhelmed with what John calls ‘the world’ and we no longer see the divine in ourselves or in our neighbour. The way John crafts this Gospel scene, the cleansing of the temple leaves Jesus standing alone as the one in whom there is no such divide. In him the divine and human are perfectly united. In accordance with the Torah Decalogue, all Jesus’ actions are signs of obedience to the Father, whose perfect disciple he is. Equally, they are signs of perfect love because Jesus’ perfect loyalty enables him to love as the Father loves. In Jesus there is no tension between love and obedience: they are one. Those who try to divide the divine from the human in Jesus by denying the divine in him or by nailing the human to a cross fail, just as those who try to divide him from other human beings fail. His death and resurrection exposes their failure and the triumph of loyalty that is love.

The path and goal of our discipleship is to become temples of the Holy Spirit, like Jesus. The Torah provides us with essential commands and the reason, indeed the ultimate reason, for obeying these commands—because God commanded us to do so. John presents Jesus as our model of loyalty to the Father; if we follow this model we are assured of arriving at our goal.
Fourth Sunday of Lent
2 Chronicles 36:14–17, 19–23; Ephesians 2:4–10; John 3:14–21

Last Sunday’s readings invited us to compare the effects of our sin to the temple that Jesus confronts in John’s Gospel; a market place of competing self interests, resistant to any thought of change, awareness of God banished to the periphery of our lives. This Sunday’s readings provide some graphic descriptions of the effects of sin, both at the national and the individual level.

What is one of the most dangerous temptations for a nation or community? According to the author of Chronicles, it is the temptation to think that we, the majority, are always right. The reading makes the point dramatically by claiming that ‘all the heads of the priesthood and the people’ rejected ‘messenger after messenger’ sent by God to warn them of their error and evil ways. Who is the equally dangerous companion of ‘majority rule is right’? Again, according to Chronicles it is the ‘blame the other’ syndrome, directed at its target via ridicule and abuse. In a telling irony, the chronicler notes how each divinely sent messenger is reviled as the one who is disloyal to God and society (eg, the book of Jeremiah). With friends like these who needs enemies? They will almost inevitably lead to ruin. Books such as Jeremiah indicate there was bitter debate about who was responsible for Israel’s descent into exile. In retrospect, Israelite tradition came to accept that the exile showed the majority had been wrong and the lone messenger right. Israel’s Bible is testimony to a complete change of heart that can only be the result of divine inspiration (grace, says Paul). For the sake of truth and righteousness, the chronicler claims that God had to intervene to expunge Israel’s distorted perception of reality—via a ‘Sabbath rest’ for the land—in order to restore the true perception of reality. Only then can the temple be rebuilt.

In our highly individualistic world we can find it difficult to think of sin and its consequences at a national or universal level, let alone things like wars, climate change and economic crises as divine signs or judge-
ments. But if we accept that God is involved in our individual lives why not at the national and universal levels? And if we accept that the good things we enjoy are God’s blessing, then why shouldn’t we associate the bad things in some way with God? Would someone preaching war or climate change as a sign of a divine warning or wrath these days motivate us to change or simply irritate and embarrass us?

It may be with some relief then that we turn from ‘that old stuff’ to the Gospel reading that tackles the effect of sin on the individual. Jesus identifies fear as one of its most damaging effects. ‘Everybody who does wrong hates the light and avoids it, for fear his actions should be exposed.’ Jesus’ insight allows us to see that it is fear that drives individuals to band together as the hostile, ridiculing mob condemned by the chronicler. We hide in a crowd. Both individual and the mob fear the truth about themselves. But it is only when the truth is ‘exposed’, that is, when our sins are made known to us and we accept them as the truth about ourselves that we can recognise and accept their antidote—the healing grace of God.

The passage from Ephesians offers another angle on the devastating impact of sin, highlighting our ever urgent need for forgiveness and reconciliation. Like the Israelites portrayed in Chronicles, we tend to think that being hyperactive is a sure sign of life: all the priests and the people made great sport of the messengers, they aped the nations around them and conducted grand liturgies. But, the chronicler would say, echoing Ephesians, Israel was in reality ‘dead through its sins’. This devastating comment reminds me of an equally devastating one on London’s rush hour in TS Eliot’s poem The Wasteland: ‘A crowd flowed over London bridge, so many, I had not thought death had undone so many’. Whether we see ourselves like the mob in Chronicles mocking anyone who dares to challenge our status quo, or like those who hide for fear of being ‘exposed’ by the Gospel light, or like the walking dead in the letter to the Ephesians, we are ourselves quite incapable of change, of bringing ourselves to true life. It can only come about through God’s gift, a gift that thankfully, God is only too eager to bestow on us. Moreover, this gift is unlike any earthly gift that we can bestow on one another; it is a dynamic power that transforms us into a ‘work of art’. How does the human being become a perfect work of art? By being in union with Christ Jesus. In this way alone can an individual become part of an authentic community, a society, a people of God.
The Scripture passages in the preceding Sundays of Lent have exposed the fractures and divisions that sin causes in human life. We lose touch with God and our neighbour. We become absorbed in ourselves but it is really a false self, a mockery of the real self that we construct and to which we then pay homage. It is insanity masquerading as the most reasonable and profitable thing to do. How can we know our true self without God as the focus of our attention? Without God at the centre of our life we can only have a distorted perception of God, ourselves and others. The Bible begins with a story about the distorted perception of reality that sin causes (Gen 2–3) and returns to this theme time and again. Biblical faith professes that God provides the remedy; biblical hope proclaims that one day humanity will accept the remedy.

The first reading from Jeremiah is a case in point. Despite the ‘death’ of the Babylonian exile and the prophetic claim that it is the just consequence of Israel’s disloyalty, the book of Jeremiah proclaims a new covenant and new life for the people. God’s purpose in establishing this new covenant is clear: ‘Then I will be their God and they shall be my people’. God will once again be the source and centre of Israel’s life. The key topic of discourse will be ‘Learn to know the Lord’. It is a highly idealistic and rhetorical picture of the relationship between God and Israel, one designed to highlight the almost brutal contrast between the disloyalty that brings death (exile) and the grace of God that brings life (new covenant). It does not try to sift the guilty from the many God-fearing Israelites who no doubt remained loyal to God yet perished in the misery of the exile. To try and address such complex and almost intractable problems would detract from the basic claim the book seeks to make: authentic human life is possible only with God as the centre of life. Can this be proved to be the case in every case? Of course not and the book of Jeremiah knows this very well (cf Jer-
emiah’s lamentations in the book). It is a bold confession of faith that God is on the side of those who are on God’s side.

The Gospel reading brings what scholars call ‘the book of signs’ in John to a close. It has been occupied principally with Jesus’ debates with the Jewish authorities and their reaction to his ‘signs’. The Greek delegation that arrives in this reading may be taken as a symbol of the rest of the world coming to Jesus. What looks to be an almost insignificant incident—a few Greeks wanting to see Jesus—is proclaimed as signaling the hour for the revelation of the greatest sign of all—Jesus being ‘lifted up from the earth’ on the cross. Paradoxically, it is this shocking sign of violent death that will turn people from absorption in the things of the false ‘world’ of their making and lead them to make Jesus the centre of their lives. The Son of Man will be glorified, not only by the great sign of being crucified and rising from the dead but also by another related sign—the sign of a rich harvest of humanity coming to Jesus for salvation, like those few insignificant Greeks (cf John 4:35). Within the Christian context no one is insignificant; the death and resurrection of Jesus enables everyone to be an integral part of the reign of God; every grain of wheat is able to flourish and bear much fruit.

But, while it is true this Gospel passage focuses our attention on Jesus as the Son of Man who will be glorified and will draw all to himself as the centre, it also looks beyond Jesus to the Father. Jesus, the one who draws all to himself in his hour of glorification says ‘Father, glorify your name’. The voice of the Father responds. In being glorified, Jesus glorifies the Father. One senses here an echo of an Old Testament refrain; ‘that they may know I am the Lord’. It is only when God is seen as the centre of our lives that we grow as human beings, that we too are glorified. When we make God the centre of our lives, God makes us the centre of divine life by coming to dwell within us.

The reading from the letter to the Hebrews dispels any notion that Jesus’ path to glorification was serene and untroubled. In almost graphic terms, the letter reminds us that Jesus experienced the same temptations that we do (he was like us in all things but sin), the temptation to make ourselves the centre of the universe, to get God to serve us rather than us serving God. Jesus had to assert his complete loyalty to the Father in the face of fearful temptations, fed by the prospect of what he was about to face. It is Jesus’ loyalty in the face of temptation that enables us to have the courage to meet the temptations that threaten to fracture our humanity.
We have been presented with the Gospel’s challenge to make God the centre of our lives because God makes us the centre of divine life by loving us unconditionally. According to the Gospel, this is the relationship that all human beings need (and really desire?) and gives meaning and fulfillment to all other relationships. In the account of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem the people seem to be doing exactly this—they are making Jesus the centre of their lives. They throw a great welcome party for him as he enters Jerusalem, the one who ‘comes in the name of the Lord’. We know from the Gospels that Jesus was always happy to join a party, whether thrown by disciples, his rivals the Pharisees, tax collectors and sinners. Life is meant to be a celebration. But the definitive welcome party in Jerusalem goes horribly wrong; celebration and unity are replaced by violence and division, and the guest of honour ends up being nailed to a cross. What goes wrong? A number of things no doubt but the people’s cry ‘Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David’ provides one clue. That little pronoun ‘our’ suggests that the people’s focus has shifted pretty quickly from ‘the Lord’ to what might be in it for them. On entering Jerusalem, Jesus does not initiate a rebellion against the Roman authorities, nor does he parade and review his troops, nor hold court like a king. Is Jesus coming to establish a kingdom, if so what kind of kingdom?

We can see the parallels to the Gospel scene in our modern life. Suburban and rural communities can turn into rival ‘gangs’ that seek to settle scores that often end in a bloodbath (one ‘nails’ the enemy to the wall). All that society seems able to do against this violence is create more laws that seem to exacerbate the divisions within the society. The description ‘gang’ is a way of denying its members any sense of community or decency; these values are seen to reside only in the ‘society’, the antithesis of the gang. The Gospels teach that Jesus comes between society and rival gangs with love for those on all sides. This kind of love can get a person killed but it is the
only kind of love that can, in the end, overcome intractable divisions and hatred and enable people to look at themselves and the other in another light. When one sees Jesus as the centre of love radiating out to all, no matter how divided they may be, there is the chance things can change.

As we come to see in faith divine love radiating out from the crucified Jesus as its centre we perceive something more. Jesus is doing all that he does out of love of the Father. God is the centre of his life. Paradoxically, the moment that seems, from the human point of view, to deny this truth—his being nailed to a tree, powerless and reviled by society—is the moment that confirms it. The centurion, the complete outsider and one of Jesus’ executioners, proclaims ‘Truly this man was God’s Son!’ If it is true that God is fully within Jesus at the point in Mark’s Gospel when he cries ‘my God, my God, why have you abandoned me’, then there can be no moment in human life when God is not at the centre of our lives, no matter how absent God may ‘appear’ to be. Therefore there can be no more fitting response from a human being who has become aware of this truth than to make God the centre of one’s life.

Our other readings for Passion/Palm Sunday add some important features to this portrait of Jesus as the loyal messenger of God, who reveals in his life and teaching the centrality of God’s love. The passage from Isaiah lays down three key requirements for a messenger/teacher of God. The first is that he/she must be a disciple: in order to teach others one must first be taught by God. The Gospels consistently claim that Jesus proclaims what he has received from the Father. This is not like repeating mathematical tables. The Word of God becomes fully incarnate in the person of Jesus; it is at once the Word of God and the words of the human being Jesus. These human words are unique as each Gospel is unique but also the Word of God. The second requirement is that the disciple must persevere in his/her mission despite rejection and insult. Again, Jesus is revealed as the model disciple in his suffering and death. The third requirement is that the disciple must trust completely in God and God’s deliverance (‘the Lord comes to my help’).

The passage from Isaiah provides the broad context within which Paul’s letter to the Philippians identifies the unique status of Jesus that completely transforms what it means to be a disciple. A disciple’s job is to represent the master and the master’s status, but how do the conditions of slavery and death represent the living and liberating God? Ah, we may reply, read the next bit that proclaims the resurrection from the dead. Well and good, but Paul seems to be implying that slavery and death are also in
their own way an authentic manifestation of the presence of God—at least in the figure of Jesus. And so as we enter another Holy Week we are called to follow Jesus in his passion, death and resurrection.

For further reflections on Mark’s Passion Narrative, refer to the contribution below on Good Friday.
As a celebration of the ‘last supper’ it is appropriate to begin Holy Thursday with the account of Israel’s ‘first supper’, the Passover meal in Exodus. As a meal, all goes well: the Israelites do as God has instructed them through Moses, the destroyer passes over their houses and renders the Egyptians powerless. The powerless Israelites are liberated. It is one the few meals in the Old Testament that has a good outcome. The Bible begins with the story of a meal that goes badly wrong—the eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden. The serpent’s temptation is like the ones that we constantly see on the TV in a variety of forms: eat this and you will look divine; drink this and you will never get sick; buy this and you will live happily ever after. Adam and Eve fall for it as we all do (after all, they stand for humanity). They think they can transcend their human condition but they end up behaving in a way that is hardly divine—fearful and hiding from each other, hiding from God.

The rest of the Bible tells how God, continually ‘revisiting’ the scene in the garden story, seeks out humanity in its hiding places with its sordid secrets and gradually and patiently encourages it to come out of hiding into the light of God’s day. Encouraged by God’s good intentions on its behalf, all Israel participates for the first time (according to the narrative) in a community meal, the Passover. The doorposts are smeared with blood to advertise to all and sundry (including that destroyer) that a meal is being shared within the house. Unlike the garden story, this is a meal that fosters hope and life not fear and death. After a fractious journey through the wilderness, with much murmuring about food and drink, Israel arrives at Sinai and all are invited to join together in a covenant with God. As a symbol of the life with God that the covenant brings, seventy elders (a perfect representative number) enjoy a meal before God on the mountain. If Israel always eats like this, that is, before God, all will be well because

Thursday in Holy Week
Exodus 12:1–8, 11–14; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; John 13:1–15
it is putting God and its complete dependence on God first. It will arrive, live in the land and flourish.

But, like Adam and Eve, Israel quickly succumbs to the temptation to have things its own way. The next meal we are told about is the orgy accompanying the golden calf story in Exodus 32; it forms a telling contrast to the meal with God on the mountain and brings death. Israel’s subsequent disobedience in the land comes to such a pass that prophets like Isaiah employ the metaphor of eating as a sign of death and destruction rather than, as it should be, a sign of life. ‘They gorged on the right, but still were hungry, and they devoured on the left but were not satisfied; they devoured the flesh of their own kindred’ (Isa 9:20). God has to exile them from the land to give it some respite: Israel is, like us, the consummate consumer who devours everything. In a graphic text, Ezekiel is told by God to eat a scroll written all over with lamentation, mourning and woe; the consequences of Israel’s evils. Not the kind of fare anyone would want to sample but eating it amounts to a reversal of the garden story. What looks desirable there (from a human point of view) turns out to be disastrous. For Ezekiel, what looks terrible turns out to be ‘as sweet as honey’. If Israel accepts God’s judgement it can taste the sweetness of life again.

The Bible effectively begins with the promise ‘eat this and you will be like God’. In a brutally honest self-appraisal Israel testifies that more often than not it succumbed to this bogus claim. For Christians the Bible effectively ‘ends’ or reaches a climax with Jesus’ promise: ‘those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life’. In other words, ‘eat and drink this and you really will be like God’—the definitive rebuttal of the serpent’s temptation. Thus the Eucharist is the meal that draws us out of the hiding places to which we have fled as a result of our rampant ‘consuming’. It is the one meal that gives us the life we crave and which we so often try to grasp and secure on our terms—causing destruction in the process.

But those Old Testament stories do not become obsolete as a result of the Eucharist; they are still the word of God. The Eucharist offers so much and is so available that, like Israel, we can succumb to that old temptation to ‘consume’ it on our terms. As a warning against this we have Paul’s timely teaching that whenever we eat the bread and drink the cup we proclaim the death of Jesus. Like Passover, the Eucharist is not just a meal but the passage from death to life.
The following reflection is based on John’s Passion Narrative which is the one customarily read on Good Friday of each year of the liturgical cycle. It will be followed by a reflection on Mark’s Passion Narrative, because it is the one for Palm Sunday in Year B.

There is a fine terracotta ‘Deposition’ in a church in Bologna, just off the main piazza. To one side is Mary Magdalene weeping and rushing to embrace the dead body of Jesus; to the other side is Mary the wife of Clopas, grieving at the sight of a mother with her dead son. The foreground has Mary with the dead body of Jesus. It is as if she has moved from grief over his death to contemplation and prayer. Behind them all stands the evangelist John, absorbed in the scene, with a hand raised to his cheek in an insightful rather than a grieving gesture.

This work of art captures something of John’s account of the Passion: it offers unique and profound insights into the meaning of Jesus’ death. What looks to have been one particularly ugly and brutal episode in the history of a backwater of the Roman empire is revealed, in John’s account, as the great sign of God’s saving purpose. In an allusion to the crucifixion in John 3:14, Jesus likens it to Moses’ bronze serpent in the desert (Numbers 21). The power of God can transform what is death dealing into that which is life giving. One can see this in the history of Christian art where the crucifix, a symbol of someone condemned and brutally erased from the Roman empire, becomes a key symbol of life, a beautiful thing that people venerate rather than recoil from in horror.

The prologue of John’s Gospel proclaims that ‘the Word became flesh.’ One can read the Gospel as the progressive unfolding of this event and its meaning in the person of Jesus, that reaches a climactic moment in the narrative of his passion, death and resurrection. This is signalled in the garden scene: those sent to arrest him seek a ‘Jesus of Nazareth’. Jesus
acknowledges ‘I am he’ and they fall prostrate as is appropriate before the one who bears the divine name. Some see this as a sign that, in John’s Passion, Jesus is in full control, marching regally and calmly to his death that is his victory over death. I prefer to see the scene as a sign that Jesus, the Word made flesh, gives himself into their hands, in obedience to the Father’s will. Jesus’ passion and death are not so much a manifestation of power and control but of God’s love, and that love is most perfectly revealed in the one who gives himself into his executioners’ hands and loves them to the end, and beyond.

At a number of points in the narrative, John is careful to point out how the words and actions of those involved in Jesus’ passion and death fulfil the Scriptures. Paradoxically, the plans of those with deadly intent towards Jesus are embraced within God’s saving purpose, even ‘the Jews’ with whom the Gospel seems to be particularly in conflict. Jesus suffers and dies for them and for us all. It is worth noting that John doesn’t soften the nature of Jesus’ ordeal: he reports that Pilate had Jesus scourged, crowned with thorns and mocked.

The love of Jesus that can endure hatred and rejection is a life-giving, transforming love. John shows this in a series of scenes at the cross. The first is where Jesus gives to the beloved disciple the most precious relationship that he has as a human being: to be the son of Mary. The second is when, on being offered wine to assuage his thirst, he ‘gave up his spirit’, a statement that recalls the promise of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ last-supper discourse. The third is when the side of the dead Jesus is pierced and from it flows blood and water, long seen in Christian thought as signifying the sacraments of the Eucharist and Baptism.

In order for this self-giving, transforming love of God to be authentically revealed the truth must be spoken: the truth about Jesus, about the world, about his mission. Thus John begins with Jesus proclaiming ‘I am he’ and recounts a number of trial scenes in which his truth is rejected. One is particularly significant for us as readers. Paraded before the high priest, Jesus tells him to ask the ones he has taught, ‘they know what I said’. This scene is framed by Peter’s repeated denials that he is a disciple. Peter’s ‘I am not’ contrasts tellingly with Jesus’ ‘I am he’. Jesus had entrusted his truth to Peter who fails him. Yet, Jesus loves Peter. So it is with us: Jesus gives himself completely into our hands and loves us even when we prove unworthy of that love.

After reading John’s account of the Passion, one might also say that it is the Father’s will that God and the nature of God be manifest no matter
what reaction this provokes in human beings, and that Jesus is the Son to whom God entrusts this most crucial mission. God is love and this is made most manifest in an act of greatest hostility towards the Son, his execution, ironically for claiming to be the Son of the Lover. God shows love for or loyalty to humanity in the midst of hate and death by remaining loyal to us, by not responding to our violence with violence. But an essential component of God’s love for humanity is to raise Jesus from the dead. It is by revealing love for the Son in raising him from the dead that God reveals love for the world. All else depends on and has life because God loves God. The astonishing claim of Christianity is that we are invited to share in the divine love within the Trinity.
As noted in the introduction to this volume, Mark’s Gospel is commonly regarded as the earliest and that it provided the basis for the later Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Mark’s account may therefore provide one of the Church’s earliest records and reflections on Jesus’ passion and death. A striking feature of the account is the way it portrays an increasing distance between Jesus and the majority of those around him.

The meal in Simon the leper’s house sets the scene for what follows (was Simon cured of leprosy or does Mark want readers to understand that Jesus was, typically, associating with outcasts?). It is framed by accounts of authorities outside this table fellowship plotting to arrest and kill Jesus (14:1–2) and Judas plotting to betray him (14:10–11). But even among those at table there is distance and misunderstanding, as evident in their comments about the woman. She alone of all those named in this opening scene can be described as a disciple. He proclaims that her gesture will be remembered because it ‘prophesies’ the imminent revelation of Mark’s messianic secret: death and burial is an integral part of the mission of this Messiah.

The next scene, the account of the last supper, is framed by Jesus’ prediction that he is to be betrayed (14:18–21) and abandoned (14:26–31) by those who, in his ministry have been closest to him. But prior to this fracture of relationships and distance, Jesus gives himself totally in the Eucharist. An important feature of this text is the way it points beyond the Eucharistic meal to its ultimate purpose, union with God. Jesus will drink no more wine until he drinks ‘it new in the kingdom of God’. The scene in Gethsemane employs the same framing device to show the fulfillment of Jesus’ prediction and to contrast his complete commitment to God with the failure of the disciples’ commitment (they fail to keep watch, they sleep and on waking abandon him). A kiss normally signals friendship and intimacy: in the case of Judas it signals betrayal and distance. Though
surrounded by a crowd Jesus is completely alone and abandoned—except for his relationship with God, the very centre of his life and mission.

In the trial before the Jewish authorities, Jesus responds to only one question—that of his identity and relationship with God. When asked ‘are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One’ he answers ‘I am’. This is the one relationship that matters, that gives meaning to all others. The trial of Jesus is followed by another trial, that of Peter by those in the courtyard. Peter denies any relationship with Jesus three times; to add weight to his third denial he swears (that is, invokes God) to set the greatest distance possible between himself and Jesus. Peter’s discipleship is effectively dead here and he weeps, as it were, at his own funeral. Only the death and resurrection of the Son of the Blessed One can bring Peter back to life as a disciple.

In the trial before Pilate, both he and the crowd use a title that should bind Jesus and his people together—the King of the Jews. Instead it is invoked as the reason why he should be expelled from their ‘community’ by crucifixion. The irony for the reader is that by crucifying their King (Pilate assumes Jesus is King and the people do not correct him) they actually enthrone him as their King and saviour. The mocking by the soldiers is equally ironical for a Gospel reader. By mocking and humiliating Jesus they actually do him honour and ‘reveal’ him as the one who fulfills the mission of the suffering servant in the book of Isaiah. By patiently enduring suffering and rejection this servant will ‘make many righteous’ (Isaiah 53:11) and shall be exalted on high, like a king (52:13). So the attempt to treat Jesus as a non-person, someone who can be beaten up and spat on, and to banish him from humanity by crucifying him, in reality brings about the opposite.

Mark’s account of the crucifixion brings all this to a powerful and even shocking climax. Those in the preceding scenes (except the disciples who have fled) now assemble to ‘celebrate’ the removal of Jesus from their midst. Being nailed to a cross was, in the Roman Empire, the most powerful sign of rejection that it could come up with. The helpless, crucified victim was also a graphic sign of Roman power. At this climactic and terrible moment one might expect a sign from God but instead we hear Jesus’ cry of desolation that echoes the opening verses of Psalm 22 (‘my God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’). One’s instinctive reaction is to ask where is God at this final moment in Jesus’ life, the one whose whole life was devoted to God and to revealing God’s purpose for humanity?
The answer comes from an unexpected quarter (cf the woman who anointed him in Simon the leper’s house). A centurion, an outsider, perhaps even one of the soldiers who had enjoyed themselves mocking Jesus, stands ‘facing him’. When he sees the way Jesus dies he proclaims ‘Truly this man was God’s Son!’ The extraordinary thing about this scene is that as Jesus asks where is God, the centurion answers that God is right here in this desolate, dying human being. This moment of light shining in deep darkness is a key revelatory moment in the Gospel of Mark.

The tearing of the temple veil is customarily interpreted as a sign of the end of the old order of the temple. But it could also symbolise that in Jesus’ death the separation or distance between God (in the holy of holies) and humanity (outside the holy of holies) is removed. One who looks on the crucified Jesus with the eye of faith ‘sees’ not only the human being but the divine one who is incarnate in this human being.
What most accept as the original account of the resurrection in Mark's Gospel is as stark as its description of the death of Jesus. Some in the early Church apparently thought it needed to be embellished and additions were made that draw in part on the other Synoptic Gospels. These are normally printed in modern translations after the original ending. The original account may appear somewhat truncated and even inadequate in comparison to the much longer accounts in the other synoptic Gospels and John but, within the context of Mark's Gospel itself, it makes for a rather fitting conclusion.

Having read through Mark's Gospel during Lent and Holy Week, we have become somewhat accustomed to its style and alert to its cryptic but very effective way of making connections between parts of the Gospel in order to get the message across. The account of the resurrection begins with the loyal women disciples preparing to anoint the body of Jesus. But in Mark 14:8 Jesus proclaims that the woman who anointed him in the house of Simon the leper has already done this beforehand. One suspects that things will not unfold according to the women's plans.

And so it is. Instead of a sealed tomb with a dead body inside, they find an open one with a strange man inside who is very much alive. Angels in biblical stories are often cast as young men, no doubt influenced by the fact that messengers (which is what the word *angelos* in Greek or *mala‘ak* in Hebrew means) of ancient Near Eastern royal courts were invariably male. In the main we can thank Christian artists for the more feminine portraits of angels, as well as the rather cute but anachronistic representations of cherubs (a fearsome ancient Near Eastern winged beast) as children.

The encounter with the messenger shatters the pious Jewish and human expectations within which the women are understandably (as por-
trayed by Mark) operating. In what way are their expectations shattered? 
The first is, as noted, via the absence of the dead body of Jesus. In its 
place is a stranger clothed in something completely different to a funeral 
shroud and sitting in a position of honour and power (right hand side). 
They might have coped with a live Jesus but I think Mark avoids this be-
cause the women could have ‘explained’ it as a resuscitated corpse (like the 
daughter of Jairus whom Jesus raises in Mark 5). Resurrection is some-
thing completely different. Their second shock is that this stranger claims 
that Jesus has been raised. The passive form of the Greek verb here means 
that someone has done this to Jesus. The young man makes no mention of 
God but it is difficult to think of Jesus, the completely loyal servant of God 
(within the context of Mark), not being raised by God. This conclusion 
could suggest that the man is a form of God or a messenger of God. From 
the women’s perspective, is the tomb functioning like the temple ‘holy of 
holies’, a divine throne room with God enthroned there? A very strange 
(and Markan?) reversal of the purpose of a tomb. Despite the man’s assur-
ance (‘do not be alarmed’) this is not the place where unordained Jews, es-
pecially Jewish women, should be. But, Mark implies, a key purpose of the 
resurrection is to assure us that we are welcome in God’s sight, any time, 
anywhere. In a sense the old separation between the sacred and profane 
spheres has been erased.

The third disturbing feature of this encounter with the stranger is that 
he is completely in the know about the disciples. Like them (and like the 
reader of the Gospel) he must therefore know that the disciples abandoned 
Jesus when he was arrested and that Peter (mentioned specifically) denied 
him three times. Yet here he is telling them to go and inform the disciples 
and Peter that Jesus will meet them in Galilee as he promised. To convey 
this message to the disciples was a daunting task. Would it be received as 
good news or would the disciples attempt to flee further away (like Jonah) 
or would they perhaps turn on the women in a hostile manner? As read-
ers we know how the encounter between Jesus and the disciples turned 
out but, if we put ourselves in the place of the women on Easter morning, 
things may not have appeared nearly as clear or comforting.

Given the completely unexpected nature of what the women encounter 
and its implications, it is not surprising that they are reported as overcome 
with fear. This fear is an integral part of the Markan account that seeks 
to emphasise how the resurrection, the irruption of God into our world, 
shatters established religious and human expectations and categories. As 
an evangelist Mark is uncompromising; the Gospel message is so impor-
tant that its proclamation takes precedence over what readers of listeners might think is nice or comforting. Given that Mark ended his Gospel in verse 8 and others added the extras, I nevertheless like to think he would have been chuffed to see that a later editor sought to secure the women’s reputation as Gospel messengers by the addition that ‘all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter’. This of course brings their portrayal more into line with the other Gospels.
Second Sunday of Easter

We are so accustomed to the annual round of Christmas—Lent—Easter, etc and they are such a familiar part of our life as Christians that we can forget how challenging it was for the early Church to establish itself. Although the contemporary situation of Christianity as a long established religion in the west is quite different to that of the early Church, our readings for this Sunday provide plenty of food for thought, above all about faith and its role in our life.

The early Church had to operate in a very competitive world. The Roman empire was a market place of religions; the newcomer Christianity had, as it were, just set up its ‘stall’ and the established ones were not going to let it muscle in on their territory without a fight (cf the current unease over the rise of Islam and other religions in Christian countries). One has the impression of a battleground of faiths in the first letter of John. In order to bolster the confidence of his ‘troops’, the author of the letter has a battle cry ‘this is the victory over the world—our faith’. This writer is no shrinking violet; he’s keen to engage the opposition in battle and is absolutely certain (in faith) that ‘our faith’ will win. A kind of David and Goliath remake! It is a bit hard to pin down precisely what the letter identifies as ‘the world’ but this is probably deliberate. It is a catchword that can incorporate all that is hostile to Christianity as this writer conceives it. It can even include what he judges are emerging heresies within ‘our faith’: is this what the swipe at the liar ‘who denies that Jesus is the Christ’ refers to in 2:22?

A key difference between the ancient hero David and our author is his conviction that he does not fight alone. He speaks of ‘our faith’—there is an army of believers and while all armies rely on the faith and loyalty of its members this one is unique. One can only believe that Jesus is the Christ because he or she is ‘begotten by God’. Membership effectively involves death to life ‘in the world’ and birth into ‘eternal life’. As our author notes
a few verses later: ‘I write these things to you who believe in the name of
the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life’. Membership of this army also involves unswerving love or loyalty to all other members: ‘whoever loves the Father that begot him loves the child whom he begets’. We know the famous adage ‘do unto others as you would want them to do unto you’. We might formulate the Johannine one as ‘do unto others as God has done unto you’. As one of God’s children on whom the Father has showered unconditional love, how can one not do to one’s neighbour as God has done to oneself? To love in the Bible is more about what one does than how one feels. Hence, one displays love towards God’s children by keeping the commandments. Within the Johannine tradition, these can be summed up as ‘love one another as I have loved you’ (John 15:12). This is the one and only ‘weapon’ that the Christian community is meant to use in its battle with ‘the world’.

Luke provides an example of this community in the reading from Acts (notice how Luke sets this passage within a context of hostility and conflict, both outside and inside the fledgling Church—cf the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5). This kind of obedience will not only show that one is a true member of this army, this Christian community, and so begotten by God. It will also (according to the faith of our author) be a sign of victory over the world because the world cannot love as Christ loves and in its hostility tries to destroy this love. Loyalty or obedience to the command to love despite rejection and persecution reveals that each member of the community, and the community as a whole, is living in the image and likeness of Christ—its crucified and risen Lord.

With the rise of materialism, secularism and atheism in the modern world, some see a weakening of faith. There may be a weakening of Christian faith but, in my opinion, faith is as strong and as much a part of people’s lives as ever. It is not so much a question of ‘no faith’ but ‘what kind of faith’. Atheism is another faith system as evidenced by a recent report of an atheist advertising campaign in the UK. It involves proclaiming a faith stance (there is no god) by a band of missionaries (the atheists), includes a critique of established faiths such as Christianity (belief in God is a source of anxiety) and is out to win converts. Competition is no bad thing: it challenges us about our commitment to living and preaching the resurrection. But perhaps the more challenging ‘competitor’ for us now is indifference. How might we respond to a situation where Christianity is regarded as irrelevant? Is it better to be hated than ignored?
Third Sunday of Easter  

Luke, alone among the Synoptic Gospels, reports that Jesus showed the disciples ‘his hands and his feet’ (John 20:20 reports that Jesus showed them his hands and his side). Within the immediate context of the resurrection appearance, this eases the disciples’ alarm at seeing a ghost, an apparition that signifies (to those who believe in ghosts) that the person in question is very much dead. It is a disturbing manifestation of someone whose proper place is ‘the other side’ of this life. The point of Jesus’ gesture is to show that he who died a violent death on the cross is very much alive, in a way that transforms not only our understanding of life after death but also of our earthly life here. The resurrection involves continuity (it is the same person) and radical transformation (resurrection is not resuscitation). Hence, Jesus’ gesture is not just to ally fear but also to reveal a new truth and a new reality.

If we now consider his gesture within the larger context of the Gospel and the Bible we begin to see the extraordinary nature of the resurrection and the massive claims that the Gospel makes about it. The hands and feet of Jesus bear the marks of his suffering and death, wounds which were inflicted by those who were involved in varying ways in his death—the disciples who abandoned him and thereby betrayed him, the authorities and people who called for his death, and the soldiers who eventually put him to death. Within the Roman empire, the wounds inflicted during the crucifixion aimed at demeaning and disfiguring the human being. But, in the resurrected body of Jesus, these wounds are now transformed; they no long disfigure but adorn, they are no longer marks that repel but signs of welcome as the resurrected Jesus extends his hands to his disciples and walks towards them. But, given that these sinners are welcome in the company of the risen Jesus, then too are all those others who had a hand in his death in whatever way.
The reading from the Acts of the Apostles turns Jesus’ gesture into a sermon by Peter who announces that God’s forgiveness and welcome are extended to those who ‘killed the prince of life’. God’s forgiveness is not a tit-for-tat affair thing, a kind of squaring the ledger: because you committed this particular offence, I’ll forgive you for it but not for others. Rather, it is something that seeks to embrace a person’s whole life: to restore one to the image and likeness of God. And so Peter urges his listeners to turn to God so that all their sins ‘may be wiped out’. Of course, for forgiveness to be effective the truth about sin needs to be acknowledged. Peter, the one who betrayed Jesus three times, knew this truth better than any of the other disciples. It is fitting therefore that Peter is the one who preaches this sermon on truth and forgiveness to the people of Jerusalem.

But Jesus’ healing and forgiveness is not confined to those involved in his betrayal and death. Just as the risen Jesus is no longer constrained by the limitations of time and space (he appears and disappears at will), so the Gospel now proclaims that the healing power of his death and resurrection embraces all time and space. It embraces the past as the fulfillment of ‘everything that was written about me in the law of Moses, in the prophets, and in the Psalms’. It embraces the future because it is a message to be preached to all the nations. The reading from the first letter of John assures us that this is so because ‘We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ who is just; he is the sacrifice that takes our sins away’. And not only our sins but the sins of the whole world. As with Peter’s sermon, but in a somewhat different way, the letter goes on to say that the only thing that can keep us from the reconciliation won by Jesus is falsehood and deceit on our part.
I argued earlier that a number of the readings during Lent are about the need to make God the centre of our lives rather than ourselves—as modern western culture in particular continually urges us to do. According to the Gospels, our relationship with God won’t work if we see God as a kind of personal assistant; someone on whom I can call when needed to help me achieve my career goals. It is only when we make God the centre of our lives that all other relationships can find their proper place and function. Jesus is the one who enables us to do this through the example and power of his death and resurrection.

When we cast our mind back to the passion of Jesus we recall that Peter betrayed Jesus in the (false) hope of saving himself. His case is a good example of how things go wrong when we put ourselves at the centre at all costs. Now, in the reading from Acts, we see the transformed traitor doing the reverse: though arrested and on trial before the authorities, he does not cut and run to save himself but proclaims the centrality of Jesus and the power of God in Jesus. It is by the name of Jesus and this name only that the cripple is healed. Even more, rather than elevate himself to a privileged position alongside Jesus, separate from the hostile crowd, Peter places himself squarely among them by proclaiming ‘this is the only name by which we can be saved.’ All are equally in need of God’s reconciliation: Jesus is the one ‘you crucified’; Jesus is the one Peter betrayed. It is only when one has been healed by Jesus that one is able to see reality clearly. We spend a lot of time in our modern world ‘getting it all together’, making accurate assessments, working out best practices, monitoring results. But, says Peter using the imagery of a builder, we may reject as useless the stone that is really the ‘keystone’, the one that will enable us to look again at our building project and see that the plans are all awry.

The reading from the first letter of John tells us in its turn what happens when we—with God’s grace—make God the centre of our lives. We
become the centre of God’s life; we become God’s children and, as the perfect loving parent, God is completely devoted to the children. Being God’s children is not simply a promise of something yet to come, in which case one might accuse God of using a carrot and stick approach. No, it is a status that the believer enjoys as soon as he or she becomes a believer. One is already an heir in the kingdom of heaven. What is more, God makes us the centre of divine life, not for God’s sake but for ours. We are to benefit. God’s purpose is that ‘we shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is’.

To leave oneself behind, or rather the idea of the self that each of us has and in which each occupies the centre, and to follow Jesus in the hope that we will find our true selves, is the major challenge and promise of Christianity. In order to encourage us to step out confidently in faith, we have the famous passage on the good shepherd from John’s Gospel. Jesus is the utterly reliable leader and guide who, like the Father, makes the sheep the centre of his life. He knows them all intimately and gives his all for his sheep, even to laying down his life for them. Jesus dies for the sake of the sheep. One might think that this would signal victory for the wolves and the failure of the shepherd. But, in a superb use of paradox, the passage claims that the death of Jesus brings about the reverse: it is his non-violent victory over the wolves that seek to destroy the sheep. This is ‘revealed’ in the way he freely lays down his life (he is not the wolves’ prey) and takes it up again in the resurrection (the sign of victory over the forces that promote death). And this is all done in obedience to the Father, which means it is done for our sake. Hence, both sheep (and wolves?) can place complete confidence in Jesus, the good shepherd who leads us unerringly to the Father who is the source of life and in whom we find our true life.
Fifth Sunday of Easter  

There are two key images of relationship in this Sunday’s readings: the image or metaphor of the vine and branches in the Gospel reading focuses on our relationship with Jesus, the image or metaphor of the household (God as parent, we as children) in the first letter of John focuses more on our relationship with the Father. Each dwells on an important outcome of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

A number of the resurrection stories in the Gospels tell how the disciples could not see the risen Jesus until he manifested himself or ‘appeared’ to them—the resurrection is a revelation. Other stories report that they were afraid, thinking they saw a ghost. Clearly, the risen Jesus is not a resuscitated corpse. He now ‘enters’ or appears in our lives as if from another life. All this can raise doubts about the reality and intimacy of our relationship with the risen Jesus. Is there any continuity with the relationship the disciples had with him during his earthly ministry? The metaphor of the vine and branches, read within our post-Easter setting, provides a powerful answer to this question by emphasising the intimacy and union between Jesus and ourselves. Even though we do not see the risen Jesus any longer within our world of space and time, the metaphor proclaims that our relationship with him is more intimate than any relationship between two human beings on earth. Once you separate a branch from its vine, it is dead; it cannot live without being grafted to a vine. In terms of Christian life, there is only one vine to which we must be grafted in order to live. But this grafting goes beyond any earthly viticulture and this is caught in the shift from the vine metaphor to the notion of indwelling ‘make your home in me as I make mine in you’. This shift also avoids a potential weakness in the vine metaphor as applied to Christian life—it can portray the disciple as completely passive, dependent. While the initiative lies, and must lie, with God, the disciple’s response is to commit himself or herself to ‘remain in me’. The one who does not so ‘remain’ has shown that
he or she does not want to be part of the life-giving vine and is therefore cut off and thrown away. Nothing escapes the attention of the vinedresser who is wholly devoted to seeing that the vine and branches flourish and bear fruit. The union between vine and branches is intimate and fertile.

The metaphor of the vine/vineyard echoes and develops its Old Testament origins. One of the most famous examples is the song of the vineyard in Isaiah 5:1–7. God expected the vineyard of Israel to yield choice grapes (justice and righteousness) but found wild grapes instead (bloodshed, the cry of distress). According to vv 5–6, God threatens to let the choice vineyard go to wrack and ruin and presumably start a new vineyard. This is a provocative challenge to Israel's status as the chosen people because it implies that God's choice is for a greater purpose—to establish universal justice and righteousness. Thankfully for Israel and for us, God has, according to John's Gospel, provided the perfect Israelite vine (Jesus) that can produce the right fruit.

The metaphor of the vine and branches emphasises the intimacy of our relationship of faith with the risen Jesus: as the Gospel says in 3:36 ‘whoever believes in the Son has eternal life’. We are already part of God's household, sons and daughters of God. The reading from 1 John takes up this metaphor to explore our relationship with the Father. The reading states that the measure of our love of God is not what we say (or feel) but what we do. Only in this way can we be certain that ‘we are the children of the truth (God)’. But there is a potential problem with this certainty: how can we know that what we do is pleasing to the Father, that we have fulfilled his will? We can easily transfer to God an anxiety that often bedevils our human families: the son or daughter always wondering whether they have lived up to Mum and Dad's expectations, suffering anxiety as they attempt to measure themselves against spoken (or even unspoken but perceived) expectations. The author of our letter is determined that members of God's family (those who want to be genuine members) do not suffer from this kind of anxiety. This is not how God runs the divine 'household' and this is assured in two ways.

The first is that God knows everything about us, our strengths and our weaknesses. Despite all our flaws, here we are, loved and welcome in God's household, treasured members of the community of believers. Hence there is no need to be afraid in God's presence. The second is that, as we can have no secrets from God, so God keeps no secrets from us. God has nothing to hide. It has been made clear to us what kind of conduct the Father desires from the children; it is to 'believe in the name of his Son
Jesus Christ, and that we love one another’. As long as we do this we will be the delight of our parent’s eye and grow, like loved and obedient children do, to become perfect sons and daughters.
I was once told that the problem with the Irish—being of Irish descent myself and studying in Ireland at the time—is ‘that you never had the *pax romana*’. We are still a squabbling tribal people. The ‘*pax romana*’ (Roman peace) was apparently a policy used by the Roman empire to break down existing tribal allegiances and cement a new allegiance to the state. The many, often wrangling, factions were meant to become an integral part of the empire. The policy was implemented by the good old carrot and stick approach. In our modern world, one could add to this notion of ‘national loyalty’, loyalty to one’s firm, one’s club, one’s salary package. These mark our various relationships but they also mark our divisions and areas of competition (my firm against yours). They divide as much as they unite, or more. It is interesting to note that people coming from traditional tribal societies often comment on how weak our family and community ties seem to be, how individualistic and competitive we are. So, modern states will see traditional tribal groups as sources of division and conflict, and vice versa.

There is something paradoxical about how the very things that we seek to bind us together tend to drive us apart. The root of this lies, I think, in an inescapable fact of nature—difference. Being a member of this family means that I am not a member of that one, etc. The problem is that we quirky and flawed human beings are tempted to turn nature into a vehicle of self-advancement at the expense of the other. Belonging to this family makes me better than that one, the same temptation operates at the level of clans, tribes, nations and firms. Difference is erected into a barrier that excludes. We dignify the elimination of a rival business by calling it healthy competition.

The Gospel claim is that it is only when Jesus becomes the centre of our lives that all other relationships are able to find their proper function and context: family, tribe, nation, etc. Jesus does not come to destroy these
relationships but to remove the barriers that we erect in their name. Grace builds on nature; it doesn’t replace it with another ‘superhuman’ nature.

A fundamental difference between the family of Jesus (disciples) and any other family or community is that it does not depend on birth, race, geography, time, or institution. It is a community that we are invited to join by a loving God who accepts us as we are. As the first letter of John says ‘this is the love I mean: not our love for God, but God’s love for us’. We can only love (form genuine relationships) because God has first loved us. Our love may (and often does) fail but God’s love does not. Hence, everyone who believes in Jesus as God’s Son has received the gift of God’s love and is thereby able to love as God loves.

The reading from Acts offers a powerful example of how the power of this love, here in the form of the Holy Spirit, is able to break down the barriers between race and religion (Jew and Gentile). As Peter says, ‘The truth that I have now come to realise is that God does not have favourites, but that anybody of any nationality who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him. This scene complements very nicely the earlier one at Pentecost where Luke says that all those assembled heard the word of God in their own language. Christianity does not have a favoured or sacred language or, to put this another way, all languages are sacred. Another barrier that can lead to exclusion and a sense of superiority comes tumbling down. An important factor in Peter’s proclamation to Cornelius is his awareness that being a disciple of Christ does not make him superior to others but the servant of others. He will not have Cornelius pay him homage (‘I am only a man after all’).

But if Peter rightly sees himself as a servant of others and not their master, the Gospel offers another angle on the community of Jesus that turns the master-servant relationship on its head. In John 13:13 Jesus says ‘You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right—for that is what I am’. But this perfect teacher is able to become the perfect servant, as he demonstrates in the way he serves the Father and lays down his life in the service of all. A key goal of Jesus’ service is to create a new relationship between himself and ourselves that is something more than being his and God’s servants. In the household of God there is no master-servant relationship in the way we tend to think of it: rather, we are now friends of Jesus, friends who can be trusted completely with the most intimate knowledge that Jesus shares with the Father. We are commissioned to share this friendship with others, people who are quite different to us, who belong to different families, tribes and nations. But, rather than barriers that divide,
these differences are now things to rejoice in because, once based on a relationship with Jesus, each difference reveals the presence of God’s love in a unique way. To borrow an image from Paul, the different stones are able to be placed in exactly the right spot in the house of God because each has been chosen and shaped by the master stonemason.
In the Gospel of John, the notions of resurrection, ascension and gift of the Spirit are condensed, as it were, into one act. The risen Jesus says to Mary ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father’. This rising and ascending Lord breathed the Holy Spirit on the disciples. And it all happens on one day of what is a ‘new creation’, the first day of the week, a clear echo of the first verses of Genesis. One might gain the impression that John is singling this ‘day’ out and setting it apart from all other time. In one sense this is true but in another sense it isn’t. Or rather, John claims that all time is now suffused with the divine presence manifested in this extraordinary moment. The divine, timeless one fills all time. The assurance of this is the gift of the Spirit to the ongoing community. Thankfully, there is no sense that one must give an account of every moment of our time that is now suffused with the divine presence. We don’t have to be anxious to ‘fill’ it because God does that for us. Post-resurrection time is remarkably user friendly; Jesus takes whatever time is needed to meet the needs of the doubting Thomas. Thomas is not wasting Jesus’ or the disciples’ time.

For Luke, Jesus is also the ‘mid-point’ or apex of time but in a somewhat different way: there is the time leading up to the Jesus event and there is the time of the Church (the Holy Spirit) that follows the climax of the Jesus event (his death and resurrection). In order to show the connections between the time of Jesus and the time of the Church, Luke lays out the resurrection, ascension and gift of the Spirit in what we might call a ‘horizontal’ schema, in contrast to John’s more ‘vertical’ one. The presence of the resurrected Jesus among the disciples prompts them to ask ‘Lord, has the time come?’ This no doubt reflects speculation among certain groups in the early Church. If Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies then his appearance as the risen Lord must signal the onset of the end time. But, rather than the end time, Jesus tells the disciples of a ‘new time’, which will commence when they receive the gift of the Holy
Spirit. Through the Spirit, the disciples will become his witnesses on earth; in short they and their successors will be Christ on earth through all the ‘times and dates that the Father has decided by his own authority’. This statement by Jesus leads logically to Luke’s presentation of the ascension. In a sense it is necessary, or perhaps better fitting, to have Jesus ascend, to leave our earthly realm. The ascension serves as an important assurance for faith that Jesus is truly our cosmic Lord, able to be present to all time and place just as he was present to the disciples after the resurrection. To have ongoing appearances of the risen Jesus to this or that individual or group would have led to conflicting claims and divisions (cf the competing claims over the holy places of Christianity). But, as the ascended Lord of history and creation, Jesus is able to be present to each and everyone at any time, any place. In traditional theological terminology, the transcendent one is able to be completely immanent without losing anything of transcendence.

Jesus also promises the disciples that they will receive power from the Holy Spirit. We human beings are creatures of limited power but acutely aware of how power can enable us to transcend our limitations. The Bible virtually begins with a story about power: ‘eat this’ the serpent urges and you will transcend your creaturely limitations and be like God. But so often, as we know to our cost in the modern world, our grab for power ends up being destructive rather than ‘empowering’. The kind of power the Holy Spirit confers does not take us magically out of time (take this pill and live for 200 years!) or place (you can go anywhere you like!). Instead it inserts us more firmly, more incarnationally, into our world of time and place. As Jesus trudged the length and breadth of Palestine for days and weeks and years witnessing to the Good News so, promises Jesus, ‘you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria and indeed to the ends of the earth’. And, as the reading from Mark emphasises, in the process they will be dealing with all kinds of individuals and will experience a corresponding mix of successes and failures.
A striking feature of Luke’s account of Pentecost is that the powerful wind and tongues of flame, symbols of divine presence and power that echo Old Testament passages, signal the removal of one of the enduring barriers between human beings—language. Despite the enormous sense of power in wind and flame, the barrier of language is erased in the most benign way; those listening to Peter and the disciples simply realise that they are hearing them in their own language. This must be the dream scenario of every international meeting—no need for multi-lingual translators, microphones or earphones. But God is wise and it is a passing phenomenon; linguists need their jobs. However, its symbolic meaning endures and challenges us to think about the role of language and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Just a few thoughts therefore that may help with a homily.

One conclusion I draw from Acts is that God has no favourite language: all languages are sacred; that is, they can all equally convey the Word of God. This is quite different to the primacy of Arabic in Islam. Despite its long and distinguished use in the western tradition, in principle Latin is no more privileged than any other language in terms of God’s purpose and is not a better ‘vehicle’ for conveying the Gospel message than any other language.

Another is that the emphasis of the Bible is on the spoken word rather than the written word. In the beginning ‘God said, let there be light’, the book of Exodus claims that God ‘spoke to Moses’, ‘the Word of the Lord came to the prophet Jeremiah’, etc. The spoken word is a fascinating thing. From one point of view it looks (and sounds) so ephemeral and flimsy. From another point of view it can be enormously powerful. Countries have been moved by a speech to go to war or to end a war; a spoken word can cement or rupture a relationship. The Bible claims that the spoken word can become the bearer of the Word of God; a flimsy, ephemeral and
at times dangerous human skill can be an enduring and powerful sign of God and God's will on earth.

We may think that the written word is what is clear, what lasts, and what matters when it comes to the Bible. But it is worth reflecting that there is no original manuscript of the Bible. All we have are different manuscripts and manuscript traditions and no one can prove that this or that one accurately records what was originally said or written. As well as this, we can never come up with the definitive translation of the Bible or the definitive interpretation of many texts. The written version starts to look as elusive and ephemeral as the spoken—but just as able to be the bearer of the Word of God. There is a constant dialogue and exchange between the written word and the spoken word as we listen to it, read it, and then try to preach or say what it means. This dialogue is reflected in both the Jewish and Catholic traditions that maintain there is an oral torah or tradition that accompanies the written text through history. A point in favour of this notion is that no one can record everything that a person, let alone a society, says over a period of time.

A third conclusion is that the proclamation of the Word of God is not confined to the spoken or written word (the sounds we utter and the marks on the page). As the Gospel of John says, 'the Word became flesh.' The divine Logos is fully incarnated in the life of a human being; hence all the ways in which a human being communicates or expresses himself/herself: speaking, acting, feeling become a revelation that Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. Both the reading from Corinthians and the Gospel of John draw attention to the gift of the Holy Spirit that each believer receives (each one who truly confesses 'Jesus is Lord'). Hence we too proclaim the Word of God not only in what we speak but in all the ways we communicate. There is no conflict or separation here between expressing the Word of God and our own identity. When we are gifted with the Holy Spirit, in communicating the Word of God in our life, we communicate or express our true selves.

The reality of our modern Church is that we are celebrating liturgy and proclaiming our faith in an ever more multi-lingual and multi-cultural context. I do not think there is anything to be gained by trying to have one universal language for the Church. For me, the demise of a language is as sad an affair and as grave a loss as that of an animal species (which we are exterminating at a great rate). Acts celebrates the rich diversity of languages as one of the marks of human nature and grace builds on nature, it doesn't obliterate it. I think we need to ask the Spirit to help us see the
diversity of languages in the modern Church not as a barrier that has to be overcome but as something to rejoice in; that the Word of God is being celebrated and proclaimed in another’s language that I may know nothing about (and I should not want to take control by expecting the person to speak my language or some other language). The gift of the Spirit and the bond of our faith are more important than the ‘apparent’ barrier of language. The work of translation should enhance this sense of the presence of the one Spirit and the sharing of one faith in a variety of ways.
The claim of our first reading from Deuteronomy is that a decisive moment in the revelation of God and God’s purpose vis-à-vis humanity occurred at Horeb, the name in deuteronomic literature for the mount of revelation. Until Israel experienced the revelation at Horeb, there had never been ‘a word so majestic, from one end of heaven to the other’. This decisive moment was therefore not just for Israel but also for the whole of humanity (afflicted by a distorted perception of reality that is a key theme of the garden story). There are three elements in this moment of revelation and divine presence.\(^1\) The three elements are the word that is spoken, the fire of the divine presence on the mountain (cf Exodus 19) and the hidden heart of the fire. One has a sense of the word erupting like a flame from the divine presence, a word that illuminates the purpose of God’s decisive action on Israel’s behalf—the deliverance from slavery in Egypt. This divine word tells Israel that God calls them into a covenant relationship and gives them the ‘laws and commandments’ as the appropriate response to this divine initiative. The word of God goes out to Israel so that Israel may be drawn to God.

If we look at this text from an explicitly Christian point of view, as the Patristic period was expert in doing, then there is more to the passage from Deuteronomy than initially meets the eye. The Word of God that issues from the heart of the fire becomes a person who emerges from the divinity in human form without losing anything of his divinity. Jesus is the one who not only delivers Israel from slavery but all human beings from whatever slavery in which they find themselves. It is a measure of the hon-

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\(^1\) In contemporary biblical study Deuteronomy is commonly seen as a reform manifesto from the late monarchical period in Judah—late seventh century BCE—that is attributed to the founding figure Moses to enhance its authority.
esty of the Old Testament that its Israelite authors came to acknowledge that a far more dangerous enemy than the Egyptians was the one within themselves. Their disobedience and indulgence was far more destructive than anything the Egyptians—according to the story—inflicted on them. Jesus, by his death and resurrection, is able to free us from what distances us from God and draw us to God.

If we now look at the reference to fire in Deuteronomy, we can see, as Luke does in his account of Pentecost, an allusion to the flame that signified the presence of the Holy Spirit. This is the power of God that empowers Jesus and empowers the disciples, transforming them from fearful, flawed men into bold preachers of the Gospel. It is a power that illumines their minds to grasp the meaning and import of the Gospel message. The power of the Spirit, what Paul in Romans calls being ‘moved by the Spirit’ brings about what Jesus, the Word of God, proclaims—that we are no longer aliens, at a distance from God, but God’s children destined to share in the kingdom as heirs. The spatial metaphors of the word ‘going out’ from God and the flame of the Spirit coming ‘down’ on the disciples at Pentecost achieve their full meaning in our intimacy with God, of being part of God’s family. Hearing the word and seeing the fire in this way enable us to gaze into the fire and ‘see’ the Father as the heart of the fire. We are not blinded by this sight: instead our sight is transformed and we are able to see ourselves and our world in true perspective. The word and the fire issue from this divine ‘source’ in order that we may be brought to share the divine life. They are never separated from it otherwise they would not remain divine.

The Gospel passage indirectly refers to that other great symbol of the divinity in the Jewish-Christian tradition—water, the water of baptism. What we normally regard as two diametrically opposed elements in creation, each in its own way life-giving or death dealing, become one as it were in the service of God’s saving purpose. So it is or should be with human beings.

In the reading from Matthew, Jesus commands the disciples to create a new community out of the squabbling, competing, nations. Some might say the Church has tried and failed, ending up more divided than when it began. It is a fascinating phenomenon that all the Semitic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are beset by unresolved schisms and divisions. Others might point out that the nations too have tried and failed—cf. the United Nations and other attempts beforehand. One can become disheartened but, as we celebrate the great feast of diversity in unity one
more time, perhaps we should recall that Jesus commands the disciples to baptise people ‘in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit’. This is not a community in the image of any community or nation or church on earth but in the image of the Trinity. In our divided Church and world, do we need to regain some perspective on this?
There are some advantages about modern city life but there are also some disadvantages: there is always a price to pay for what we call progress. A good example is blood. While we now have the convenience and hygiene of supermarket shopping I notice that one rarely finds the word ‘butcher’ used or displayed in the meat sections of supermarkets. We are so divorced from what happens when an animal is slaughtered that the thought of all that vital blood pouring out or being drained away from a dying animal, slaughtered for our sake, rarely enters our mind. Mass production of food has separated the end product (the package of meat) from the process. For the ancients however, handling flesh or thinking about it involved blood, and vice versa.

The book of Leviticus says in a number of places ‘life is in the blood’. In one sense this is pretty obvious: without blood you’re dead. For Israelites, the life of all flesh comes from God and is a power that resides in blood in some mysterious way. Life is sacred; a fortiori blood is sacred and must be used appropriately. There are two ancient Israelite uses of blood that are pertinent for our feast. One is that of expiation or purification. Because that life-bearing agent, blood, has divine power, it could cleanse what was dirty, stained or sinful. We carefully clean up blood ‘stains’ and disinfect the place; in contrast, Israelites sprinkled it around sacred places as a kind of disinfectant. For them it had life giving power and restored anything that had been tainted or corrupted to full life. The second is that blood was also a sign of relationship (so the term, consanguinity). Blood sprinkled on the altar of the temple (a symbol of the divinity) and on the priests or participants, signaled that they were accepted as God’s kin. This is the realm of covenant theology as expressed in the reading from Exodus.

What gave legitimacy to the slaughter of animals for sacrificial purposes and the use of their blood? The simple answer is the divinity, as presented in the biblical text. There are passages like Genesis 9:1–5 in which
God sanctions the killing and eating of animals after the flood, as long as blood is properly disposed of. Then Leviticus and other Torah texts have God sanction the various sacrifices and the role of blood (and fat/suet) in them. It is the classic argument from authority and was probably a way of resolving difficult and debated issues. Thus, it ruled out using human blood for atoning purposes, a powerful temptation because human blood could be seen as the most effective kind. What is interesting about the whole edifice of sacrifice and liturgy in the Torah is that it has a certain interim quality: it is a way of relating to God in the flawed post-flood situation that God sets out to heal. It takes place in a temporary tent sanctuary associated with a journey to the promised land, where God's purpose for all creation will unfold in a definitive manner. A number of the great rabbinic commentators were of the opinion that the sacrificial system would cease in the messianic age, having fulfilled its purpose.

Why does the letter to the Hebrews expend so much effort on relating the life and death of Jesus to this system? One key reason is that for early Christianity, the Old Testament was the 'Sacred Scripture'. There was as yet no New Testament. If the new Christian faith in the great Roman marketplace of religions wanted to sell its wares it had to explain itself in relation to the established religions. The Letter to the Hebrews does this job by showing how Jesus' death and resurrection can be 'explained' in terms of the Old Testament sacrificial system but also how it fulfils its purpose. Thus, Jesus is both priest and unblemished sacrificial victim; as priest he pours out his own life/blood in sacrifice, not to purify himself but others. He is already in perfect communion with God. He is not sacrificed by other human beings; he does it himself of his own free will. His life-giving power (symbolised in the blood) is such that it is able to cleanse all tainted and corrupted human life. Because it is a perfect sacrifice and the life or blood of Jesus is divine and not an imperfect participation in divine life as is the case with an animal (or human), it does not have to be repeated. Instead, it is able to give life to all those who accept it and to empower them to transform their lives in the image of Jesus, the model.

In relation to the reading from Exodus, the sacrificial blood of Jesus brings about a communion between himself and ourselves. We share his divine life as his 'kin', as his brothers and sisters. This communion, effected through the perfect sacrifice, is enshrined in the Eucharistic meal. Even though we commence a Eucharist at a certain time, it is important to realise that, from a faith point of view, it is Jesus who invites us into his presence (notice in the Gospel reading how he, not the disciples, makes
all the arrangements for the last supper, from finding the room, to the arrangement of the room, to the meal). He is present to us in the bread and wine in a more real way than his physical presence to the disciples at the supper. It is a sacramental, not a physical presence, it is not restricted to time and space but is able to ‘enter’ any time and space. This is intimated in the way Mark describes Jesus, physically present with his disciples at the supper, handing around bread and wine to them with the words, ‘this is my body’ and ‘this is my blood’.
Second Sunday of the Year
1 Samuel 3:3–10, 19; 1 Corinthians 6:13–15, 17–20; John 1:35–42

The texts for today begin and end with the theme of vocation: the vocation or call of Samuel to be a prophet in the first reading, the call of Jesus’ disciples in the Gospel reading. The notion of vocation has been part of Christianity for so long, particularly in relation to the priesthood and religious life, we can overlook that it now has a rival in the notion of career. These two notions no doubt share quite a bit of common ground but they are also, I believe, quite distinct. It is inevitable that they will interact and influence one another in our modern world where so many ideas get tossed around and intermingle. Taking our cue from the readings, I will try and identify some of the distinctive features of vocation.

The first one is that in vocation theology, the initiative lies with God. We are chosen, as is illustrated in the case of Samuel in the first reading and Peter in the Gospel. In contrast, the emphasis in the modern notion of career is on personal choice. True, we get to choose whether we will heed God’s call or not; that is an essential part of the theology of vocation. But if we don’t see ourselves responding in some essential way to the call of God—whether it comes via an encounter with the Bible, a personal experience, another person, the Church—we have lost sight of an essential component of vocation.

A second important feature of vocation is that it involves stepping out into the unknown, trusting God and neighbour. A career path however is one that I map out in advance as far as possible. The aim is to be in control of events, to define the parameters with a view to achieving a certain goal. Again there is some commonality. We believe our vocation is the surest path to holiness and happiness but we accept that the path by which God leads us may not be the one that we would choose.

A third feature of vocation is that there is no point compiling a CV that will influence God’s choice and the path of one’s vocation. However
a well-prepared and up-to-date CV that will hopefully sway a panel of interviewers for a job is an essential item in one's career arsenal. If a modern business had inspected the disciples' CV's at the end of Jesus' ministry, it would almost certainly have not employed them, let alone given them key positions in the business. But that's just what Jesus did after the resurrection.

A fourth feature of vocation is that it is not about rivalry and competition, for a number of reasons. One arises from consideration of the individual. People compete for the same job but a Christian vocation is unique, never to be repeated on the face of the earth because each individual is unique. There is no point anyone else trying to be you. Another arises from consideration of the other. When one recognises that God has called another to a task—even the one that I have spent most of my 'career' engaged in—one is willing, even glad, to step aside and let God's work be done. So, Eli comes to recognise that God is calling Samuel and accepts that henceforth, God will speak through him. Similarly, John the Baptist sees Jesus passing by and proclaims that he is 'the lamb of God'. He makes no attempt to hang on to his disciples, they are free to follow Jesus. In contrast, the notion of career often fuels competition and rivalry. Someone has to win, territory won has to be defended and the other or others have to lose. With the notion of vocation there are no losers. It is an integral part of one's vocation, one's call, to recognise the call in another person and to rejoice in this. A third reason follows from this. To recognise another's vocation is to 'see' the glory of God in another person; as such one could say that this moment of 'recognition' is the high point or at least one of the high points of a vocation. Not only does one 'see' the other person as a temple of the Holy Spirit but one is also able to establish a Christian (and therefore fully human) relationship with this other person, as another son or daughter of God, as another brother or sister of Jesus and not as a rival whom I have to dominate or eliminate from the competition.

The reading from Paul highlights the importance of a relationship in which both parties are free members of the 'Body of Christ' by pointing to its opposite, the fake relationship that is fornication. Paul sees it as an abuse of the notion of relationship on two counts. On the one hand it is an abuse of the other person who is not there for his or her sake but for one's own gratification; on the other hand it is an abuse of oneself, in Paul's terms 'your own body'. If one's body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, fornication turns it into a brothel. It is the opposite of vocation: an attempt to take control of life on one's own terms. Those who think that it will advance their career find that, more often than not, it wrecks their career.
This Sunday the lectionary adds an important element to the notion of vocation that we explored in the readings for the previous Sunday—we are called by God to become partners in building a new world. But, in order to become God’s building partners it is essential that we let go of the world that we have been endeavouring to build ourselves. It is a flawed world that will not build up ourselves or others.

We can see this in that wonderful, fictional tale that is the book of Jonah. It is at once a provocative and profound meditation on the prophetic vocation and, on the larger plane, the vocation of Israel as God’s chosen people. In a reversal of the expected plot, the citizens of the capital of the hated Assyrian empire, Nineveh, are cast as the good guys. How often had the prophets warned and threatened Israel about the consequences of its sin, only to be ridiculed and rejected in favour of the status quo. In contrast, the Ninevites are warned once and they repent, clothing themselves in sackcloth down to the last cat and dog, all howling to God for forgiveness. Despite their repentance of all the evils they have done and despite God’s forgiveness, Jonah can’t change. In his view of the world, the enemies of Israel deserve only punishment for all that they have done. Such is his anger at the Ninevites and at God he would rather die than change his mind.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus promises the fishermen that they will become fishers of men, something completely new. It is a promise, but like all promises in the Bible the person is free to accept or reject it. Acceptance means the formation of a new relationship, with Jesus and with one’s neighbour. Its hallmarks are set down in the general proclamation with which Jesus begins his public ministry. This proclamation is strategically placed in Mark’s Gospel because it comes immediately before the call of the disciples. The implication is that their call is an integral part of the call or vocation of every human being. The essence of discipleship is the
same for all. It involves repentance, letting go of the world that one has or is building; a project that is inevitably flawed and sinful to a degree. It involves faith in the Good News; accepting that following Jesus and living by his ‘law’ will make one worthy of the kingdom of God. But while the essence of discipleship is the same for all, the way in which it unfolds for each person is unique, in two ways at least. One is that the world we are called to leave is unique to each one of us; it is the idea of the world that we believe gives or has so far given meaning to our lives. The other relates to how much of this world we need to shed in response to Jesus’ call: are we prepared to give it all up, even our whole earthly life? This is something about which each one of us has to make a decision; no one else can make it for us. Leaving our old world behind is not something that we do and then become disciples. It is an integral part of our discipleship, it is something that we can only do authentically when we are empowered by God to do so. The kingdom of God is indeed near at hand, seeking entry into our hearts to transform us.

Even though Paul’s advice in First Corinthians is made in the context of his expectation of an imminent Parousia, it does enable us reflect on an important pastoral issue associated with the notion of vocation. The vocation to be a Christian is, after all, an integral part of the ‘end time’ ushered in by Jesus. It often happens that we make a commitment to become disciples of Jesus but, as he himself warns in the parable of the sower, the passage of time and the cares and concerns or the delights of this world can erode our commitment. Paul does not want to belittle marriage, or sorrow at a loved one’s death, or enjoyment of the good things of the earth. But he does want to emphasise that these things cannot be compared to the realities of the new world that Jesus has prepared and is unfolding even now in our lives. It is not only ‘that the world as we know it is passing away’; it is also, and much more importantly so, that it is being transformed into a new world in which all these ‘passing’ things will achieve their true meaning and fulfilment.

Another way of expressing the same ideas as above is to say that vocation is a challenge to three kinds of ‘world’ that we can create and live in. It can be a self-centred world like Jonah’s that he refuses to step out of; it can be a world that we think is unchangeable but which Jesus invites the disciples to transform; it can be a world that we think is permanent but which Paul reminds us is transitory.
One might say the message for today is that, particularly in matters of faith, there is no neutral ground. To put it another way, one cannot be simply a spectator: engagement and decision making is required.

A favoured theory of recent scholarship is that the book of Deuteronomy was composed as a reform document in the wake of the collapse of the northern kingdom around 721 BCE; only the much smaller state of Judah, the southern kingdom of the Davidic dynasty, remained. To give the book authority, it is composed as an address by the great figure of Israelite antiquity, Moses. To give it urgency, it is set on the edge of the land and much of Moses’ address is about how the land can be won or lost. To assure the people that God is loyal, the writer promises a prophet like Moses who will guide them as the great leader once did. This is in continuity with what the people requested when the covenant was sealed at Horeb (Deuteronomy’s term for Sinai). The people are urged to listen to this prophet but their role is not merely a passive one, as our deuteronomic author well knows. He has to allow for the likelihood that a fake will claim to be the prophet like Moses. Someone who speaks in the name of another god can be easily identified as spurious, but what about a person claiming to speak in the name of Israel’s God? How does one sift the true from the false? Ultimately, it is the people, or someone among the people, who will have to make the decision. One should of course trust that God will guide a faithful people in their decision; in fact, one could say that part of God’s gift of a prophet like Moses is to give the people themselves a prophetic role in making the decision. They asked for a prophet, they are promised a prophet; they will need prophetic discernment themselves.

Paul is driven by a somewhat different urgency to the purported author of Deuteronomy. Because he believes that ‘our time is growing short’ (see last Sunday’s reading) Paul seeks to set out for his audience what he judges to be the best option. He has no command from the Lord about
this; it is his own considered opinion. As such it is designed to encourage people to think and then make a decision. Faced with what Paul believes to be the crucial ‘end times’, one cannot be a disciple of Jesus and remain a spectator. In other words, a disciple cannot make a decision about the fundamental orientation of his or her life without making the commitment to Jesus its centerpiece. Each has to decide how they can best live this central commitment. According to Paul, the celibate option is the better one for the reasons he outlines. But, two factors could lead one to disagree with Paul here, and within the larger context of his discourse, Paul recognises that these need to be taken into account. One is that the time may not be so short; the other is the vocation to which I honestly believe God has called me—it may be the married state (cf verse 37).

In our Gospel reading, the disciples and the people in the synagogue hear Jesus’ first teaching and witness his first miracle—an exorcism. We are not told what he taught in this synagogue setting, although the larger context suggests that it was the message with which he began his Galilean ministry: ‘The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the Good News’. If this is the case then it is a call to conversion, to make a decision. To decline the call to repentance is, in the Gospel of Mark, to reject the call. One is either for or against Jesus, there is no neutral territory—a claim that goes against the grain of some modern thinking that prides itself on being ‘neutral’ and ‘non-invasive’. But is this really being neutral or a clever advertising ploy to make the product attractive and sell better? Whatever the case, the uncompromising, challenging stance of the Gospel is underscored by the exorcism. This unclean spirit that is driven out shrieking before the synagogue crowd (perhaps symbolising something about the crowd), asks the leading question: ‘what do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth?’ Jesus gives the one uncompromising answer that every would-be disciple needs to hear, the command, ‘come out of him’. There can be no in-between, no accommodation with evil. It has to be expelled from a human life or it inevitably takes over, enslaves and destroys it. By way of contrast, it is worth noting that Jesus during his earthly ministry never destroys demons; rather, he orders them to clear off so that the possessed can be free. Jesus is a deliverer not a destroyer.
This Sunday and last Sunday’s Gospel covers what we might call the first day of Jesus’ public ministry, accompanied by his initial band of disciples. Significantly, it is a Sabbath, the Lord’s day. Jesus enters the Capernaum synagogue, preaches and heals a man possessed. Immediately after, he heals Simon’s mother-in-law and then spends the evening at the door of the house, healing many who are sick and possessed. Early the following morning, the disciples find Jesus in a deserted place at prayer and he leads them off to the surrounding towns. What strikes one is how local Jesus’ mission is and how engaged he is in the particular moment and with each person. If this is the saviour of the world, the transcendent God in human form, why didn’t he cure everyone with one sweeping gesture and power-filled word? So much more efficient and ‘divine’. Instead, Mark’s Gospel gives the impression that Jesus focused completely on each one in need. This personal attention takes time and he had to move from this one to that one, from this town or place to the next one. If the Son of God became incarnate in our modern world with its massive programmes and global perspectives, would he act differently? I tend to think not because the picture that the Gospels paint says something vital about the mystery of the incarnation and the ways of the transcendent, all-powerful God as we believe they are manifested in the incarnation.

God became incarnate in Jesus Christ so that all humanity might be saved and become ‘one in Christ’. And so Jesus will sit and teach ‘the people’ or ‘the crowd’ at length; he will look with compassion on the crowd as sheep without a shepherd, he will even feed a hungry crowd of followers. But the presence of a crowd never causes Jesus to lose sight of the individual, each individual in the crowd. The reason for this is because the crowd can only truly become the ‘people of God’ when each potential member of this new community is healed and made whole. Hence an integral part of the incarnation is that the Word made flesh enters fully into the life...
of each and every individual and that means the time and place of each person—perhaps better the times and places because our lives on earth are lived in a variety of times and places with all the particulars that these involve. The grace of incarnation enables us to be free of our sinful world, of the false ‘world’ that we construct. The grace of incarnation enables us to become partners in transforming this false world into the real world in which the glory of God can be recognised and celebrated. In order to do this we must, as Paul insists, keep our eyes fixed on heaven, that is, on our heavenly Lord who guides us. But, by doing so, almost paradoxically, we become more incarnate in our world, more committed to God’s work in it, more involved in it.

This is the message that comes through strongly in the reading from Paul. In almost paradoxical terms, Paul speaks of being freed from his previous life so that he might become the slave of Christ. But this is an extraordinary slavery because Paul has been entrusted with the kind of responsibility that no slave owner would entrust to a slave—the preaching of the Good News with its rewards and blessings. Jesus the master entrusts his slave Paul with the very same mission that he himself undertook and trusts him completely. But, in becoming more like the master Paul thereby becomes more the slave. This is so because as Jesus was able to enter fully into the life of every individual—to become the slave of every individual—so Paul is enabled to become the slave of everyone. To be a Jew to Jews, a Gentile to Gentiles, a weak man to the weak, and so on. And this all takes place so that the transcendent power of God may be manifest, can we say may be incarnate, in the life of each person.

It is as if every detail—time and place and person—of Paul’s life is full of meaning and purpose. One can see the opposite in the reading from the book of Job. Even though the theologian(s) who wrote this book were wrestling with the dilemma of innocent suffering, our particular passage resonates strongly in any context where earthly life, in time and place, becomes meaningless. Life is seen as ‘pressed service’, a form of slavery with no relief (the slave, sighing for some shade but there is none). Time is meaningless, graphically captured in the sense of a massive contradiction: days and nights drag on agonisingly slowly (how slowly evening comes) but all this does is make one realise how short life is (but a breath). Surely a key purpose of the incarnation is to enable us to become incarnate ourselves, to enter into the detail of our lives (both joyful and painful) because they are integral elements in our transformation into sons and daughters of God. This does not mean of course that we have to measure
or count each detail; that would be a return to our old slavery. Nor does it mean that someone who lives a longer life of discipleship is thereby more incarnate or better. The transformation of a life can take a moment or it may take many years—God knows. As 2 Peter 3:8 says ‘with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like one day’.
Today Mark’s Gospel provides one of those enigmatic passages that can be read in more than one way and creates endless fascination and debate. The first part of the passage that tells how Jesus heals the leper is clear enough. The reading from Leviticus gives us an idea of what leprosy was like and how it was ‘treated’. The term seems to have covered a variety of skin complaints that were thought to be highly contagious. The rules of conduct for a leper were not in principle a sign of heartlessness or cruelty. In a world with few medicines and no hospitals, quarantine was often the only viable option to try and protect society. It was hoped that a leper would one day be pronounced cured by the priests (who also acted as doctors) and welcomed back into society. No doubt family, friends and priests offered prayers for such an outcome. No doubt too the fear of leprosy and the potential to see it as the result of sin meant that lepers were often reviled as much as pitied. We often seek to blame someone else for what is wrong in society.

A striking feature of the healing story is that the leper crosses the established barrier by approaching Jesus, and Jesus responds by going even further and touching the leper. Not only is a healing performed but a social barrier is crossed, thereby challenging our own attitudes to established boundaries and barriers.

But then comes the puzzling or enigmatic part of the reading. Jesus orders the man to tell no one but to go and show himself to the priest who will presumably pronounce him clean and welcome him back into society. According to the text ‘he’ goes off and immediately begins proclaiming ‘the word’. There are several ways one can read the Greek text. If ‘he’ is the former leper, then he disobeys Jesus’ command and becomes a preacher of the Gospel news, what the text calls ‘the word’ (cf the same term in 2:2). But ‘the word’ may simply refer to ‘his story’, the account of his healing. Whatever the case, the impact of the leper turned preacher or storyteller
means that Jesus can no longer go into the towns. If however one reads ‘he’ as a reference to Jesus, then the miracle story ends abruptly with Jesus’ dismissal of the healed leper. Jesus goes off to continue preaching ‘the word’ but is obliged to remain outside the towns (presumably because of reports about his miracles).

Take your pick, but I personally prefer the reading where ‘he’ refers to the leper. The fascinating thing about this reading is that it effectively reverses the positions of the leper and Jesus. One could even say that Jesus becomes ‘the leper’. Before his cure, the leper could not enter towns, could not mix with people and tell his story, had to stay out in the country on his own or with other lepers—he was powerless. Now he is cured and back in town, the talk of the town. In contrast, Jesus is the one who is pushed to the fringes of society. He can’t go into towns, can’t preach and has to stay out in the country. The barriers are now erected around Jesus—in a way he is rendered powerless. And why are ‘those people from all around’ going out to Jesus from the towns? On one reading, they could be seeking him out for the best of motives—to be taught, to be reconciled to God. On another reading, they could simply be curious to see the wonder worker, perhaps hoping too to see another manifestation of his magic powers. It is worth noting that Matthew’s version (8:1–4) of this miracle has no report of the leper turned preacher while Luke (5:12–16) simply says that the ‘word about Jesus spread abroad’ as a result of the miracle. Were both of them a little puzzled by Mark’s account?

If we accept the above reading of the text, it implies that while Jesus solved the leper’s problem by healing him, the miracle created more problems than it solved for Jesus. This is the case whether the former leper was preaching ‘the word’ or, what is more likely, telling the story of his cure and celebrating the wonder worker. Is the version of Mark outlined here meant to tell us something about divine power and how God works? Divine power heals people and empowers them; they are able to act (once again) as human beings, to take the initiative. The former leper goes off to tell his story but it has an adverse impact on Jesus and his mission. Nevertheless, Jesus does not rush in and take charge, to correct the former leper for being disobedient; to do so could damage a still vulnerable person, causing him once again to be an outcast among his people. Instead Jesus accepts vulnerability and powerlessness, accepts that he has to retreat to the fringes and wait for the right time to re-enter the towns (as he does in the following chapter). If this is a plausible reading of an elusive text then it is telling us something about divine power, about how God acts in our
world. The story thus becomes a torah or instruction for us as disciples. As a result of doing some good deed, we may find ourselves in a difficult and vulnerable position, much to our disadvantage. We will need the gift of patience to wait and discernment to judge the appropriate time to act. We often talk about waiting for God patiently; but God waits for us with infinite patience.
The preceding miracle stories in the Gospel of Mark show that Jesus has compassion on those who are afflicted by disease and demonic possession and acts to relieve them of their suffering. But today’s Gospel adds another important reason for the miracles—it is ‘to prove to you that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’. The diseased and the possessed become a locus of a crucial divine revelation, a sign to the world that Jesus has come to heal us of something far more destructive than any disease or even demonic possession, and that is our sins.

Mark, in his typically cryptic way, does not tell us why Jesus greeted this particular person with the words, ‘your sins are forgiven’. We are all sinners, so why single this one out? A clue may be that Jesus saw their faith (including that of the paralytic). However, one suspects that it is meant as a lead-in to the exchange with the scribes. As Mark notes, Jesus knows their thoughts. From the way Mark tells this story, we can reasonably presume that he wants us to see the scribes as honest brokers, initially at least. In their theology there is a strict separation between working miracles and forgiving sin. A human being, empowered by God, may do the former but the latter is the preserve of God alone (Who can forgive sins but God?). Jesus does not censure them for thinking in this way; instead he challenges them to revise their thinking in relation to him. This particular miracle worker is unique, the ‘Son of Man’, the one who has power on earth to forgive sins, a power that is then demonstrated in his healing of the paralytic.

But there is another factor in the encounter between Jesus and the scribes that ‘demonstrates’ equally powerfully that the Son of Man has power to forgive sins and this is the ‘revelation’ that Jesus knows what they are thinking. Anyone who can demonstrate that he has this kind of insight is a powerful figure indeed and one before whom we can feel pow-
erless and trapped. We take a lot of care concealing our sinful thoughts from one another but the disturbing thing about this kind of person is that we cannot hide our thoughts, let alone our actions. Jesus knows this human frailty only too well and I think it is chiefly for this reason that, after proclaiming he has power to forgive sins, he immediately heals the paralytic and lets him go his way. Jesus knows the sins of the paralytic and his friends, he knows the sins of the scribes but, as ‘demonstrated’ in his healing touch, his purpose is not to use his power to take advantage of people but to be to their advantage. He frees us from the things that trouble us most, the things that we hide most deeply.

In sum, this story aims to assure us that the God of all things who knows all things desires only our liberation from the slavery of sin that, like a disease, cripples and enslaves us. Paul knows this from personal experience. He sees himself as the perfect sinner who was rescued by the all-merciful God. Like Jesus, he wants to assure his audience of God’s good intentions; with God it is always yes to those who seek him, always a new beginning no matter how bad the past.

Our reading from the so-called ‘Second’ or ‘Deutero-Isaiah’ adds its own important ingredient to this theology of sin and forgiveness. This prophet of the exile announces that God is about to do a mighty deed of salvation that will dwarf even the great deeds of the past. But why is God about to do such a deed? It is because, the prophet proclaims, ‘you have burdened me with your sins, you have wearied me with your iniquities’. An essential part of God’s salvation is that God ‘blots out your transgressions’. Forgiveness is not just a hand out from the divine welfare agency. It is the healing of a relationship between ourselves and God and there are two important components in this healing process. One is that we are informed about what is wrong with the relationship and acknowledge it. How could there be a mature, flourishing relationship with God and neighbour if the truth about it is withheld from us—but God could never deceive us—or if we refuse to acknowledge it? The second is the recognition that we cannot administer the healing medicine ourselves, it is a grace that comes from God alone and which God is only too ready to give.
Marriage is the key image or metaphor for this Sunday’s readings. In what looks to have been a bold innovation in Israelite theology, the eighth century prophet Hosea invaded the turf of the Canaanite fertility god Baal and stole his theology. The prophet preaches that YHWH not Baal is Israel’s husband and the wedding ceremony and honeymoon had taken place way back in the wilderness. But Israel had forgotten her husband and become a faithless, adulterous wife. She should be divorced. But the prophet, reflecting its seems on his own disastrous marriage, came to the inspired conviction that God would not divorce the bride. Instead God would take her on another honeymoon in the wilderness to heal their relationship (the definitive marriage counselling session). A powerful text that expresses God’s commitment is the command in 3:1 ‘Go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress, just as the Lord loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods’. Hosea’s theology entered Israel’s tradition and added an important dimension to Israel’s eschatological hopes. When would the wonderful renewal of this marriage bond take place? The Pharisaic movement shared Israel’s hope of a messiah and John the Baptist had urged his followers to repent because this messiah and the advent of his kingdom was near at hand.

Enter Jesus who claims to be the long awaited bridegroom, come to woo back his bride. But, as we well know, while weddings are wonderful occasions the lead up to them can be a fraught time for the parties involved. Is this the right time for the wedding? The disciples of the Pharisees and John have been engaged in preparing themselves by fasting and this is a good thing. Jesus has no problem with it. The principle behind their fasting is that it is transitory, a preparation. But who decides when the time of preparation is over? When you devote so much time and effort into doing a transitory thing as well as possible (even one’s life on earth) the danger is that you can be trapped into thinking it is permanent, even...
though this contradicts in a sense the very principle on which you base your conduct. Then of course there is the one claiming to be the bridegroom. The family of the bride will no doubt have certain expectations about how the bridegroom should be conducting himself and the protocols to be followed as part of the courtship. This fellow Jesus and his mates don’t seem to respect the rules of engagement. Their conduct is a bit like having a group in the parish celebrate mardi gras in the middle of Lent.

We need to remember as we reflect on these readings that they are employing a metaphor to try and grasp the mystery of our relationship with God. Within the metaphor, Jesus is claiming to inaugurate the renewal of the marriage promised in Hosea. The scribes and Pharisees had no doubt studied the matter and their assessment of the eschatological fulfilment of Israel’s relationship with God did not tally with what Jesus claimed. They saw themselves as the custodians of the tradition and they were not prepared, shall we say, ‘to give away their bride’. Jesus does not impose himself but he sees the direction this conflict will take and it will end up in an attempt to eliminate him as the suitor/husband. He does not impose but he teaches or proclaims the truth, namely that the marriage will be renewed and it will amount to a complete renewal of the relationship between God and the chosen people.

According to the Gospels, the nature of this relationship cannot be adequately described by or fitted into Old Testament categories. This is seeing things the wrong way round, like trying to pour new wine into old wineskins. The right way is to see the old transformed and fulfilled in the new. The old doesn’t lose, rather it gains. This faith claim remains a key sticking point between Jews and Christians.

Within the faith of the Church the marriage renewal did eventually go ahead, despite the objections of Jesus’ contemporaries and others at various times. But, if weddings are a challenge, married life is as much or even more of a challenge, as Paul found out. In the second letter to the Corinthians he has to, as elsewhere, tackle the Judaisers who want marriage to be lived according to the traditional protocols. Nothing should change. But marriage is or should be a new reality for the couple. How many marriages break up because the husband or wife thinks that he or she can live as before, with the spouse as a lovely accessory. If you do not make your spouse the centre of your new life the marriage won’t work. And so Paul labours to drive home this central point about our relationship with Jesus.
The Sabbath is not a pressing issue in the modern west. We have our week-ends, busy though they may be, and our holidays. Most Christians, I sus-pect, do not see going to a Sunday liturgy as 'keeping the Sabbath.' Yet the New Testament focus on it as captured in today's Gospel is important because of what it says or implies about God and our relationship with God. Jesus' statement that 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' is not in Matthew and Luke. This suggests that it plays a key role in Mark's Gospel. Whether it was spoken by Jesus or composed by Mark cannot be proved and, in a sense, is not the key issue. If it comes from Mark this was because, according to our faith, he was inspired by the risen Jesus.

An initially striking thing is that Jesus answers an accusation with a teaching. The Pharisees accuse his disciples—and by implication him also because they are his disciples—of breaching Sabbath law. Jesus replies by teaching them about the Sabbath. He invites them to look beyond or be-hind the law to what the Sabbath is really about. According to the Bible the Sabbath is not established by a law or set of laws or by obedience to laws. It is something created by God, a gift, to manifest an important aspect of God and God’s relationship with human beings. The injunction to keep the Sabbath is designed to protect its primary purpose. One might say that all laws have this aim, they point beyond themselves to relationships on which they depend and which they are designed to protect or enable to flourish. Hence in the passage from Deuteronomy’s version of the Deca-logue, Israel is enjoined to rest from work on the Sabbath because it will remind them that God has liberated them from slavery. According to the Pentateuch’s account of Israel’s slavery in Egypt, there was no time off for rest or celebrations. Pharaoh refuses point blank to let Moses take Israel into the wilderness for a festival.
The other version of the Decalogue in Exodus 20 links observance of the Sabbath to the account of creation in Genesis 1. God rested from the work of creation on the seventh day and made it holy; that is, God set it apart as a special day. One has the impression that the whole account of creation with which the Bible begins is to lead up to the creation of this special day. But as with all the things the Bible identifies as holy, dedicated to manifesting the presence of God to Israel, the Sabbath is there so that Israel may share in some way in the divine life. When it observes the Sabbath it is acting in the image and likeness of God the creator, it is in a right relationship with God and becomes ever more holy, ever more the chosen race, the people set apart. This means that Israel's holy vocation is to participate in God's saving purpose, to restore what is unholy, what is incomplete and defective, to holiness. Hence, to condemn the healing of a crippled man on the Sabbath is to impede God's purpose rather than to advance it. Jesus presses the issue even further, implicitly accusing those objecting to his healing on the Sabbath that they are breaking Sabbath law instead of keeping it. This is not the same thing as 'observing the spirit rather than the letter of the law'. There are diametrically different understandings of the Sabbath and Sabbath law at stake here. Hence the hostile reaction to the healing and the seeds of the plot to destroy Jesus.

The same kind of thinking applies to Jesus' appeal to the case of David and his men. The 'house of God' and its cult was created by God: it all had to be done according to God's instructions otherwise, within the faith of its adherents, it had no legitimacy and no authority. But, as with the Sabbath, God created this holy house for the benefit of Israel and their greatest benefit is that they are able to worship God in a way that they are assured is fitting and proper. David and the priest Abiathar (in 1 Samuel 21 it is his father Ahimelech) had a correct understanding or theology about the bread of presence. Giving it to David and his followers was doing what God does, providing for the welfare of a needy people.

On this reading, God created the Sabbath so that Israel could be holy as God is holy. Whenever Israel is made unholy or incomplete (by sin or slavery) or whenever anyone is unholy or incomplete (by sin or by disease) then the Sabbath is a time for making them whole again.\(^1\) The Sabbath

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1. The Old Testament understanding of sin/fault embraced clean and unclean as well as what we identify as moral issues. A person who accidentally became unclean had still sinned or crossed a boundary; hence the provision of a ritual that would enable him or her to return to 'wholeness/cleanness' as soon as possible.
laws are meant to enable people to enjoy the holiness of this holy day. When humanity lives the Sabbath this way, God who made it is glorified.

At this point one might invoke the reading from Second Corinthians. We are only earthenware jars that crack and crumble easily but we have nevertheless been chosen to be the containers of an extraordinary treasure, the radiant light of God’s glory in Christ. For Paul the amazing thing is that in our struggle to show forth the glory of Christ in our feeble humanity, we discover that Christ is there completely for us. It is indeed true that God does all things for the glory of God and it is to God’s glory above all else that we rejoice in God’s complete commitment to us. Can the Sabbath perhaps help us recapture an appreciation of creation as gift?
As they say, it’s all about perception and it can be difficult for us human beings to get the right angle on things. In a sense we can never see it all because we are inside our own heads and inside creation. The only person who can offer us the overall true perspective on ourselves and our world is God because, according to faith, God is not part of creation. The Bible’s claim is that it provides something of this divine perspective, as the Vatican II document on Revelation says, that which is ‘for the sake of our salvation’. But God doesn’t impose; we are free to make our decision for or against this perspective. The Bible offers plenty of stories about people who decide for or against, seemingly encouraging us to make decisions too and providing crucial guidelines in the hope that we will make the right decision.

In a way it is not surprising that the Bible effectively begins with the story of Adam and Eve who through temptation develop a distorted perception of God and reality and so make the wrong decisions. As a foundational story in the Bible it teaches that the foundational mistake we make is to try and play the role of creator rather than creature. According to the Bible this will inevitably create chaos. When you are using the literary form of story with characters and plot, you have to portray the just side of God intervening to bring evil doers to book in some way, and you have to portray the merciful side of God ensuring that order is somehow restored so that life goes on (salvation). Otherwise you’ve ruined your story and your theology as well. You don’t have to do this in a homily or an essay. Each literary form provides creative opportunities and imposes limitations. So our story has God pronounce a curse on the serpent (who was not subject to the command) and punishment for the couple (that is, us) until such time in the Bible story when God judges it is appropriate to ‘lift’ this sentence.
The Gospels announce the good news that our liberation from this sentence is imminent. Such is the importance of this announcement that God does it personally in the person of Jesus and not through any messenger. It’s like having the president of the US personally come and escort you to freedom. But surprise, surprise—or perhaps it is not such a surprise—Jesus’ mission to announce the Good News shows that the distorted perception of reality is very much alive. As Mark tells it, it affects all those around Jesus in various ways: we are all in need of healing. It even seems to affect his family who think he is mad. At a deeper level it affects the scribes who say that the devil is in him. This is the fascinating thing about our distorted perception of reality. One group seeing what Jesus does and says proclaims that a great prophet of God has come among them. Another group, the scribes, seeing the same deeds and hearing the same words proclaims that the devil has come among them. How does Jesus react to such distortions? He seeks to correct people’s perception by teaching them. The importance and urgency of his teaching becomes evident as one reads on. If the scribes see only evil in Jesus then they cannot of course seek good (forgiveness) from him. This would be a contradiction. Nor can forgiveness be given to those who deny that the one making the offer can forgive, that is, can do any good. In short, the scribes are in the same situation as Adam and Eve who are convinced by the tempter that God is mean and unjust.

Despite the severity of Jesus’ warning against those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, the reading ends with his offer of membership in his family to all those who are listening to his teaching: his mother, his family, the scribes with whom he is debating and the crowd that had collected. All each one needs to do is make the decision and he or she is most welcome. Jesus does not exclude; people exclude themselves by the decisions they make. When one becomes a member of the family of Jesus one also gains a new and true perspective on things. The difference is expressed nicely in the reading from Paul: ‘we have no eyes for things that are visible, but only for things that invisible; for visible things last only for a time, and the invisible things are eternal.’ This doesn’t mean that Paul and his Church opt out of the cut and thrust of life. This would be anti-incarnational: Jesus was very much involved in his times. What it does mean is that one can become involved in the things of this life, without becoming trapped by them, because one now has some insight into their true meaning and purpose.
Eleventh Sunday of the Year
_Ezekiel 17:22–24; 2 Corinthians 5:6–10; Mark 4:26–34_

The reading from Ezekiel is the second part of an extended allegory in which eagles represent the superpowers of his day, presumably Babylon and Egypt, and the twigs and seeds that the eagles pluck up and plant represent the minor players such as the kings of Judah whose fate seems to lie in the hands/claws of the mighty ones. But the way human beings think history is unfolding may be deceptive because, according to the Bible, God is the Lord of history and God’s plans can confound those of any emperor or superpower. The second part of the allegory proclaims that the real ‘eagle’, God, has plans for the establishment of a king (a shoot) in Israel that will make the plans of the superpowers look puny and transient. Such will be the tree (the kingdom) that sprouts from this shoot on the high mountain of Israel that all the birds (including the mighty eagles?) will acknowledge it and ‘rest in the shade of its branches’. It is an eschatological vision of peace and well being that only the Lord can bring about. One can see here an Old Testament anticipation of Jesus’ parables about the kingdom of God.

The two parables about the kingdom in Mark’s Gospel are more down to earth than Ezekiel’s soaring eagles. But they make two essential points about the kingdom. The first is the most important. The crop that God sows like a farmer throwing seed on the land will bear a rich harvest and it will all go to the one who sowed it. No one can steal the harvest of the kingdom from God. That is assured. And the assurance applies to all stages of the emergence of the kingdom, the growth of the crop. The parable seems to combine God and God’s workers, the preachers of the Good News, in the figure of the farmer. God of course knows every stage of the growth of the kingdom but we mortals, like farmers of Jesus’ day, cannot see or understand all the workings of God. The key thing is that the kingdom of God is a crop that does not and cannot fail.
If this is the focus of the first parable, the second one about the mustard seed assures us of the impact that the kingdom will have. Rather like Ezekiel’s allegory, the kingdom of God may look paltry by normal standards (the tiny seed) but it is our true home where all can find shelter and welcome (the birds in its branches). Hopefully without forcing things, one could link the two by saying the kingdom that belongs to God is provided for our benefit. In general the Gospels juxtapose Jesus’ parables without combining or summarising their meaning or adjudicating between them. They are food for thought, as Jesus sometimes says after telling a parable, ‘listen, anyone who has ears to hear’. In contemporary idiom, something like ‘think about it folks’.

It can be difficult at times to see connections between the Gospel readings and the second readings because each follows its own sequence. However, I think we can link today’s passage from Second Corinthians by noting how Paul is in a sense caught between two desires. On the one hand he wants to be exiled from the body (this earthly life) and make his home with the Lord. He belongs to God and desires above all to be with God as part of the harvest. On the other hand he realises that, as a member of the kingdom of God, he is there for the benefit of others and this is God’s purpose. Hence he must preach the Good News so that people will find their true home in Christ—and this as long as God wants. So Paul looks towards the fulfilment of his life as a disciple from seed to shoot to plant to harvest and being with the Lord. But he also accepts that part of God’s purpose in calling him to preach the Good News is that he bring as many others as he can to their true home in the kingdom. The overriding principle must be, as Paul says, to be ‘intent on pleasing him’.
I find this Sunday’s Gospel passage one of the most elusive and ambiguous in Mark and for that reason one of the most intriguing. A common interpretation is to see the storm as a manifestation of demonic forces ranged against Jesus. It is argued that Mark may reflect something of the Old Testament notion of creation as order out of chaos, as is evident in the reading from Job. But there is nothing of the demonic in such Old Testament texts. Their heritage was the ancient Near Eastern myths in which unruly elements of creation signaled a struggle between rival gods. Once monotheism triumphed around the Babylonian exile, the images and metaphors in these stories were reshaped to evoke the almighty power of the one God. The forces of creation are completely under God’s rule, which creates a bit of a problem for an interpretation in which a demonic power is able to wield them against God.

But Mark is primarily interested in crafting a dramatic story with rhetorical and theological impact, and demons are important in his Gospel. There are two clues that suggest one may read the scene as an encounter with the demonic. One is the following story in Mark 5 that portrays Jesus exorcising demons. The other is his command to the storm ‘Peace, be still’ which is similar to the command to a demon in 1:25. But there Jesus commands a demon who is afflicting someone whereas here he commands the storm, not any demonic figure responsible for it. Given that the devil cannot affect Jesus directly (is this indicated in the story by his sleeping during the storm?) then perhaps its aim is to do so indirectly, via the disciples’ fear. If so, Jesus trumps the demonic strategy by turning the disciples’ panic to a positive outcome—a manifestation of his divinity and an instruction/exhortation to his disciples.

The focus on the disciples allows us to present another customary interpretation of the passage, a more symbolic one. The boat in the storm symbolises the Church making its way through unruly and at times dan-
gerous history. We, the disciples, can be panicked into thinking that Jesus is ‘asleep’ on the job and that we will be swamped. The point of the story is to assure us that trust in God, of the kind that Jesus displays by calmly sleeping through the storm, will enable us to ride out the worst threats because, in reality, they are not threats to God’s purpose. But, if our trust fails and in fear we cry for help, Jesus will always answer our prayers. He will also always urge us to greater faith.

A third interpretation takes note of the number of times questions are raised about Jesus in this first manifestation of his saving mission. It is as if everything he does or says prompts a question, some of them are about what he does or says, others about why he or his disciples do something. This section of the Gospel, from the call of the disciples in chapter 1 to the crossing of the sea, all takes place in Galilee (home territory). It is framed by two key questions: the first comes immediately after Jesus’ first teaching and exorcism in 1:21–25. The bystanders, among whom we may include the disciples, ask ‘what is this, a new teaching’ (1:27)? The second comes at the end of the storm scene, as the boat crosses the ‘other side’ into new territory. This time the disciples ask ‘Who can this be that even the wind and the sea obey him?’ The first question is about the shock of the new. In a sense it and the questions that arise in the intervening text reach their apogee in this crucial question about the identity of Jesus. It is fitting to locate this question within the context of Jesus’ control over some of the most awesome forces in creation (wind and sea) because Mark is here pointing to Jesus’ divine status. Moreover, up to this point the disciples have been observers of Jesus’ power over death dealing forces. Now, as they see things, it is a matter of their own life and death—they can no longer remain spectators.

A key point in this reading of the story is that although the disciples urgently ask the leading question (at least they have got to this stage), they cannot answer it properly. In the words of Paul from our second reading, despite their sincerity they are judging ‘by the standards of the flesh’. A major theme of Mark’s Gospel is the so-called messianic secret: it is only in the light of Jesus’ death and resurrection and the gift of the Spirit that the disciples will be able to echo Paul’s following words, ‘if we did once know Christ in the flesh, that is not how we know him now’. In order to answer the question who Jesus is, there has to be a new creation, a new way of looking at our world and our reason for being here that takes us beyond the questions and enables us to formulate something of an answer.
Perhaps the various ways of reading this story are part of the point of the story. The inspired genius of our evangelist was to craft a text that does not allow us to settle for any one answer or explanation as the one. Just as there can never be one single answer to the question who is Jesus. Or, to put this another way, the answer to this question is always unfolding.
In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus seems caught in the kind of situation that every priest or parent or teacher dreads. Take the priest: he gets a call from a family to go and anoint a relative who is seriously ill; he sets off in a hurry but is sidetracked on the way by another crisis. It takes up his time and he arrives after the sick person has died. The family has been praying and anxiously waiting the priest’s arrival to comfort the sick and dying person but he is too late. One can imagine similar situations with parents, teachers and many others besides. Like them Jesus responds to an urgent request (by Jairus) but is delayed by a woman with a haemorrhage. As a result he is, in the eyes of the mourners, too late (‘your daughter is dead: why put the Master to any further trouble?’). One can imagine how Jairus might have felt at that moment.

Faith is the issue that links the two scenes and provides a clue to how we might read the Gospel passage. It is strikingly evident in the episode of the sick woman. She has already been healed by touching Jesus’ clothing but, instead of this being the end of it, her physical healing is only the beginning. Because he knows that power has gone out of him, we may presume that Mark is implying that Jesus also knows on whom his healing power has been bestowed. He could easily have identified her in the crowd but he doesn’t. Rather, he waits until she comes forward and confesses; then he tells her that it is her faith that has saved her. It has done so on two counts. The first is her conviction that touching Jesus would bring her healing. The second is her faith that overcomes her fear of being found out. She trusts the Lord. Once she is revealed to the crowd as the one who caused the delay, he holds her up as an example of the power of faith that is available to everyone in the crowd. If all have faith like her all will be saved: they will be delivered from what is burdening them and be free to ‘go in peace’. This is because faith forges a bond with God who never fails.
In sum, Jesus fully integrates into his mission what looks to an outsider like a distraction or a delay.

On being greeted with news of the death of Jairus’s daughter, Jesus exhorts him to have faith. Jairus had shown faith in initially requesting Jesus’ assistance and he could have ended his involvement then and there but he doesn’t. Faith ‘saves’ Jairus from joining the crowd—the bitter, mocking mourners—and he lets Jesus proceed on his terms. The sign of the power of faith is the raising of his daughter (it is difficult to tell whether Jesus’ reference to her being ‘asleep’ is to be taken literally or is his way of referring to death). Thus Jesus is able to turn what looks to outsiders to be a delay and a too-late arrival, into two manifestations of the power of faith. Jesus never arrives ‘too late’ for those who have faith and do not fear.

We of course cannot emulate this deed of Jesus but we are not meant to. We are people of faith in Jesus and this story serves as a kind of Torah or teaching to bolster our faith. Even though, from our perspective, we often seem to arrive ‘too late’ or are unable to satisfactorily resolve a crisis, the story teaches that as long as we do what we do in faith, God looks after the rest.

This awareness of our limitations is evident in another way in the reading from Paul. He begins by reminding his readership of what they have received (the most of everything). As a result they should ‘put the most into this work of mercy too’; their model is Jesus who gave himself away completely in order to make them rich. But the ever practical Paul knows that this injunction cannot be taken literally, at least in the case of poverty. If I give everything away to alleviate my neighbours’ poverty, are they then obliged to return the favour—to give it all back to me or someone else and once again become poverty stricken themselves? We would end up in a vicious circle. No says Paul; we are not God, we are limited human beings and we need to make what are hopefully prudent judgements about such situations. We emulate our model Jesus as honestly as we can in faith and the witness of our faith, we are assured, is a more powerful medium of salvation than the particular things that we give. In fact, these point to the faith in which they are given and will hopefully prompt our recipients to appreciate the centrality and importance of faith in their lives also.
If the preceding Sunday’s readings reveal the faith that sees and hears and leads to salvation, this Sunday’s readings reveal the faith that is blind and deaf and leads to enslavement. A key term or terms in these readings is rebellion and pride. In our modern world, we often celebrate the rebel who bucks the system. If a system, such as a government, becomes bad enough then rebellion and protest can be a good and moral thing to do. But, in the Bible these two terms are generally used in a negative sense and for good reason. They refer primarily to rebellion against God and such rebellion is an evil. English translations render their Hebrew equivalents as sin, apostasy, transgression; all are the offspring of pride, our inordinate desire to take control and have things on our terms. In short, we dethrone God as the ‘author’ (authority) of our lives and mount the throne in God’s place.

So, in our first reading the prophet Ezekiel is commissioned to preach God’s message to an Israel that has become a nation of rebels. He is warned that the people will not heed him, so entrenched are they in their rebellious attitude. Later in the book we learn that the people rebel because they claim that God’s ways—presumably as presented in the Torah and interpreted by prophets and others—are unjust (cf chapter 18). This renders God's authority null and void and legitimates the establishment of an alternative system on their terms. It’s an argument that is still invoked today. What is striking about God’s response is that rebellion is to be countered by a word—the preaching of the truth as the book of Ezekiel claims it. From a purely human perspective, this places Ezekiel in a very vulnerable and powerless position against those who claim authority and therefore power. From a faith perspective however, it is only fidelity to the truth that can overcome falsehood and evil. The faithful prophet is assured that the people will in due course know that a prophet (God’s word) has been in their midst. This assurance indicates that God rejects the rebel’s warped
view of reality but does not reject the rebels themselves: they are God’s chosen people and God will always be loyal to them.

We can see a similar dynamic operating in the reading from Mark, this time at the local level, the level with which we are probably more familiar. Jesus disturbs the locals’ familiar world, the world they have constructed and about which they are the authority. According to their thinking—and it is one that should be familiar to us—everyone has their place and are meant to more or less maintain their place. There is a good side to this because human beings need order in which to function confidently. We fear chaos. But a person or a group can easily turn it into a form of manipulation and control. There is an ironic touch to Mark’s account. In one sense, the way the locals fit Jesus into their scheme of things is quite accurate: he really is the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joset, etc. They even acknowledge that Jesus has wisdom and power to work miracles. But what they are unable or unwilling to do is expand their horizons and apply the term ‘prophet’ to Jesus, the term that he uses to describe himself.

So, although they hear his wisdom and see his power, their inability or unwillingness to surrender their authority and control of their world renders them deaf and blind. Mark notes that Jesus was unable to work miracles in their midst because miracles, by definition, presume good faith. To call something a miracle is to acknowledge that it is a sign of God’s presence and power. Hence, we may rephrase the above and say that the locals were unwilling to change. Presumably, they feared that accepting Jesus as a prophet would lessen their status and power. They therefore reject the very one who has come to empower them—as evidenced by his preaching of the good news and his healing miracles. As with the preaching of Ezekiel, Jesus does not impose himself or his mission; it is preached, it is made manifest but there is no coercion. People are free to accept or reject it.

The reading from Paul tells how he had to come to terms with his own rebellious side. He wanted ‘a thorn in the flesh’ removed so that he could preach the Gospel more effectively—so he thought. Paul prayed to God about it and confesses that it was a difficult time; he had to make quite a faith journey before he came to accept the way of weakness as God’s way. Paul seems to have been a man of considerable ego and talent but eventually he came to see that the power of Christ was most effective in his weakness rather than what he thought were his strong points. What is more, he came to rejoice in his weakness rather than try and conceal it or be rid of it because in this way he not only became a more effective messenger
of the Gospel but became more fully human himself, more fully the Paul whom we celebrate as an apostle. Quite a contrast to the ‘patron saints’ of modern society, the celebrities of various kinds, who dare not—or are not allowed by their minders—to admit any weakness or failure.
To the best of our knowledge, Amos preached in the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BCE, sometime before it succumbed to the Assyrians around 721. At the time it was a much more powerful kingdom than Judah and its capital Samaria a much wealthier and grander city than provincial Jerusalem. At the battle of Qarqar a century earlier, a coalition of Palestinian states blocked an early Assyrian advance. The Assyrian records claim that Israel fielded 2,000 chariots at the battle, no puny force. The northern kingdom was able to punch above its weight. When you are an integral part of what you think is an impressive system, as Amaziah the priest of the royal sanctuary at Bethel was, your natural instinct is to protect it against perceived threats. Amos is seen as a threat because, in a verse preceding our reading, Amaziah informs the king that ‘the land is not able to bear all his words’. He is disturbing the status quo. Amaziah’s message to Amos is all in terms of the structures: ‘this is the royal sanctuary, the national temple’. There is no mention of God or the people; does Amaziah even see himself as one of the people? Amos’ reply exposes the priest’s bias and blindness; God said to him ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel’. God is always concerned for the welfare of the chosen people, above all when they are in need of repentance. Amos is at one with God’s purpose and so at one with God’s people.

This same concern is evident in the reading from Mark. In the preceding Sunday’s reading, Jesus desired to reach out to his own kith and kin and was rebuffed. He was clearly distressed. But, as Mark tells it, this rebuff only leads Jesus to intensify his mission to Israel by sending out the twelve apostles. Instead of one Jesus figure, there are now 12 tramping around Palestine preaching the good news and curing the sick. That they are there for the sake of the people, as Jesus is, and not for themselves, is emphasised by his instruction to take no provisions and to stay in the one place, irrespective of whether it is five star accommodation or not. In a sense the
apostles are to become one with the people to whom they minister. This focus on the people and God’s concern for the people is also expressed in the instruction about what the apostles are to do when rejected. Shaking dust from one’s shoes may have been associated with returning to the land of Israel—one symbolically ‘casts off’ the foreign land where one has been.1 If this is the case, the sign may be a warning that those who reject the apostles’ message are in danger of missing out on fellowship with God in the kingdom (the real land or home).

There is probably no better passage in the New Testament that celebrates God’s care for his people and Jesus’ solidarity with his people than our passage from the letter to the Ephesians. Whether or not the author of the letter is Paul or a disciple, it is striking how he identifies completely with those to whom he writes and ministers—the references to ‘us’ permeate the passage. This author’s attitude forms a telling contrast to that of the priest Amaziah. All of ‘us’ have shared in the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ, we have all been chosen before the world was made, we have become the adopted sons and daughters of God, we have all gained our freedom through the forgiveness of sin and we have all been privileged to know the mystery of God’s purpose. This is such a stirring synthesis of the Gospel message that it is difficult to see how anyone could reject it or treat it as trite. But people have done so and continue to do so. This can’t be because of the message—certainly not from our point of view as believers. More likely it is because of the way we messengers convey the good news. There may come a time when it will be worthwhile to read that passage from Amos again and have a good look at the portrait of Amaziah the priest. When we get in the way between God and God’s people, we become an Amaziah.

Most organisations these days, and probably also in days or yore, spend a considerable amount of time on mission statements, constructing a prospectus for the future, drawing up 'the big picture', identifying priorities. We need these things; they provide a necessary context in which we then try to work out the details of the daily round. As long as the big picture holds together we can bear a certain amount of chaos or disappointment. When it comes to the really big picture however, the welfare and destiny of humanity, it is quite another matter. We can’t get outside our human context to look at things from outside, to gain an overall perspective. The Semitic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) claim to have been given the perspective of the only one—God—who can look at us from the outside as well as the inside and who can therefore point out for us the kind of life humanity needs to construct and the way it should go.

A number of features of the big picture painted by Jeremiah are important for faith and theology. First, it claims that, despite appearances, the present situation is not out of control, the chaos we most fear. God is in control of all that has happened and is happening. Even though the shepherds have let the flock be scattered and dispersed, God is with the flock and will bring it back from wherever it has been dispersed. In an audacious move, the text even claims that God actually took the initiative to disperse the flock, presumably to protect it from the destructive shepherds. Second, the shepherds will be brought to book by a just God (there is no victory for evil). The passage does not go into details about how all this is to happen; to do so would rob it of its rhetorical power. It paints a grand word picture whose aim is to assure readers and listeners that, for those who believe, there is no chaos. The Lord of creation and history is always in charge. If not, then some other god must be in charge and for orthodox Old Testament faith that is unacceptable.
If the reading from Jeremiah is about the destiny of Israel among the nations, the reading from Ephesians is about the destiny of Israel and the nations. In an even more audacious big picture than Jeremiah, the letter claims that Christ has destroyed the barrier between Jew and Gentile and made them one people. This is nothing less than a new life; there is no longer Jew and Gentile but a New Person, a new people with a new life. The source of this life is the blood of Christ shed on the cross because, in biblical thinking, life is in the blood. The pouring out of Christ’s blood released its life-giving power for all people. The great sign that there is a new human community is peace. Whereas nations beforehand sought to forge a peace that would advance their respective interests, the peace of Christ is a gift that enables those who receive it to set aside their self-interest and to work for another interest—God’s purpose. Or, to put this another way, they see that advancing God’s purpose is the best thing for everyone. As in the reading from Jeremiah, the grand picture painted by the words of Ephesians does not spell out the details. The Bible is not like a users’ manual for a car that anyone who buys the car can follow in exactly the same manner. The richness and uniqueness of each human life (and nation) would be demeaned if this were the case. Its principal aim is to provide a vision about human life and a call or challenge to each one to live his or her life in the light of that vision and call.

But along with this big picture, it does provide some instructions about how to paint the smaller pictures, our individual lives and how they contribute to the big one. The reading from Mark shows Jesus ‘incarnating’ the good news of peace in the details of his daily life. One does not get the sense of some grand plan that is being meticulously implemented at each step. Nor does it appear to be a very tidy or peaceful process. Jesus seems to be pulled this way and that, trying to juggle the competing needs of his disciples, who need a rest after their mission, and the restless people in urgent need of his mission. In this particular situation, the needs of the people take precedence and Jesus sets himself to teach them. Yet, according to Luke 6:12, Jesus spends a night in prayer before choosing the twelve. Our lives are lived out as a series of particular decisions and, given our limited perspectives, we can only do our best. We can’t avoid making decisions because even to do so is still a decision. Our faith should give us confidence to take the initiative in making decisions and to take responsibility for them. After all, the big picture of the Ephesians’ passage assures us that our often untidy, unclear decisions are all part of God’s larger purpose in bringing peace to humanity, of breaking down the barriers which keep us apart.
This Sunday’s readings invite us to explore further the relationship between our limited individual lives and God’s overall purpose, as was outlined in the readings for the previous Sunday. The little episode about Elisha and the man from Baal-shalishah provides a basic context for our reflections, a kind of model case. The generous farmer is well aware of the limitations of his gift of food; what the prophet requests looks absurd. But God is able to transform the particular gift into something far greater than what the farmer can imagine, yet it is still his gift, the bread and grain that he provided. God doesn’t take things that we do or make away from us and then turn them into something else. God takes our lives that are ‘incarnated’ in flesh and space and time and reveals their true meaning, and in and through them the divine and eternal.

The Gospel reading preaches the same basic message but with an important addition. When the people see the power of Jesus they think they know who he is (‘the prophet who is to come into the world’) and what his role should be (to be their king and provide for them). In modern terms we could say that Jesus is the capitalist economy’s dream, promising unlimited supply for every demand. Whether in ancient or modern guise this desire or temptation springs from the awareness of our limited human condition. Once we see a way of transcending it, of ‘escaping’, we think we know what needs to be done; we try to grasp what we see as an exalted vision of reality for ourselves, for our own advantage. It’s the theme of the garden story again, a theme that runs throughout the Bible. Adam and Eve are tempted by the clever serpent to see God as mean and restrictive rather than generous and giving, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as a way out. Eat this and you will be free of your constraints. But, as the Bible goes on to point out, this is a distorted perception both of God and of the human condition and the attempt to transcend the latter on our terms inevitably leads to disaster (as we have been made painfully aware.
in relation to the environment). To make Jesus king in the image and likeness of the king that they have in mind would be a distortion of Jesus’ mission and destructive for the people. What looks to be an exaltation of Jesus (make him king) would in fact be a diminution, an imprisonment. Hence he must escape in order to reveal in due course the kind of king that he is and what humanity really needs.

The reading from Ephesians provides a timely instruction to counter this kind of temptation. A person confined to prison certainly experiences the limitations of the human condition in a graphic way. Yet Paul claims that it does not limit in any way his ability to live his Christian vocation of love. In a way the extreme restrictions that operate in prison provide an opportunity in which the presence of God’s love is intensified, is more sharply revealed. The community at Ephesus is therefore urged to incarnate itself as fully as possible in the daily round of Christian life. To ‘bear with one another charitably, in complete selflessness, gentleness and patience’ can only be done as a human being in the particularities of each life, of this time, this location (Ephesus). Each of these moments that are so lived becomes a manifestation of the divine: the Spirit of peace that binds the particular members of the community together.

By following this instruction we become aware that we are the recipients of a gift from God that is shared with our brothers and sisters. This provides a healthy antidote to the temptation to grasp it for my benefit on my terms. The gift of the Spirit creates the new reality of the Church of Ephesus but in doing so the unique life of each member is enhanced. It shows forth the presence of God that is in each one and in the community. The instruction concludes by reminding the members of the Church of the source of it all, the one God who is the Father of all. The life of each person and the life of the community should be lived for the glory of God above all, because it is to the glory of God that the potential of each and every life be fully realised.
The so-called ‘murmuring in the wilderness’ stories are arresting in the way they pack a lot into what is quite a limited bundle and in their ability to touch the phobias and failures of any generation of readers. As if to try and cram as much as possible into the first example of this kind of story, there is even a rather odd mention of quails, which play no further role in the story. They may be there as a signal that one can tell this kind of story either via the bread or the meat theme (cf the parallel in Numbers 11). The ‘murmuring’ story form provides plenty of scope for a storyteller to construct a ripping yarn and to turn it to a theological purpose.

As part of the Torah, our example provides some valuable instructions on a number of issues. A key one is faith. Human beings only become interested in the notion of God (initially at least) because they hope there is something in it for them. The desire for self-improvement is admirable, it’s the way we go about it that causes problems. This story portrays Israel as being prepared to follow God as long as God provides what fits Israel’s notion of the good. It also describes God wanting to lead Israel beyond this limited perspective to loyal discipleship because God is God, not because of what they think God can or should provide. It presents this in three moves. In the first, God is prepared to meet the people where they stand, a fearful and demanding lot. The second is that God meets their needs in the hope that ‘they will follow my law’—will they be able to move beyond their restricted context and accept the context of the Torah? God gives Israel food to eat but a much more important gift is the Torah that enables Israel to gain a true perspective on themselves and God. It will free them from a distorted perception that sees slavery in Egypt as life (note the unreal claims about how they ate in Egypt, one doesn’t eat like that as a slave) and freedom in the wilderness as death. A complete inversion of values. The third is that, via obedience to the Torah, Israel will learn ‘that I, the Lord, am your God’. What God seeks is a personal relationship with
Israel; what Israel should seek is a personal relationship with God as God, not as welfare agent.

In the reading from John’s Gospel, this same divine purpose is unfolded via the Johannine term ‘signs’. The wonders that Jesus works, such as the miracle of the loaves and fish, are signs that should point to and reveal the person who performs them. But, as Jesus admonishes the crowd, they see the signs only in relation to themselves and their needs (‘you had all the bread you wanted to eat’). As God seeks to do in the Exodus story, Jesus here desires to draw the people out of their self-focused world to himself. So, we see a somewhat similar three stages in the Gospel text, from meeting the people where they are in their concern for earthly food, to a teaching about food that endures for eternal life, the heavenly bread that gives life to the world, to an identification of this bread with Jesus himself. Once this personal relationship is established, once they ‘believe in the one he has sent’, everything else can find its proper place and true purpose. This is because, as the letter to the Ephesians makes clear, a faith relationship with Jesus enables one to put off the old self with its distorted perception of God and reality and become a new person.

This change can only take place of course when we are willing and able to see our old self for what it really is, and this is to accept the judgement of Jesus as to what we are. This can be a frightening prospect, on two counts. We know that we are flawed creatures and there can be a deep fear of facing ourselves, and an even deeper fear of having to face others when they find out. There are too many skeletons in the cupboard; better to keep it shut tight. Depending on our idea of God, we may also fear the judgement of God. But we can’t hide from God and the Gospel assures us that, no matter how bad we may think we are, God looks on us in love; hating the sins that demean us but loving the sinner. It is this realisation of being unconditionally loved by God that gives us the confidence to hand over our old flawed self to God who will recreate us ‘in the goodness and holiness of truth’. Only in this way can the deep self-interest that drives so many of our thoughts and deeds be satisfactorily fulfilled.
It’s a pity that our first reading does not contain the preceding verse that states Elijah was afraid because the formidable queen Jezebel, devotee of the Tyrian Baal, put out a contract on him. Why so? Because, according to the story, Elijah executed four hundred of her prophets in the wake of his triumph over Baal on Mt Carmel. The text has no command from God about this: does Elijah (as a character in the story) assume that his victory mandates him to do it? The text may be hinting at something important about peak experiences here. Life is about experiences and we all hunger for the peak ones, naively thinking that they will work wonders in us or that they give us authority to do things, but perhaps on our terms. Rather like the woman who thinks that once she is married her husband will change forever for the better (as she sees it), or the seminarian who thinks that once he is ordained his doubts will be resolved. Elijah has a peak experience on Mt Carmel but, as the story unfolds, he ends up almost the complete opposite of the all-powerful prophet on the mountain. He flees from Jezebel and asks to die in the desert. Does he misinterpret the meaning and purpose of his peak experience? Whatever the case, the story portrays God as merciful, pulling Elijah together for a journey to another mountain, Horeb, and a different kind of ‘peak’ experience—near silence followed by a question ‘What are you doing here Elijah?’ This time God gives him a number of commands but the only one that he actually gets to perform is to anoint ‘Elisha as prophet in your place’ (1 Kings 19:16). It is a tribute to the confidence of Israelite tradition that it could tell such a critical story about one of its great figures. According to the text Elijah accepts his commission and anoints his successor. He sees that God’s purpose is greater than his own triumphs or failures.

The people in John’s account of the miracle of the loaves and fish also have a peak experience but it does not change them. They are exposed as voracious consumers, just like us. According to the Gospel, they first
eat all the bread they want, then they seek to make Jesus king (secure the supply line for the future), next they demand that he give them ‘this bread always’ (he must satisfy their demand), and in our reading for today they reject his claim that he is the ‘bread from heaven’ (the supplier must conform to the consumer’s expectations, not the other way round). Their argument is that they know exactly who Jesus is (‘we know his father and mother’) and what he has to do in relation to them. Once you have a peak experience and convince yourself that you know what it is all about, it can start a chain reaction that is difficult to stop. Pretty soon everything is seen only through this one, distorted, lens. In the end, the way the crowd ‘sees’ this experience of divine power blinds them to seeing the divine presence among them, the only one who can free them from their trap and enable them to become what they really desire—be like God. Instead, their focus is fixed on the thing (the bread) to be consumed, not the person who supplies it. When shopping in our supermarkets do we give a thought for the struggling farmer who supplies our food, the factory hand on the other side of the world who makes our shoes?

The reading from Ephesians is important within this context because it provides a timely focus on another side of our experience of God that is just as important and can be just as destructive, if handled the wrong way. The reading speaks of the struggle to live the Christian life day by day, to deal with those very ordinary things such as avoiding grudges, tempers, name calling, spitefulness, etc. These things are so common and often seem so petty that we can forget that they are, in their own way, just as important as a peak experience. The careful, laborious work of a biblical scribe is just as inspired as the fiery preaching of a prophet, as the community that treasures his or her words and passes them on to succeeding generations. The way we relate to our brothers and sisters in the daily round is also a precious experience of God; they are sons and daughters of God, they are temples of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus says in Matthew 25:40 ‘in so far as you did it to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me’. And in Mark 9:41, Jesus says that ‘If anyone gives you a cup of water to drink just because you belong to Christ, then I tell you solemnly, he will most certainly not lose his reward’.
The book of Proverbs begins with the author/teacher gradually introducing the pupil (the listener/reader) to Lady Wisdom, the divine source and authority for his teaching. In the reading for today from chapter 9, she is described establishing her school; the pupil is then invited to follow her curriculum in chapters 10–31, at the end of which the pupil graduates. That is, the pupil reaps the benefits of Wisdom’s teaching, which is like being married to the perfect wife (31:10–31). But there is a dangerous rival that the author warns the pupil about—Dame Folly. The uncanny thing about the portrait of her and her ‘school’ in the same chapter from which today’s reading is taken is that she can speak just like Lady Wisdom and can appear so attractive. The point seems to be that evil can masquerade as good and it can be damn difficult at times to distinguish between the two. The thesis of the book of Proverbs is that Lady Wisdom’s curriculum will provide a sure guide through the labyrinth of life and its dangers.

The reading from the letter to the Ephesians adds an important ingredient to this wise instruction. The Christian life is not just about navigating one’s way in a wicked world, it is also about redeeming it. We should never see our Christian vocation only as something to be defended or protected from outside threats. Threats will of course occur but if we see others, outsiders, only as threats then we are not seeing them as God does, as our brothers and sisters, called to become sons and daughters of God. We are commissioned to be God’s messengers of the Good News to others and this involves two primary things. One is that we must strive to ‘recognise what is the will of the Lord’ and we can’t hope to do this if we drug ourselves with wine or anything else that distracts us from discerning the will of the one person who is completely devoted to our good and that of our neighbour. The second is that if we are wholly devoted to God (‘singing and chanting to the Lord in your hearts’) then we will become wholly devoted to God’s saving purpose, to redeem our wicked world. How else
could we respond to God’s complete devotion? Such is the implied logic of the letter. To be the bearer of God’s salvation to others is the greatest vocation to which God can call us in this life because it is meant to enable others in their turn to become wholly devoted to God. This is after all what the life of Jesus was all about. Hence it is the common or universal vocation of Christians. Singing and chanting the praises of God is not a flight from reality into some kind of wonderland; it is the way by which we bring the reality of God’s salvation to the attention of our world.

The reading from John’s Gospel adds a third and particularly challenging ingredient to this mix, and this is the need to maintain the truth of the Good News even in the face of misunderstanding and rejection. As presented in the Gospel, Jesus’ Jewish rivals are unable or unwilling to change their idea of him and his relationship to them (cf the previous Sunday’s reflection). If he conforms to their horizons and expectations then he will be their favourite. But this would require Jesus to assume a false identity. He does not and cannot retreat from proclaiming the truth about himself and about them, to do so for the sake of peace and the satisfaction of a warm welcome would be to play both them and him false. Salvation and truth are inseparable.

We should aim to present the truth in as attractive and acceptable a way as possible but this should not be at the expense of diluting it, whether it is the truth about God or about ourselves. A particularly significant and challenging element in Jesus’ mission is that although others give up on him and reject him, he does not give up on them or reject them. And he is true to his word. He says that ‘the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world’ and this is exactly what he does in his crucifixion. Preaching and living the Good News can be a difficult and challenging thing in a variety of ways. There can be the challenge of hostility and violence that Jesus and many martyrs have experienced. Perhaps in our modern world it is the widespread indifference and distraction that makes it difficult to preach the Good News effectively. Someone once said that it is better to be hated than ignored: at least the haters are paying some attention to you and what you are saying.
There is a time for talking and there is a time for decision. Our talk can be illuminating and instructive but we can’t cover everything that needs to be said or should be said, and our talk can’t make our decisions for us or make others decide. In the end, we have to consider what we know, interpret our experience and decide what we are going to do. This is the case for discipleship in particular because the Bible’s words are designed to enable us to commit ourselves to God in fruitful relationship. In our first reading, Joshua has delivered two sermons to the people in chapters 23 and 24 on the good things that God has done for them and the importance of remaining loyal to the covenant relationship. But, he can’t secure that loyalty. They have to be free to make the commitment, and in our reading they do just that. But one does not have to read too far beyond the book of Joshua to realise how fragile such professions of loyalty can be. A change in generations, a change in circumstances and things can fall apart. It is testimony to Israel’s honesty that they did not conceal these failures.

The Gospel passage brings John’s account of the loaves and fish and the long dialogue with the Jews about the bread of life to a close. It’s now decision time and Jesus challenges his listeners (and the readers of the Gospel) to make their decision for or against him, even though he ‘knew from the outset those who did not believe, and who it was that would betray him’. One might ask, if he knew beforehand who would not accept his teaching then why bother preaching to them? Two responses come to mind. One is that his knowledge does not presumably impinge on their freedom to decide one way or the other. As God, Jesus knows but does not coerce; rather he weeps over those who will reject him. A second response that is perhaps easier to get our heads around is that the message of truth needs to be spoken even to those who reject it. To avoid doing so would be a dereliction of his mission to humanity and of his obedience to the Father’s will. God’s will is that all be saved and there is always the hope that down
the track, those who reject the truth will be moved to hear it again and accept it. On behalf of the twelve, Peter makes a heroic decision to stick with Jesus in the face of rejection and departure by ‘many of his disciples’. It is crucial profession of faith in John’s Gospel, a parallel to the profession by Peter in Matthew 16, but like its Synoptic parallel it does not guarantee their lasting loyalty. They remain flighty, fragile disciples.

Where might we find an example or a model of the kind of discipleship that remains loyal throughout the highs and lows of human experience? In answer the reading from the letter to the Ephesians invites us to consider married life. Such is the importance of married loyalty in the eyes of the author of the letter that it becomes a visible sign, almost a sacramental sign, of the relationship between Christ and the Church. Married life is a relationship of loyalty that has to be lived out day-by-day. Two things can be said about this passage and its use of the husband/wife relationship to describe the relationship between Christ and the Church. One is that although the metaphor of marriage is a powerful one and has a long biblical pedigree stretching back to the eighth century BCE prophet Hosea, like all metaphors, even inspired ones, it has its limitations. Masculine imagery is associated with God in an active, leading role, while female imagery is associated with Israel in a more passive, receptive role. The metaphor needs to be balanced by other biblical images of the relationship between Christ and the Church; such as ‘brothers and sisters of Jesus’, ‘sons and daughter of God’, Luke’s notion of the Church as the people of God. The second is that, despite these limitations the text still provides a powerful challenge. Although our understanding of the way the relationship between husband and wife is to be lived out may have changed significantly over the centuries the principle on which the author bases his reflections is as valid as ever—‘Give way to one another in obedience to Christ’. This principle calls for the constant sacrifice of oneself for the Christian welfare of the other, however one enacts this in different cultures and times. In living this way we are doing as Jesus does, and we are also doing it to Jesus. As he says in Matthew 25:40 ‘in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me’.
In the reading from Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people that they must add nothing to the commands that he has passed on to them and take nothing away. The reason for this is that they are ‘the commandments of the Lord your God’. For Israel to add to or reduce these divine commands would be to imply that they are somehow imperfect. But how can they be so when they come from God and God would not sell Israel short? It would also mean that Israel has assumed divine authority whereas the whole point of the Torah is that Israel accepts God’s authority. In doing so it will become a wise and prudent people, a kind of divine beacon that will attract the peoples around them. Israel will of course need to discern how the commands are to be applied in different situations but the conviction of the deuteronomic theologians is that if Israel is wholly devoted to God’s law then it will gain the wisdom and prudence to make the right decisions.

The Old Testament understanding of Torah is that it provides the context in which Israel can be free and flourish. This is God’s will. As long as Israel remains within this context (is obedient to the Torah) it will be free and creative in a proper human sense. One implication in Deuteronomy’s prohibition against Israel adding to or taking from the Torah is that it will not lead to an enhancement of Israel’s God-given freedom but an enslavement. This is a highly rhetorical faith claim that would be difficult to demonstrate by appeal to experience. What one sees as liberating another will see as enslaving, as is evident in the debates over abortion, same sex marriages and euthanasia.

We can see a similar emphasis on the creative empowering presence of the word of God in the letter of James. It is an important one for challenging the position that separates Old from New Testament, the loving God of the New from the wrathful God of the Old, etc. Apart from brief references to Jesus at the beginning of the letter and the beginning of chapter 2, and a reference to church practice towards the end of the letter, it would
fit seamlessly into the Old Testament context. One could easily substitute James’ reference to ‘the word’ which has been planted in you’ with ‘the Torah/law’. Within the Christian context however, we take it as a general reference to the teaching of Christ, which is the fulfilment of the law. James urges his readers not just to listen to the word but also to do what it tells them. In this way they will participate in God’s new creation, bringing liberation and life to those most in need. Who are the ones in need? Themselves initially, because they are sinners who have been forgiven and healed by God; hence they need to keep themselves ‘uncontaminated by the world’. Then there are the others; here James names the classic Old Testament duo of those most in need—the orphans and widows.

In the Gospel reading we find Jesus tackling the very problem that Moses warns about in Deuteronomy. The problem is not so much that the scribes and Pharisees have developed various laws about clean and unclean—one can see these as the application of the Torah in Leviticus to particular situations—but that they have come to assume the same status as God’s law. What is worse, according to Jesus’ critique, they have also led to a distorted perception of reality and of the people’s relationship with God. The cleanliness of the things we use is confused with our inner cleanliness or is used as a way of avoiding the challenge of inner cleansing. But instead of dismissing those who hold such views, Jesus sets out to help them by attempting to correct their view of things. He calls the people to him, among whom we may presume are the Pharisees and scribes who had ‘gathered around him’ to challenge him, and teaches them. Within the larger context of the Gospel, we learn that the only one who can change our inner selves so that we see God’s law correctly and obey it in a responsible way is Jesus.

It is difficult for many in our modern world to see law as liberating and creative. Instead it is seen as restrictive, something to escape from whenever you can. But to try and escape from law is futile, human societies can’t live without some ethos or structure that is enshrined, hopefully as well as possible, in rules and regulations. Anarchists who seem to be virulently against all laws are in reality authoritarian figures in disguise. The only law that they will accept as legitimate is theirs, and it is to be imposed on everyone. So it’s not a question of whether or not law but what kind of law. In this environment the task of the Church community surely is to show by the way it lives (not just listening but doing) that God’s law is what truly liberates us and enables human beings to be creative.
Many, perhaps most, of us would operate with the modern conviction that communication operates primarily via the visual medium. The image is the thing that you need to focus on in order to get your message across. However, a recent research project by an expert in brain scanning has questioned this thesis. According to the newspaper report, he found that the brain responds primarily to sound. If our brains don’t like the advertising jingle or the spoken words accompanying it, we will tend to turn off, even if it is accompanied by a powerful visual image. The ears have it over the eyes. When one considers the enduring role of music in human life this makes good sense. It also resonates with the readings for this Sunday, in particular the Gospel. Jesus heals a deaf and dumb man who, as Mark reports ‘spoke clearly’. The bystanders knew that he had been completely cured by this fact: they could clearly understand him, which meant that he could hear his own words and so speak clearly and confidently.

But it is significant that Jesus’ focus is not so much on the man who can now hear and speak clearly but on the bystanders, what they hear and what they are likely to speak. They don’t heed Jesus’ instruction not to speak about the cure. In short, their ability to hear Jesus is ‘deafened’ by their witnessing the wonder of the deaf and dumb man speaking. Their enthusiastic noising abroad of the wonder only serves to show that they are deaf to the one who worked the wonder and, if they are deaf to his words, then they cannot preach his good news in an authentic way. To put this another way, one must first hear accurately the good news that Jesus brings before one is able to speak about it. In order for this to take place, one must first have one’s ears opened so that one can hear and speak the word of God truthfully.

The reading from Isaiah catches the importance of having our ears and mouths opened by drawing a parallel with creation. To have people hear and speak again properly is like having the desert bloom after rain, like
having springs of water gushing out of a parched landscape. The passage leaves open whether the ‘miracle’ of hearing and speech is associated with deliverance from prison and oppression (God is coming as saviour and deliverer) or the healing of physical ailments. I prefer the former. People like the Israelites in prison or exile are ‘dumbed down’ by the experience. Oppression and fear act as enforcers of silence; prisoners are often forbidden to speak their own language or even speak at all. Hence it is appropriate to celebrate deliverance in terms of hearing and joyous singing. However, the text may also or alternatively be implying that the physically deaf and dumb will be healed so that everyone can hear the good news of God’s ‘coming’ and give praise to God. God’s salvation touches all.

If the reading from Isaiah celebrates the positive side, the reading from the letter of James warns us of what can happen when one’s ears are not open to the truth of the Gospel and, as a result, one proclaims a false message. The particularly dangerous thing about the situation the letter describes is that the person is, to all appearances, representing Jesus because he or she takes the position of authority, making a judgement. In a way we are all judges because we make decisions and draw distinctions between ourselves and others. It is both natural and necessary because only in this way can I come to learn who I am and who the other person is. But flawed judgements will lead to a false understanding of others and of Jesus. Our judgements can divide the community—on false premises—rather than unite it as Jesus wants. A significant feature of the passage from James is that, because the person has not heard the Gospel message properly—has not had their ears opened—he or she cannot see the other person clearly (they do not see beyond the rich man’s attire, the poor man’s rags). James’ remedy for this is to appeal to his readers to ‘listen my dear brothers’ (to be receptive to the true teaching) and then to remind them of the true message of the Gospel (‘it was those who are poor according to the world that God chose . . . to be the heirs to the kingdom’).
Jesus’ question about who people think he is initially sounds very familiar. After all, we all shape our identity and measure ourselves in response to people’s comments and ideas about us. The presence of the other, the one or ones who are different, helps me to discover who I am. But it can go badly wrong. Look at modern celebrities and sporting champions. They can become hypersensitive to what people and the media are thinking and saying about them. In a way they have to be because their careers and their money depend on it. The sad thing is that they often end up conforming so much to public and media expectations that they really have no identity of their own or they develop a completely distorted idea of their identity.

Our Gospel passage for this Sunday teaches us how to discover our true identity and there are two keys to doing so. The first is to acknowledge that Jesus is that other person, the one—indeed for Christian faith the only one—who enables me to discover and shape my true identity and discern my role in life. It is essential therefore that we have a true idea of who this person, this other, is who claims to reveal my identity to me. The painful scene with Peter drives this point home. Peter, the one who seems to be so close to knowing who Jesus is (you are the Christ), the leader of the disciples whom we would hope would know the score, bungles things badly. Two signals in the text point indirectly to the distorted understanding Peter has of who the Christ, the Messiah, is. One is that he seems completely unaffected by Jesus’ teaching about the destiny of the ‘Son of Man’. He attempts to dissuade Jesus from his purpose. So it tends to be when we have a thoroughly distorted idea of someone whom we think we know so well. We are reluctant or unable to change our idea of them. The other is the sharp rebuke from Jesus in which he tells Peter that his interjection shows that his real identity is Satan; he may think he is Peter but his words and actions reveal another disturbing and distorting identity. This is not the real Peter, the Peter whom Jesus calls to discipleship and full human-
ity. Jesus does not make this rebuke to condemn Peter (he is included in the subsequent call to discipleship) but to underline the importance of a true understanding of Jesus’ identity. Jesus does not conceal his identity as we sometimes try to do but reveals it. It is essential that we ‘see’ this revelation clearly because Jesus’ purpose is to entrust this revelation to his disciples. In an astonishing move, he entrusts his identity to his flawed followers, Peter included.

The second key depends on this first one and flows from it. It is only when we know who Jesus really is that we can discover who we really are and what our purpose is in life, and this can only be done by becoming his disciples. The path of discipleship is a passage through death to new life; this means abandoning our existing but distorted perception of ourselves and discovering our true identity. As Jesus puts it ‘For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it’. Being ultimately prepared to let go of our earthly life for the sake of the Gospel is an integral part of this discovery of our identity and purpose in life. This may take the form of martyrdom; for most it will take the form of dying a little every day to the things we once thought were precious and valuable, that we thought would make us who we want to be. It may be discovering that something I once counted as worthless or a hindrance—a relationship, a painful experience—is the very thing that enables me to be and express my true self. And what does our knowledge of Jesus and our discipleship reveal about our true identity? That we are sons and daughters of God, each one a unique identity never to be repeated on this earth (each one is to take up his/her cross), each one destined to be heirs of God’s household.

The other two readings add important coda to this teaching. The letter of James is a timely reminder that we may encounter the presence of Jesus in our lives in unexpected and even unwelcome guises. The bothersome needy brother or sister is a presence of Christ, not just someone in need therefore but a God given opportunity to do the greatest thing we can do in this life, to take up our cross as true disciples of Jesus. The passage from Isaiah reminds us that our complete dependence on and obedience to God does not take away our initiative or turn us into timid yes-men and women. Quite the reverse; it empowers us to be courageous and not to shrink from the disciple’s task, no matter how difficult or threatening. So the speaker in the text, confident of God being ‘at hand’, boldly challenges his adversaries to debate in the court—the most public place in an Israelite town, being located at the main gate.
All three readings for this Sunday draw sharp, even brutal, contrasts between good and bad people and how they live. But they do have one thing in common and that is self-interest. All human beings are self-interested; it’s part of our nature, the result of being self-conscious animals. We all want to be perfect and there is nothing wrong with this; after all, when people in the Gospel ask Jesus how to become perfect he doesn’t send them packing with a reprimand. Rather, he tells them that if they want to be perfect then they should follow him and they will find out how to do so.

The key ingredient is love and, according to both Old and New Testaments, there are three persons that we need to love in order to become perfect. First and foremost of course is to love God. Deuteronomy 6:5 commands Israel to love ‘the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might’. The other two are one’s neighbour and oneself. Leviticus 19:18 enjoins Israelites to ‘love your neighbour as you love yourself’ and Jesus reiterates this command in the Gospel. In both Testaments, these are commands. It is not how you feel about God or your neighbour or yourself, it’s more about how you live in relation to each one. Hence, the meaning of the term ‘love’ is probably closer to that of loyalty. We show by our conduct that we are loyal to God, to our neighbours and to ourselves. Another important feature of these commands is that you can’t have one without the others. Jesus proclaims that love of God is inseparable from love of neighbour and from love of self. The message seems to be that if we don’t truly love ourselves, then there is probably something amiss in our relationship with God and our neighbour, and vice versa.

What I like about the reading from the letter of James and the Gospel of Mark is that God does not give up on human beings who are on the make, no matter how selfish they may be. The fact that we become involved in intense rivalries, that we squabble and compete for our distorted ideas of perfection and power at least shows that we recognise inadequacy
and imperfection in ourselves. There is a chink in our armour; we need something or someone from outside ourselves to complete ourselves. God will take advantage of the tiniest opening to try and reach us. The letter of James rails against jealousy and ambition and the terrible prospect that because members of the community haven’t got what they want they are prepared to kill to get it. But at least the jealous and ambitious, no matter how murderous their intent, are after something beyond themselves; they recognise some lack. Hence James laces his condemnation of their evils with a reminder of the need to turn to ‘the wisdom that comes down from above’ which alone can bring fulfillment and peace.

Similarly in the Gospel passage. The disciples are arguing about which of them is the greatest, each comparing himself to the others, ranking each other. One reason why they are doing this of course is that they have been invited by Jesus to be his companions and disciples. Most of us like to think that when someone whom we greatly admire invites us to join his or her company it is because of qualities in ourselves. This makes us feel better about ourselves. Our self-esteem goes up, perhaps dangerously so as in the case of the disciples. We begin to think we are better than those who are not part of the inner circle. But, like James’ community, there is at least the awareness—however inadequate—of an imperfect and incomplete humanity that is searching for fulfillment. So, Jesus immediately uses the opportunity to teach the disciples about true perfection: ‘If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all’. There is always a chance that in our frantic search for perfection we will heed the Gospel message and take the road to true perfection. Jesus never misses such a chance.

Within this context, the first reading from Wisdom is quite disturbing because the ones who have evil designs on the virtuous person think they are perfect. They are not competing with the virtuous man for some shared notion of perfection, for a common goal. Rather, they see him merely as the occasion for an interesting experiment. Let’s persecute the fellow and see whether God responds as the fellow claims he will. There is no sense of them having a relationship with God. In fact, they have taken the place of God—after all they have no need of change—and have made God a part of their experiment. One might well describe these people as completely or, dare I say, ‘perfectly’ evil and that is disturbing. One would hope that there is some flaw in them, a tiny crack through which a ray of goodness may enter.
It’s always a challenge when an outsider disturbs our carefully constructed and stable world in some way. Today’s readings provide some examples and outline right and wrong ways of responding to them. The first reading from Numbers invites us to look at the motives behind a hostile attitude to the outsider. Moses has complained to God about the burden of ‘bearing’ the people of Israel and so God arranges to take a portion (just a bit) of Moses’ spirit and distribute it among the elders. It will show Moses just how much spirit God has given him to bear his burdens. But, in the perception of Joshua, things have not gone according to the script. Eldad and Medad, the outsiders in this story, have received the spirit too and he asks Moses to stop them. Moses’ reply ‘are you jealous on my account’ is the crunch line. It invites Joshua, Moses’ deputy, to ask ‘am I anxious on my account’? A further implication in Moses’ question is: Joshua, if you are in this for my sake or your own sake, then get out while the going is good. We are not here for our sakes but God’s. In our terminology, it’s the difference between vocation and career. Vocation, God’s call, is to learn to do things God’s way whereas career tends to mean I do it my way. As the scene ends, Moses trudges back to the camp to bear the burden of God’s people.

The Gospel passage provides a different response by shifting the focus from the objecting disciples to the outsider. And as so often in the Gospels, Jesus uses a crisis or a problem as an opportunity to teach. He provides the disciples with a criterion for assessing an outsider who appears to be doing what a group thinks is their prerogative. His ‘anyone who is not against us is for us’ is an amazingly generous and trusting criterion. His next piece of instruction pushes the boundaries even further by challenging the disciples to think how far they are prepared to go with this criterion. Would they see the presence of God and attribute a like importance to ‘anyone’ who gave them a cup of water simply because they are his disciples? ‘Anyone’, even their enemies? Like the reading in Numbers but in a somewhat
different way, Jesus seeks to challenge horizons and expand them, to get his listeners to see where their priorities lie and to question them.

Having provided a criterion by which the disciples can judge or assess the outsider he then turns the focus on them (‘if any of you . . . ’). What follows is a graphic text that is not easy to interpret. For me context is almost everything and so I read it as a way of reinforcing Jesus’ rejection of their negative judgement of the outsider. If you set yourself up as a judge of others, the text implies, then why not apply the same criteria to yourself. If you do then of course you would agree with what should be done to anyone who damages ‘one of these little ones’. And who are the little ones that Jesus has in mind: the child in v 36 and/or the outsider condemned by the disciples?

He then pushes the envelope even further. If your hand sins cut it off—and who could claim that he or she has never sinned by touch? The same goes for the rest of the senses. If you sin by them they must be cut off, excluded from participation in the ‘body’, just as the outsider must be excluded from participation in the community and its work. In order to enter heaven according to these criteria we would have to self-destruct because we all sin in all our senses. Instead of judging others therefore and deciding their fate in God’s scheme of things, we need to look at ourselves first and we will find that we are more in need of God’s mercy than they are.

The letter of James deals with the worst example of all and that is why I have left it to last. A redeeming feature about Joshua and the disciples’ complaint is that at least they are paying some attention to the other and there is a concern about the welfare of the community. But with those against whom the letter of James rails there does not seem to be one redeeming feature. They are completely absorbed in themselves and couldn’t give a hoot about the other, in particular the deprived or persecuted (‘in the time of slaughter you went on eating to your heart’s content’). What is worse, they condemned and killed the innocent to get them out of the way. What seems in particular to distress James is that all he can do is preach and write against them; they carry on oblivious and die in ripe old age while the poor die too soon and in great misery. One can see why Judaism, Christianity and Islam developed the notion of a final judgement. There has to be some accountability for such shameless evil.
The account of the creation of woman in Genesis begins with God’s authoritative pronouncement ‘It is not good that the man should be alone’ and the decision to ‘make him a helpmate’ (more like ‘a helper corresponding to/like him’ in the Hebrew). The subsequent description of the rib being taken from the man and made into a woman might give the impression that the female is of somewhat lesser status than the male. But this seems to be countered by the statement that a man leaves his father and mother and ‘joins himself to his wife’. The Hebrew verb is ‘cling’ and it is a strong verb implying complete dependence and an unbreakable bond. The final ‘and they become one flesh’ catches the permanence of the preceding statement nicely, as does the man’s earlier exclamation ‘this at last is bone from my bones, and flesh from my flesh’. This statement or ones like it occur at a number of places in the Old Testament to describe a lasting bond or covenant between two or more people. In the light of all this, a reader is presumably meant to endorse the divine judgement with feeling; indeed, it is not good that the human being should be alone.

Yet in our modern world we seem to lead a somewhat schizophrenic life, caught between the desires for relationship and for independence. At its worst it has become another form of rampant consumerism. People form relationships in order to satisfy or fulfill particular needs; when they don’t the people involved split and return to the perceived advantage of being alone, but then often pursue yet another liaison. The one that used to be seen as a model of a relationship that sticks or ‘clings’—marriage and family life—has now become one of the most fragmented. What contribution might our Genesis text and the Gospel text make to our understanding of marriage?

I see three ways in which they contribute and more alert readers may find additional ones. The first and primary one is, as Jesus states in the Gospel, that it is God who joins a couple together in marriage. This can
be a hurdle for the modern mind with its particular notion of freedom and autonomy. Isn’t this a denial of human freedom? Not so, the Bible would reply. When God brings a couple together it is part of God’s creative and salvific purpose. Given the Bible’s conviction that God’s purpose is to bring about the fullness of humanity, this cannot therefore mean a denial of human freedom. On the contrary, the freedom of the couple will be enhanced through God’s involvement in their life. After all, part of God’s creative activity is to create human freedom; without it we would not have any. If we break the connection between God and marriage and seek complete autonomy, the result will be a distorted perception of marriage (and the individual). Thus claims the Bible.

This links up with the second contribution our texts make: Jesus does not see marriage primarily as a legal contract, as the Pharisees in the passage do. He points to two dangers in this view of marriage. One is that marriage comes to be seen as something between a man and a woman; the third but most important party in the ‘contract’—God—is eliminated (‘it was because you were so unteachable’). A second is that understanding marriage primarily in legal terms implies restrictions—laws are seen to impinge on freedom. Hence the desire for an ‘escape clause’ that allows one, particularly in our modern world, to once again be alone and free. But the Bible would claim this is a distorted perception of freedom.

The third contribution is that when a man and a woman do become truly ‘one flesh’ in a marriage relationship they thereby become more perfectly themselves. Or, to put this another way, their covenant relationship enables them to become more the unique individuals that God wants them to be. We only come to know who we are by comparing ourselves with the other, the one(s) who is not I. And, as the famous commandment enjoins, this is to be done by loving my neighbour who, as neighbour, always remains ‘the other’. The biblical claim is that the relationship within which such love can be realised intimately and perfectly is the marriage bond. But in order to do this effectively the couple needs to be joined even more firmly to the third party in the marriage relationship—God. God who brings them together is the one through whom and with whom each will discover who their spouse is and how to love their spouse.
The disciples, operating with a traditional version of the act-consequence dynamic with which we all operate in varying degrees, find it very difficult to accept that a rich person is not blessed by God. Having the good things of earth must be a consequence of having done good deeds and the person therefore deserves a heavenly reward. But Jesus’ encounter with the rich young man shows that there is another factor that threatens this nexus—attachment. As Jesus points out how hard it is to be detached from one’s riches, Peter moves swiftly to distance himself and the disciples from the young man by claiming that they are detached, they have given up everything to follow Jesus. What reward will they get? Peter still appeals to the act-consequence dynamic but now, he thinks, purged of the ‘attachment’ factor.

What is striking about Peter’s move is that in attempting to distance himself from the rich young man he in fact reveals how close they are: both are self-interested. Jesus has no problems with self-interest as his reply to both the young man and Peter shows. The Old Testament has no problem with it either, as the first reading from the book of Wisdom shows (‘in her company all good things came to me’). Both Jesus and the Bible want us to realise our true potential. We are commanded to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. The problem is not self-interest in itself but how we pursue it. As I read today’s Gospel, it warns about two things that we need to avoid in our quest for perfection (two negatives) and one that we need to latch onto with a passion (one positive).

Our attempts to better ourselves, to become perfect, are a tacit admission that we are imperfect or incomplete. We lack something or something is holding us back. But we first need to identify what this is and deal with it. The temptation of course is to identify it in the other, what is outside me. The Gospel warns us about this in the figure of Peter who separates himself and the disciples from the young man and his kind. That’s where
the problem lies, not with me/us. I have had people tell me that they cannot stay in the Catholic Church because of all the wrongs they find there—abusive clergy, wealth, poor treatment of women and so on. The same is sometimes said about other Churches and even more vehemently about Islam. We need to accept criticism where it is due and the Churches and Islam are not perfect by any means. But when I ask these critics whether they are happy to continue as Australian citizens they reply that they are. Yet Australia has a bad record in its treatment of Aborigines, there is a growing disparity between rich and poor, and we bash, rob and abuse each other with disturbing regularity and viciousness. To be consistent these critics should leave this deeply flawed society for another as they have decided to leave the Church. I wish them luck.

The second warning is the flip side of the above: it can reveal a reluctance to engage in self-criticism. Jesus brings this gently but firmly to Peter’s attention when he says that ‘no one’ who has left everything for his sake and that of the Gospel will miss out on the appropriate reward. The significant point is that Jesus doesn’t say to Peter ‘you and the disciples’. I take the general ‘no one’ as an indirect way of inviting Peter and the disciples to ask whether they have indeed left all for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel. When one thinks about it, anyone who claims to have done so would be either arrogant or naïve. There is always some self-interest in what we do and is it the right kind of self-interest? Surely only God can judge whether we have truly left all for the sake of the Gospel.

These warnings present an almost insurmountable challenge but thankfully they are trumped by the one positive element which is that God is there for us despite our tendency to respond to self-interest in the wrong way. God is there for our sake in two crucial ways. The first is that Jesus loves the young man despite his attachment to riches. And Jesus is the word of God who, as the letter to the Hebrews says ‘can judge the secret emotions and thoughts.’ Nothing is hidden from him yet he loves us unconditionally and desires nothing more than to help us overcome our faults, to fulfill our self-interest in the proper way. Jesus hates sins but loves sinners. The second is that while it is impossible for us to free ourselves from attachments that cripple rather than enhance us, Jesus assures the disciples and ourselves that for God everything is possible, we can become perfect. It may not be easy at times and it will occupy us for all eternity (however one conceives eternity) but this is the excitement and adventure of being a Christian, of becoming a perfect human being.
As noted in the reflections for the previous Sunday, self-interest is part of our make up and an essential part of our Christian vocation—as long as we can get some purchase on what it is that will truly make us perfect. And we are unlikely to be motivated to seek perfection unless we have some worthwhile notion or idea of it. We all operate through ideas and images and these will be stimulated and shaped by the various experiences that we have. As Mark unfolds his Gospel story, we can presume that James and John have witnessed Jesus’ encounter with the rich young man who sought perfection, have heard his subsequent teaching on the rewards of discipleship, and have also listened as he tells them about his death and his rising from the dead.

Their request to Jesus shows that they have an idea of what is the best thing for them, what they envisage as the perfect goal of their life with Jesus. As with the rich young man, Jesus does not criticise them for desiring the best for themselves. As always, he takes us where we are. What he immediately does however is to teach them two essential things about Christian perfection. The first is the way to it, the path of discipleship. It involves complete commitment to the path that Jesus takes. There is considerable debate about what the cup and baptism refer to but, within the more immediate context of Mark’s Gospel, one may reasonably assume that they allude to Jesus’ suffering and his passage from death to resurrection. James and John confidently assert that they can drink the cup and undertake the baptism but I think they see these things as something like a test or trial that wins them the prize.

If this is a fair reading then it resonates with a favoured feature of modern western life—the immersion experience. I remember when I was a student in Rome in the early 1970’s meeting an enthusiastic young man who had just spent six weeks living in a poor village in Turkey, sharing fully in the life of the locals. He was so moved by the experience that he
had traveled to Rome to arrange a transfer of money from his parents in order to return to the village for a further six weeks. There are many people in the rich west willing to go and work for a time in poor villages and poor countries in order to help and in the hope of bettering themselves. But, in a way it is a role that one plays for a time and then leaves to return to the privileged western way of life. There is no way that such an experience, sincere though the motivations may be, can turn one into one of those poor villagers.

Yet, isn't this the challenge behind Jesus’ subsequent teaching to the disgruntled disciples? If you want to be the first or the greatest, you must become the servant of all and slave of all. Jesus is not talking about assuming the role of slave for a time, about experiencing privation or suffering in order to better ourselves. No, he is talking about becoming a slave and this is something quite different, a complete change. This ‘conversion’ is so challenging and radical that he is the only one who can show us how to do this and give us the power or grace to do so, because he is our model and he, the Master, became the servant of all. His elevation to glory does not mean that he has now moved beyond being a servant. Jesus is forever our servant, acting on our behalf, for our welfare, forever pleading our cause. On reflection, we can never claim to have become a servant like Jesus; given that becoming a true servant like him is our perfection as human beings, it is our whole life, which is eternal.

If the first part of Jesus’ teaching is about the way, the second involves the desired goal—a share in that glorious enthronement. He tells James and John that places at his right or left hand are not his to give, they ‘belong to those to whom they have been allotted’. Two points come to mind here. The first is that Jesus’ statement is in keeping with his subsequent teaching about being a servant. To hand out special tickets in advance to ‘my show’ is not what a servant does. That is up to the Master and the relationship between the Father as Master and Jesus as Servant is such that Jesus can trust the Father completely and leave this matter in his hands. The second is that the disciples—any disciples—should get on with learning to be servants from the master servant. Trying to secure one’s future in advance is, on this reading, a lack of trust.
Things must have looked pretty chaotic to the people of Jeremiah’s day as the superpower Babylon rampaged across the ANE, swamping the little kingdom of Judah in its wake. We fear chaos, particularly when we believe in a God who is Lord of creation and history, who gives meaning to our lives. Ancient Israelites no doubt asked where is the meaning in all this, where is our God in all this? Jeremiah and other prophets sought to provide an answer. Although inspired their responses are limited because, like us, they operate within the context of faith. But their words are meant to challenge us to think about our own situation. In the earlier part of the book, Jeremiah proclaims that Babylon’s conquest of Judah is not chaos or chance. Because the people have been so disloyal to the covenant and have polluted the land, God has summoned Babylon to remove them from it (exile).

The proclamation of divine punishment gives voice to the faith conviction that, contrary to appearances, God is in charge and everything is unfolding according to the divine will. The exile is not the work of the Babylonian god Marduk. The purpose of God’s punishment is to remove evil and restore the fullness of the covenant relationship; God is loyal to the chosen people and will in due course bring them back from wherever they have been exiled, as our Jeremiah reading for today proclaims. Those whom people may think burdensome passengers rather than active contributors to the restoration plan—the blind, the lame, women in labour—are singled out for special mention. In God’s plan these have as important a role to play as the healthy, the clever, the wealthy. Jeremiah’s sweeping vision of God’s restoration seeks to restore the faith of a shattered people, yet the tone of God’s judgement and punishment that precede it contain a disturbing factor that resonates with our world today: are human beings good news for creation? Let us imagine a modern parallel to the book of Jeremiah: a prophet announces that because we voracious consumers
have so damaged Australia, God has decided to exile us to New Zealand (God help them) in order to give the land time to recover from our destruc-
tive ways. In God’s good time, we will be returned in the hope that, maybe next time, we will get it right.

The prophecies of Jeremiah urge us to believe that are all embraced
within God’s saving purpose, however chaotic and meaningless the world
may appear to be, and however insignificant people may think they are. Our Gospel reading seeks to do much the same via the story of a blind
man, Bartimaeus. He is the one who to all intents and purposes looks to
be the ultimate outsider, the forgotten person who sits ‘at the side of the
road’ with Jesus and the crowd passing by. Despite the crowd’s attempts
to shut him up, Jesus hears his cry and grants his petition. The key words
that Jesus says are ‘your faith has saved you.’ Bartimaeus cried out to Jesus
because he had faith and was saved. The message is that faith is the bond
that unites Jesus and the believer and overcomes whatever barriers we
might think impede it (space and time) or whatever barriers others may
try to erect between the believer and Jesus (insiders and outsiders). The
one who believes in Jesus is a treasured member of his kingdom, is never
alone and never forgotten.

While I am attracted to both these texts and the assurances they off-
er the believer, I fi nd it diffi  cult to escape the sense of being something of an
observer, at a distance from them. I have never been in exile and have nev-
er suffered the kind of disability that afflicted Bartimaeus. Even though I
rejoice in the healing of sick and disabled people, and am relieved that an-
other group of displaced refugees have found haven somewhere, and even
though I will contribute something to an appeal on their behalf, there is
still a distance between myself and them. It’s a bit like watching the news
on TV, the way we seem to ‘experience’ so much of this kind of thing in
our modern world; as ‘concerned’ spectators rather than participants.

However, when I turn to that less immediately friendly and closely ar-
gued letter to the Hebrews I am jolted, somewhat unwillingly, out of the
role of spectator. I may be healthy and I may have a home and a homeland
but I stand along with all the rest of humanity at the door of the sanctuary,
waiting for the high priest of our faith to take away my sins by off ering up
a pleasing sacrifi ce to God. Through our high priest I have confi dence that
my contribution to the affl  iction and misfortune of others will be forgiven
and we can all become brothers and sisters rather than haves and have-
nots. There is a real sense in which the cross of Jesus, the symbol of his
self sacrifi ce for all, looms over us all. We all stand under or at the foot of
the cross. In this way I can hope to join the community of Bartimaeus and
all those exiled and affl  icted by confl  ict in our world, rather than look on
them kindly and sympathetically from a distance.
The book of Revelation’s dramatic picture of the assembled saints in heaven, ‘a huge number, impossible to count’, is a heartening one for us struggling to emulate them. It’s a very fitting way to end the Bible story of humanity but it also calls to mind, for me at least, the rather less than dramatic and triumphant story of how it all began—the garden story of Adam and Eve.

Comparing one picture of humanity with the other raises all kinds of questions about the nature of human life and how we get from one to the other. The garden story contains some powerful and challenging ideas about us in its simple storyline—Adam and Eve stand for all of us. A key element of its torah or teaching is our difficulty or inability to accept the human condition, to be creature. The serpent’s advertising blurb is one that we fall for all the time: ‘eat this/do this and you will transcend the human condition’ (be like God). An essential part of the serpent’s sales pitch is to convince the couple that the rival is really lying about the product. This creates the distorted perception of God and God’s law/torah that justifies transgressing its boundaries. But in a telling irony, the attempt to do so, to escape the human condition as set up by God, ends up with them (and us) erecting our own boundaries or barriers (clothes, hiding from God). There is an uncanny similarity here to our modern attempts to cross sexual boundaries, food and drink boundaries, economic boundaries, environmental boundaries, etc on our (distorted) terms.

The saints throughout the ages have read their Bible with devotion and tried to live by it to the best of their ability within their time and place. With the help of God’s grace they have negotiated a way through the various distortions and misconceptions that confronted them. The variety of saintly lives is testimony to the incarnational nature of God’s grace; it reaches the heights and depths of each individual life. Given the uniqueness of each saint’s life what might be a common factor that helps us lesser
mortals? Some think that the key ingredient is that our lives here are a testing ground. God wants to see whether we are worthy and the saints provide models of those who passed the test. Well and good, but why does God have to test me when God knows me more fully and intimately than I can ever know myself? Another angle is to see life a bit like a cricket match. You’re out there batting away and you keep looking up at the scoreboard to see whether you have enough runs to secure you place and help win the match (build up treasures in heaven). Another perception is that it is about self denial, purging oneself of any personal desire to desire only the things of heaven—to keep one’s eyes firmly fixed on heaven (quite biblical).

I would like to suggest that what is essential about sainthood is the quest to become fully a human being. We live human life in three stages: nine months in our mother’s womb; however many years in this life; and eternal life (which is not going to another place because heaven is not a place). From the Christian point of view, the important thing about being born is that the fragile bundle of cells that commences in the mother’s womb is unique and eternal, never to be repeated on the face of the earth or in heaven.

The important thing about our earthly life is learning to be creature and not creator. By following the Bible and its wise interpreters over the centuries, we can hopefully avoid the trap of the garden story, of trying to supplant God. This is what I take the injunction to keep our eyes on heavenly, not earthly, things to mean. It is not to encourage us to imagine what heaven may be like but to remind us that God is the only one who can enable us to become fully human in this world. I can’t speak for those whose earthly life is cut short, but for those of us who make it to adulthood, a key purpose of our life is learning to be and live as God’s creature. As the beatitudes in Matthew’s Gospel indicate, there is a variety of ways in which one grows as a human being, becoming virtuous or ‘blessed’. As we know so well from the lives of the saints, each one’s path to perfection was personally his or hers, a unique vocation. But there is something in this life that joins us all and it is death, however painful and frightening it may appear. The human being is apparently the only animal conscious of the inevitability of its death and the death of every other living thing. To accept death is to completely accept being a creature and to place one’s trust fully in the creator. To put this another way, it is to become fully human in this life and it is the entry point to the third stage of our life. As we die to our first life in our mothers’ wombs in order to enter this life, so
we die to this earthly life in order to enter eternal life. Our growth in the fullness of humanity, which is to be in the image and likeness of God, will of course continue in heaven. Whatever heaven may be it is certainly not a place of ‘eternal rest’! To return to the book of Revelation, the saints seem to be completely occupied in shouting their praises of God, and doing so very gladly.
Thirty First Sunday of the Year
Deuteronomy 6:2–6; Hebrews 7:23–28; Mark 12:28–34

The two commandments that Jesus names in reply to the scribe’s question are straight quotations from the Pentateuch or Torah. The origin of the first one, the command to love God, is clear from our first reading. This is the famous shema’ Israel or ‘hear O Israel’ that commences the synagogue service on the Sabbath. In the book of Deuteronomy it comes after the proclamation of the Decalogue in chapter 5 and commences a series of homilies or paranetic exhortations on the necessity of maintaining exclusive devotion to YHWH and rejection of all other gods. Scholars debate whether Deuteronomy is monotheistic (there is only one God) or henotheistic (worship only one God). If the latter then it is still taking the cult of other gods seriously whether or not the theologians behind the book (now generally regarded as a reform manifesto of the late monarchical period) actually attributed any divine reality to the beings venerated in such cults. The book of Leviticus, from which the second quotation is taken (19:18), is regarded as the manifesto of the priestly caste and somewhat later than Deuteronomy. One could say that Deuteronomy campaigns for monotheism whereas Leviticus presumes the battle for it is won, at least in principle.

The scribe’s question was commonly put to Jewish teachers of the time. For example, the famous rabbi Hillel’s answer was ‘What you hate for yourself, do not do to your neighbour’. We cannot prove that Jesus’ reply is entirely new and I don’t think this is the point. Jesus was quite happy to invoke the wisdom of the tradition as part of his teaching. But his selection of these two commandments as the greatest of all says something about how he sees our relationship with God and with one another. The first thing that strikes one is the occurrence of the term ‘love’ in both commands (in the biblical context ‘love’ is used to convey the sense of ‘loyalty’ rather than our romantic, emotive sense). Commitment/loyalty to a relationship with another person is to the fore. The second thing is the close
link between the two commandments. It is as though he is saying, ‘if you love God you will also love your neighbour as you love yourself’. If you don’t then how can you say that you love God? The reverse also is true. If you truly love your neighbour this must be so because you also love God who made you and your neighbour. If you don’t then how can you say that you really love your neighbour? The third thing that strikes me is there are really three commandments here because of the way the second is formulated: ‘you shall love your neighbour as you love yourself’. This implies that if you don’t love yourself then it is unlikely you will be able to love your neighbour or your God who made you. It hardly needs to be said that self-love here means anything but self-indulgence. If it did then how could it be linked to, be one with, loving God and neighbour?

So we have a trio of love commands here and as we know, twos company but threes a crowd. I remember attending a seminar once at which a distinguished systematic theologian said that it was impossible for us to relate to all three members of the Trinity at the same level. People tend to focus on the Father and the Son, or the Son and the Holy Spirit and so on. For the theologian running the seminar this was quite right and an essential part of Christianity because it reminded us that we cannot grasp the Trinity or fit the Father, Son and Spirit within our creaturely way of relating to the other. The Trinity is the basis of all our relationships as Christians but it is also the ultimate mystery and says something about how we should approach our relationships with our brothers and sisters. We can apply this to the trio of love commands and suggest that we cannot and should not try to distribute our loyalty to God, neighbour and self so as to create a balance that we think is right. Jesus does say however that loyalty to God is the first. The implication therefore is that if we put love of God first then love of neighbour and love of self will find their proper place.

As a final comment on these three love commands it is important to recognise that we are only able to love God because God has first loved us. Deuteronomy 7:7 puts this so clearly, ‘It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you . . . It was because the Lord loved you’. Our love of God, neighbour and self is therefore not a condition for winning the love of God in return. Rather, it is the consequence of being loved unconditionally by God. The reading from Hebrews expresses this in terms of Jesus’ sacrifice ‘once and for all by offering himself’ for our sake.

When we Christians think of biblical models of vocation and discipleship we instinctively think of the twelve apostles, the accounts of their call and their troubled journeys as disciples of Jesus. How refreshing, different and challenging then to find that today’s readings about vocation and discipleship focus on women rather than men and in particular, non-Christian women.

The passage from 1 Kings is to a significant degree about the call of a pagan woman to discipleship. It is a pity that our reading does not include some of the preceding verses that provide the context for the exchange between Elijah and the woman. Stories about famous figures like Elijah would have been the ancient equivalent of our modern soap operas; they were told in various settings for entertainment and instruction, were embellished if they proved popular, revised or ditched if they did not, and eventually a version ended up in the biblical text through God’s inspiration. This version has a great drought for its setting and in the story God tells Elijah that a widow in Sidonian territory (modern Lebanon) has been commanded to care for him. This is surprising because she is a member of a rival religion devoted to the cult of Baal, a fertility god. God has an uncanny knack of choosing what initially look to be the most unlikely characters. Not only is she a pagan but, in ancient society, widows, along with orphans and foreigners, were regarded as the really needy—they were not seen as providers. A second surprise comes when Elijah arrives to find there is no widow with a napkin and tray of food ready to serve him. Has God done what God said? There is a widow nearby but she is busy about her own chores. Elijah asks her for water and then food, and her testy reply signals that she is indeed the one commanded by ‘the Lord your God’ but is none too happy about it as she describes her desperate situation. Here is a woman in whom there is no guile—rather like Jesus’ approving remark about Nathaniel in John’s Gospel (John 1:47). Nevertheless, she
obeys the prophet’s instructions; after all, if it works then she may be able to keep her son alive.

In the next episode (beyond our passage), when her son is at death’s door, she gives the ‘man of God’, as she calls him, a piece of her mind. The title signals that the miracle of the jar of meal and the jug of oil has had some impact. When Elijah then restores her son she proclaims ‘Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth’. Note how the miracle of raising the dead has an impact akin to the resurrection on the disciples in the Gospels. Like the disciples in the Gospels she is now no longer in it for what she can get out of it. She is prepared to be the one believer in a society of Baal worshippers, not an easy option. Her words become fuel for Elijah’s own faith. When God commands him in the very next verse to go and confront his arch foe, Ahab king of Israel and devotee of Baal, he goes immediately. Is this a final surprise, is the story suggesting that this widow obeyed God’s command to ‘feed’ Elijah in the way that really matters—via her profession of faith?

If the story from 1 Kings is about the call of a widow to be a disciple of God, the Gospel passage is about the celebration of a widow who is a model of loyal discipleship. Notice how Jesus draws only the attention of his disciples to what she has done. He has called them to be disciples and they are not finding it easy. Hence, to instruct them he singles out a model for them; a Jewess who ‘from the little she had has put in everything she possessed, all she had to live on’. This is a powerful statement of what true discipleship means—handing one’s life over completely to God. Jesus does not single her out for the crowds to look at, perhaps because he knows too well that they would only, or mainly, see her as the stereotypical widow: someone who is to be pitied and helped but who certainly cannot make the kind of commitment that makes her a model of discipleship.

This scene in the temple can be linked to the reading from the letter to the Hebrews. The writer assures us that when Jesus our saviour appears ‘a second time, it will not be to deal with sin but to reward with salvation those who are waiting for him’. His singling out of the widow and his judgement of her can be seen as an anticipation in this earthly temple of what will happen at the last judgement in heaven. If we give ourselves completely to God in whatever forms of discipleship our lives take then we can be assured of a similar judgement and its reward, eternal life.
Thirty Third Sunday of the Year
Daniel 12:1–3; Hebrews 10:11–14, 18; Mark 13:24–32

It is sometimes said that the Old Testament proclaims a God of war whereas the New Testament proclaims a God of love. That this is nonsense is evident from a glance at the apocalyptic aspects of the New Testament, in the Gospels and in the book of Revelation. In this book in particular, we have a prophecy of the mother of all battles between the forces of good and the forces of evil and, in keeping with a constant promise in the Bible, God and the forces of good are portrayed as victorious. Associated with this final showdown is the second coming and ‘last judgement’ when the bad will be brought to book and the good rewarded. All of these prophecies or promises are important for our faith otherwise what is the point of striving for justice against the odds here and now?

Both testaments proclaim that God is the one Lord of creation and history and is utterly committed to rooting out evil in all its forms. Where they differ to a degree is that Old Testament prophets claimed to discern God’s blessing and punishment primarily within the history of their own nation. This is a logical consequence once you believe that God is guiding history to some final purpose and that Israel is the chosen people. The problem of course is that no one can monitor all of a human being’s experience/history, let alone that of a nation, and point to how God is guiding things at each instance. To do so would obliterate the need for faith. As in all things, we human beings have to make a (hopefully) judicious selection and the prophets claimed to be guided by God to do so. As the book of Jeremiah points out, people are happy to associate God’s presence with their peace and prosperity but it’s a different matter when a prophet fingers the bad as a sign of God’s punishment. Even more disturbing for ancient Israel was the prophetic claim that God would summon foreign powers to carry out the punishment. From a monotheistic point of view this is another logical move, otherwise God is not in charge of history. Even though such prophecies were understandably not gladly received, at
least they implied that war and defeat were not chaos or chance or the victory of other gods. They also meant that Israel was still the chosen people; Israel may be accused of abandoning God but God had not abandoned Israel (punishment is not rejection). Moreover, punishment was decreed for a time (70 years according to the book of Jeremiah) after which God would restore Israel to blessing. Associated with this are prophecies about the nations joining Israel to create a universal just society (Isa 2:2–4). It is all part of God’s just and merciful purpose. To put it another way, God’s just intolerance of evil is an integral part of God’s saving purpose.

The prophetic take on history was a bold and risky one and there is plenty of evidence in the prophetic corpus that it was vigorously disputed (cf Jeremiah 28). Nevertheless, the northern and southern exiles came to be accepted as God’s judgement against a sinful people, as shown by the fact that the relevant texts are in the canon of the Old Testament. But ongoing disputes about the course of history and the failure of the marvelous new age to materialise led to the post-exilic emergence of apocalyptic literature. God’s Lordship of history is still affirmed in faith but the triumphant manifestation of it is now projected to the end time when God’s purpose will be fully revealed and acknowledged.

Apocalyptic literature can strengthen the faith of any generation of readers but its focus on the final showdown can deflect our attention from the challenge of discerning the presence of God in our time and responding to it. Like Israel in the post-exilic period, a legacy of painful and at times violent disputes has made the Church reluctant to proclaim national or international events as signs of God’s blessing or censure. Was the defeat of the axis powers in World War II a sign of God’s punishment, while the allied victory was a sign of God’s blessing? And what about the Holocaust (Shoah)? The tendency is to appeal to the mystery of God’s ways and the limitations of human knowledge. Fair enough, but we seem willing enough to identify ‘God moments’ in our personal lives, normally nice ones that are seen as a sign of blessing rather than punishment. Even though they probably did not like it any more than we do, ancient Israel’s prophets felt they could not avoid the challenge of trying to discern God in the history of the chosen people, in relation to both good and evil. If they came back now, would they see our reluctance to speak of these things as laudable or lamentable (there is so much at stake)?
This feast and the apocalyptic readings that accompany it are not about the establishment of the kingdom of Christ, or his enthronement as king at the end time. As the psalm for today says ‘your throne has stood firm from of old.’ For this reason too, Jesus tells Pilate in the Gospel of John that his kingdom is not the kind that can be threatened by evil powers. If it could, then it would not be of divine origin. Jesus does not become a king through his death and resurrection. As he says ‘I am a king’ and so his death and resurrection is a revelation of what kind of king he is and what is the nature of his kingdom. This is a king who gives himself so that all may live in his kingdom.

If the kingdom of Jesus is from and for all eternity and can never be threatened, why then all those apocalyptic and other texts about the life and death conflict between good and evil, leading to a final showdown? Presumably, they refer to the full manifestation of his kingship to all creation and the acknowledgement of this by all creation. They are also meant for believers of any generation, to assure us that no matter how bad things may appear from our human perspective, in reality (the claim of the eye of faith) there is no threat to us. We are in God’s hands and as long as we keep faith, nothing can destroy our life, not even the most powerful manifestation of evil, the kind portrayed so graphically in the great battles of apocalyptic literature. Such manifestations can confront the individual or society at any time, not just at the ‘end time’, whenever that may be. This is why Paul can say with such confidence that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ—except ourselves.

This of course does not make the struggle to be good in the face of evil any less real; evil is not some kind of virtual reality, a game that we can play when we feel like it. We are fragile human beings and we need to remember our complete dependence on the power of our king in order to remain loyal subjects.
The Bible’s preoccupation with the fight against evil does however raise some questions about the devil and hell. Being an angelic being, the devil is no doubt one of the smartest creatures around and one wonders why he (the devil always seems to be masculine) keeps leading the losing side. Being so smart one also wonders why he doesn’t do a deal and rejoin the winning side rather than face inevitable defeat which, according to apocalyptic literature, is his lot. As a character in the Bible, a kind of type, does this say something about the blindness or complete distortion of perception that evil brings about? But, in another way Satan is devilishly clever, because his one way of scoring against God is to take advantage of something that God gives—freedom to make decisions. And human beings are prone to make the wrong ones.

This invites another consideration. The Church has never taught that anyone is in hell, except the devil and his cohort, but the Bible gives plenty of warning that some humans are likely to end up there and if they do it is for all eternity. Setting aside the graphic metaphors that are used at times to portray hell, what strikes me about it is that it stands as a kind of victory for the devil (and for those who end up in hell?). After all, he is able to cock his demonic snout at the divinity for all eternity, boasting that he succeeded in snatching some (even one) from God. Yet God will not destroy the devil or anyone else in hell in retaliation. God hates their evil but loves them as creatures and so they live for all eternity; if God didn’t love us we would cease to exist. It is significant that Jesus never destroys a demon in the Gospel stories; instead he tells them to clear off and leave the person alone.

If you will excuse the use of time bound words, this reflection suggests that God will spend all eternity loving everyone in hell as God loves everyone in heaven. What kind of victory is this for our universal king? Perhaps it means that, as it is wont to do, the Bible rewrites the notions of victory and triumph. For God, to ‘win’ the battle against evil is to show that divine love is not in any way weakened or embittered by the deepest evil or hatred. God will ‘spend’ all eternity weeping out of love for all those who hate God and go to hell, but will never force them to love in return. Not only would that be most ungodlike but how could the citizens of the ‘kingdom’ of hell ever become in this way citizens of the kingdom of heaven?
Extras for Year B

Extra for 2018
Birth of John the Baptist

The celebration of both the vigil and the feast means that the liturgy can combine Luke’s account of the annunciation of the conception and birth of John the Baptist to his father Zechariah, as well as the account of his birth. The annunciation text crafts a portrait of John and his mission that is drawn from a number of Old Testament texts. The requirement that he refrain from wine and strong drink echoes the announcement of the birth of Samson in Judges 13 but may have the more general requirement of Numbers 6 in mind that anyone who ‘separates themselves to the Lord’ are to so refrain. Being filled with the spirit before his birth echoes the call of Jeremiah (the first reading for the vigil), who is told that God had designated him as a prophet before his birth. The promise that he will turn many to God leads in to the following statement that casts John like Elijah. Elijah is in many ways a representative figure of Old Testament prophecy: according to the legend of 2 Kings 2, he was taken to heaven in a fiery chariot which fuelled expectation that he would return to complete his prophetic mission. The book of Malachi takes up this expectation with the promise that Elijah will come to do just what Luke promises John will do. John will be, in terms of fulfilling God’s prophetic purpose, Elijah returned. Luke effectively doubles the promise that John will turn many towards God, perhaps to assure readers that it will indeed take place, thereby cancelling the threatened curse in Malachi.

Old Testament theology of prophecy is all about the public proclamation of God’s word. God is not a God of secrets hiding things; rather the mystery that is God is continually unfolding for human beings, in this life and the next. The call of Old Testament prophets is often accompanied by a sign that indicates to the prophet, his audience, and the reader of the prophetic book, that God has singled this person out for prophetic proclamation. Luke acknowledges this element of the theology in a skilful way. Zechariah asks for some sign that the angel Gabriel’s words will come
true and the angel, somewhat ironically, turns the doubting father-to-be himself into a sign. He will remain mute before all until his son is born. This motif provides a link, missing from the Gospel passages selected, between the announcement of the birth and the account of the birth in the liturgy for the feast. Although chastised by the angel for demanding a sign, Zechariah is nevertheless given the dignity of serving as two signs of the advent of this greatest of prophets: he is struck dumb and then released from it when he writes the designated name of his son. When something important is to be announced or done, the Bible often likes to do so in threes and one could say that the third sign is provided by Elizabeth who insists that his name is John.

The clear message of the two readings is that a great prophet has been born. Yet, as the book of Jeremiah makes clear, the greatness of a prophet lies in his commitment to the word that he or she receives from God, irrespective of how disturbing this might be for the people or for the prophet—and it proved very disturbing for Jeremiah as his famous ‘lamentations’ show. John’s commitment to his mission of preaching the truth of God led to his death at the hands of Herod who could not bear to hear that truth, as others could not in their turn bear to hear the truth about themselves from Jesus.

Another feature of prophetic theology is that, more often than not, the prophet does not get to experience the fulfilment of a prophecy, particularly one of blessing. They are there for God and the people’s sake, not their own. As the first letter of Peter puts it, ‘It was revealed to them that the news they brought of all the things which have now been announced to you . . . was for you and not for themselves’. True prophets are devoted to promoting the advent of the kingdom of God. As Jesus says later in Luke’s Gospel, ‘I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he is’. John would have rejoiced on hearing this for it is an assurance that God’s purpose for the kingdom is being fulfilled, and he was privileged to play a part in it.
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Sunday matters or should matter to Christians. It is the Lord’s day and so the most important day of the week, a time for us to acknowledge God as the source, centre and goal of our lives. Because Sunday is a matter of importance there are important matters to consider on this day, such as time for prayer, worship and being nourished by the Word of God. Sunday also matters because it is a limited amount of time and these days there are a host of other things competing for our time and attention: sport, shopping, TV, travel, etc. Deciding what to do on Sundays and other major days of the Christian calendar has become something of a challenge for contemporary Christians, some would say even a crisis.

But a crisis or a challenge can provide an opportunity to rethink and refocus. The reflections on the lectionary readings for Sundays and major feasts are designed to show that the Bible itself is an invitation or challenge to think. It does not impose its views because that would be most ungodlike—according to the biblical understanding of God. Much of life is about making decisions and the Bible challenges us to decide where our priorities lie. The reflections offered are relatively short (around 800 words) so that all the Sundays and major feasts of a liturgical year can be included in one book. As a result not every reading can be given equal attention. This volume covers year C of the Roman Catholic Lectionary; previous volumes covered years A and B.

These reflections originally appeared in the *Australasian Catholic Record* over a 3-year period as ‘Reflections on the Readings of Sundays and Feasts’ (2007–9). Although not homilies they were composed with homiletic preparation in mind. In the light of readers’ comments and further reflection, some have been revised, others rewritten and new ones added in order to cover all the Sundays of the three-year cycle and make the material more accessible to the general reader as well as the preacher. Those

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1. I am grateful to Dr Gerard Kelly, President of the Catholic Institute of Sydney and editor of ACR, for inviting me to do the reflections.
who do not have a lectionary or follow its cycle of readings can easily correlate biblical text and reflection by consulting the index at the back of the book.

It may be of help to readers to outline briefly some of the major ways in which the Bible has been read over the centuries and some of the major themes that I judge the Bible addresses. A good starting point is the recognition that we all communicate by expressing something in a certain way or form and within a certain context. In the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament the preferred literary forms are narrative (story, report, genealogy, etc), poetry (psalms, proverbs, prophecies) and law (commands, prohibitions, instructions); in the New Testament they are narrative (in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles) and letters (of Paul and others). A literary form provides a creative opportunity yet imposes limitations. For example, a story usually involves a plot (such as overcoming an evil) with a limited cast of characters. A storyteller has to develop the plot towards some form of resolution and this means being selective, otherwise the story could become too unwieldy and lose something of its impact.

What authors include in or leave out of their compositions is also influenced by their historical and social context. The context in which ancient authors operated had no equivalent to the modern novel with its intricate plots, large cast of characters and elaborate detail—but even these have their limitations. Most biblical stories or parables, songs or prophecies, are fairly short and it is likely much of what we have in the Bible are written ‘distillations’ of longer oral performances. Writing in ancient times was time consuming and expensive: it is unlikely a scribe could write down all of an actual performance. To my mind they were very adept at recording the outline of a story or song, the key elements that would guide further performances. Stories, poems, Gospels and letters were written for public proclamation, elaboration and comment. Thankfully, this is still the case for our Sunday liturgies in which a short selection of texts from the Bible is proclaimed for us to listen to, to preach on and to discuss. People in ancient times had excellent memories but they also had a smaller corpus of material to memorise. We now have to rely on computers and memory sticks to store an ever increasing corpus of texts that is beyond our capacity to memorise.

I have been trained in modern western critical methods of reading the Bible but I also respect the traditional ways of reading that have been used

in the Church and Synagogue since their inception. Both have to operate with the fundamental premise that one can only understand what a text is communicating by paying close attention to the way it is communicating (in story, poem or letter form). We all do this instinctively with literature with which we are familiar: we distinguish headline from commentary, editorial from a letter to the editor, advertisement from operating manual. Sporting enthusiasts know that a headline announcing ‘cats maul dogs’ is about a football match not a brawl between pets. When we come to the literature of another culture we need to be aware that two different contexts are coming in contact—our own and that of the other culture.

One could say that the traditional way of reading the Bible in the Church assumed a close relationship between the biblical text, its inspired author or authors, and readers. When one read the book of Isaiah, for example, one heard the words of the prophet and through his words, the Word of God. One’s faith context was also seen as important. Christians believed that reading Isaiah within the context of their faith enabled them to see the deeper, Christian, meaning of the book. Inspired New Testament authors operated in this context and the Church and its theologians sought to follow their lead.

But contexts can change, and the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods in Europe led to a heightened awareness of the difference between the ‘present world’ and the ancient or classical world. One needed to reconstruct its context and ways of communicating in order to understand it. This in turn led many to the conviction that layers of interpretation over the centuries had obscured the original, real, meaning of the Bible, particularly the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. The new critical analysis set out to recover the original meaning of each book of the Bible and through this the thinking of each author. Paradoxically however, this analysis concluded that many books of the Bible had multiple authors and editors and had undergone a long gestation. One could no longer be sure which parts of Isaiah came from Isaiah and which from later editors or scribes. Historical critical analysis opened up the world of the Bible to the reader and showed how divine inspiration can embrace all phases of a text’s production, from the spirit filled prophet, to the community that preserves his or her preaching, to the careful work of a later scribe. But a clear connection between text and purported author could no longer be assured and critics of the approach accused it of fragmenting the Bible, assigning bits of texts to different authors and editors. Others shifted their attention to analys-
ing biblical books as literary works of art, irrespective of who the author, authors or editors might have been.

The context of readers has changed again more recently with the rise of psychological and social sciences. This development has shifted the focus of attention from the author to the reader, what some call the ‘subjective factor’. A lot of energy is now expended studying the dynamic relationship between a text and reader. In a sense this is a positive move because in the end it is the reader who has to say what he or she thinks a text means. The danger of course is that one can replace authorial intention with reader’s invention. To try and prevent this, critical analysis insists that one must pay attention to the way the various parts of the text have been arranged—presumably by one or more authors. Even though the traditional relationship between author, text and reader has been pulled apart and dissected by critical analysis, there is now broad agreement that we need to keep their relationship in mind, even though we will probably never get the balance quite right. We are only human beings after all. Wrestling with such issues is part of the adventure of reading and discussing the Bible, or any text for that matter. We can learn from different perspectives, differing contexts.

It is a risky business to try and identify key theological themes in the rich and varied books that make up the Bible but life is about risks so here is an attempt. A key theme is love; primarily God’s unconditional love of us and, as a result of this, our love of God, neighbour and ourselves. God hates the evil we do but loves us despite our evildoing. The biblical meaning of love emphasises loyalty and commitment. According to the Bible’s claim, Israel is the chosen people to mediate God’s love to the world; according to Christian faith, this divine love is most intensely and perfectly enshrined in the figure of Jesus. How is God’s love revealed? Primarily, so the Bible claims, through justice and mercy/kindness. It is important to remember that the Bible explores these key terms within a context of injustice and cruelty. Augustine once said: ‘love and do what you will’. If we really did love we would will to do what the lover (God) wants. But because we are flawed and sinful creatures we need to learn to love by being just and merciful. A theology of God as just means that God is intolerant of evil and acts to remove it and establish a just society or world. But God’s justice is always kind and merciful, what is best for humanity. To use another biblical term, it is about salvation.

The great challenge for biblical people, as for our selves, was to assess their experience/history in relation to justice and mercy, both on the indi-
individual, national an international scale (God is Lord of all history). Prophets intervened at times to challenge Israel about its conduct and proclaim that God would punish it for its infidelity to the covenant established at Sinai (book of Exodus). If prophets did not proclaim this message the theology of a just and merciful God would lose its authority. Punishment did not mean the covenant relationship was ended. God remained committed to Israel and would in due course restore it to the land and enable it to live as a just society, a beacon for all the nations of the world. This is a broad theological schema that makes a faith claim, it cannot be proved nor does it try to answer all the particular issues and questions that arise for each individual or each generation. This is not the Bible’s purpose. Rather, it offers a ‘big picture’ or framework within which we are challenged to make decisions about our lives.

Christians believe that Jesus is the one sent by God, the only Son, to fulfil Israel’s mission to the world. He showed his complete and unconditional commitment to bring justice and mercy to our sinful world by his death on the cross. But Jesus’ death was not just a heroic act of self-sacrifice, of giving his life out of love for us. As his resurrection revealed, it is a passage to a new and everlasting life that he invites us to share even now through the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is a grace or power that enables us to live a life of love and to build a just and merciful society.

Another important theme that courses through the Bible is what I would call the distorted perception of reality. The Bible virtually begins with it in the Garden Story. This seemingly simple story tackles a key challenge that all human beings face: to accept being a creature rather than try to become the creator. God instructs the couple that they may eat any tree but one. All relationships operate within appropriate boundaries or frameworks and within the story this instruction establishes the appropriate boundary. The temptation is to cross it on our terms (eat the fruit of the tree) in the belief that we will then be in control (you will be like God). This is the dream of the modern consumer: unlimited supply that will satisfy any demand. The irony is that the couple end up erecting all kinds of barriers between themselves (hiding their nakedness behind fig leaves) and God (hiding from God among the trees). Same God and same couple, but what was seen beforehand as good (God, themselves) is now seen as evil and to be feared. This distorted perception occurs in the Gospels where one group who see Jesus heal someone proclaim it as a work of God, whereas another group, seeing the same thing, claim it is a work of the devil. With such a distorted perception of reality, how can human
beings establish true justice and mercy? But God is good and loyal and comes to restore our true perception of things, and so we have the story of Israel culminating in the figure of Jesus. In a definitive response to the serpent’s bogus claim ‘eat this and you will be like God’ Jesus proclaims ‘those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life’. In an echo of Genesis 1:26, we will finally be remade in the image and likeness of our just and merciful God.

Hopefully, these few introductory remarks and the reflections that follow will be of some use to readers who celebrate the Lord’s day, whether as preachers in the liturgy who need to prepare a homily, or worshippers in our churches who listen to the readings. They may also be of some use to any who are curious about what the Bible has to say to our world.
Reflections on Readings for Year C
In contrast to the other Evangelists Luke wrote a two–volume work, the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. The first tells the story of Jesus’ life and ministry, the second that of the fledgling church community that he founded. One of Luke’s aims is to show how the life and ministry of Jesus transforms our understanding of time and place, thereby giving authentic meaning and purpose to human life. He presents Jesus as the one who inaugurates the definitive or final era of God’s saving purpose for the world; he fulfils the promises of the Old Testament. In doing so Jesus also, according to Luke, transforms or ‘fills up’ their meaning; they are understood in a new light. Jesus also transforms our perception of place. The account of his birth (Luke 2) commences with a decree from the Roman Emperor to number the ‘whole world’. It affects a seemingly insignificant couple on the margins of the Roman world, Mary and Joseph. Luke’s two–volume work concludes with a reversal of this scenario: Paul, a prisoner within the Roman world, arrives at its centre with Jesus’ decree—the Good News of the Gospel—inviting all to join the one community that matters, the ‘kingdom of God’. Caesar’s decree is about information and control mechanisms (a census); Jesus’ decree is about freedom from such controls and the formation of right relationships.

We understand a whole via its parts, hence, in order to gain some appreciation of the Gospel it is worth identifying its constituent parts. To do this I will make use of the work of recent commentators. Most modern divisions do not follow the Gospel chapters and verses at all points. These were made in medieval Europe and are retained in current editions because of established custom. Understandably however, modern perceptions of where parts begin and end have changed to some extent and will

probably change again. As readers become more familiar with the text they can make their own judgements.

The introduction or prologue in 1:1–4 is followed in 1:5 – 2:52 by what is commonly called the ‘Infancy Narrative’, in fact the infancy narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus. The birth of each child is announced in advance by the angel Gabriel (the annunciation scenes) and is followed by an account of the birth, circumcision and naming of each child. The circumcision/naming ceremony of each is accompanied by a prophecy; in the case of John it is the famous ‘Benedictus’ of his father Zechariah (1:67–79; in the case of Jesus it is the prophecies about Jesus and Mary by Simeon (2:25–32) and Anna (2:36–38). This pairing of infancy narratives allows Luke to spell out the close relationship between the roles that John the Baptist and Jesus are to play in the unfolding of God’s plan of salvation but also to highlight their difference.

The ‘annunciation’ about John’s birth and his father’s prophecy are firmly focused on the advent of Jesus for whom John is to prepare the people. The unique status of Jesus is further emphasised in Mary’s song (the Magnificat), in the narrative of his birth and in the ‘Finding in the temple’ that concludes this section of the Gospel. The Infancy Narrative commences with Zechariah in the temple serving God (1:8–10); it ends with Jesus proclaiming to his parents that ‘I must be in my Father’s house’ (2:49), a signal of his unique relationship with God.4 In light of this it is significant that the Gospel ends with the disciples ‘continually in the temple praising God’ (24:53). Readers will find that Luke introduces other important themes in the Infancy Narrative that are developed in the course of the Gospel.

The next major section of the Gospel (3:1 – 4:13) portrays both John the Baptist and Jesus in the desert/wilderness. In contrast to Matthew, Luke does not report any encounter between John and Jesus at his baptism (3:21–22). The implication may be that the prophetic vocation is about serving God’s purpose not personal satisfaction (of meeting Jesus). John exemplifies the true prophet. After his baptism Jesus is tempted in the wilderness (4:1–13); in contrast to Israel that frequently succumbed to various temptations on its journey through the wilderness (Exodus and Numbers), Jesus demonstrates complete loyalty to God’s will (the fulfilment of God’s purpose). He exemplifies what it is to be a ‘son of God’ (cf the genealogy that precedes the temptation narrative).

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4. The Greek expression here can also mean ‘my Father’s affairs’ (cf Jerusalem Bible).
Jesus’ return from his wilderness sojourn inaugurates what can be called his ‘Galilean ministry’, a portion of the Gospel that runs from 4:14 to 9:50. It unfolds in several stages. Jesus first proclaims the ‘Good News’ in his hometown of Nazareth (4:14–30) where initial amazement turns to hostility and an attempt to kill him when he challenges their understanding of who he is. This adumbrates a theme that will develop in the course of the Gospel and reach its fulfillment in Jesus’ passion and death. Rejected by his own townsfolk, Jesus goes to Capernaum and other towns proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom of God and providing signs of its presence with a number of cures (4:14 – 5:16). In the middle of this section one finds the call of the first disciples (5:1–11). Jesus summons four fishermen from the ‘crowd pressing round him’ to become fishers of men.

Here one finds in embryonic form another important theme that Luke develops—Jesus and the Holy Spirit’s transformation of the disparate and desperate ‘crowds’, Jews and Gentiles, into the ‘people/community of God’. Within this covenant relationship with God all other relationships can find their proper place and purpose. The section 5:17 – 6:11 has a similar arrangement; accounts of Jesus’ cures frame the call of another disciple, Levi (Matthew). However, in contrast to the earlier sequence this one brings to the fore for the first time the hostility of the scribes and Pharisees. Debate ensues about the right (lawful) way to keep the Sabbath, the day of rest and healing, and the section concludes with the report that ‘they began to discuss the best way of dealing with Jesus’.

Jesus counters this hostile group by expanding his own community of disciples to twelve (6:12–16) and openly instructing them and the crowd about the nature of the ‘kingdom of God’ (6:17–49). This is Luke’s parallel to Matthew’s ‘sermon on the mount’ and commences with a version of the Beatitudes that echoes the radical reversal of the established order proclaimed in Mary’s ‘Magnificat’. It is followed by further accounts of Jesus’ healing ministry (7:1–50), in the midst of which there is the delegation from John the Baptist. Unlike the scribes and Pharisees, John does not seek to gain advantage or personal satisfaction, only the truth about Jesus. For this Jesus commends him (7:18–30).

The report of women disciples joining Jesus’ band in 8:1–3 could be read as concluding this section or introducing the last part of Jesus’ Galilean ministry (8:4 – 9:50). This includes the first mission of the twelve (9:1–11), the meal for the multitude (9:12–17), and Peter’s answer to Jesus’ question about his identity (9:18–21). The transfiguration scene fol-
lows which provides further revelation of Jesus’ identity and mission. But this climactic scene is framed by the first prophecies of Jesus’ passion (cf 9:22, 44–45), the significance of which is hidden from the disciples, and instructions about the nature and cost of discipleship (9:23–26, 46–50). Thus Luke concludes his account of the Galilean ministry on a sombre note.

Most modern commentators identify a major turning point in Luke’s Gospel at 9:51, which states ‘Now as the time drew near for him to be taken up to heaven, he resolutely took the road for Jerusalem’. The account of this journey runs from 9:51 to 19:27 and contains material that Luke and Matthew share as well as material peculiar to Luke.5

The section commences on an ominous note; a Samaritan village spurns Jesus but he refuses to take revenge on those who reject him (9:51–56), a foreshadowing of what will take place in Jerusalem? Nevertheless, the successful mission of the seventy two disciples (or seventy) that follows in 10:1–20 provides assurance for all disciples that God’s saving purpose will ultimately triumph despite rejection. The mission of the disciples also signals why the bulk of Luke’s account of Jesus’ journey is taken up with instruction of various kinds rather than healings and exorcisms (there are only 4 and each provides an occasion or opportunity for further instruction; cf 11:14; 13:10–13; 14:1; 17:11–19). Via parables, instructions, and debates with adversaries, Luke portrays Jesus expounding on the nature of the Christian community and how it is to undertake the ‘journey’ of living and preaching the Gospel.

In order to become an effective disciple, a ‘good Samaritan’, Martha needs first of all to be instructed by the Teacher. In this sense her sister Mary has chosen ‘the better part’ (10:29–42). In his account of the Galilean ministry Luke often portrays Jesus at prayer; hence instructions on prayer and its importance (cf the ‘Lord’s Prayer’) are to be an integral part of the disciple’s life (11:1–13). A text that encapsulates the theology of this part of the Gospel is the parable of the ‘prodigal son’ in 15:11–32, found only in Luke. As Eduard Schweizer points out, the customary title of this parable is something of a misnomer.6 The central figure is the father who loves equally his prodigal yet repentant younger son and his hostile elder

5. The material or tradition common to Luke and Matthew is known as the Q source, because the theory that they drew on a common source was first proposed by German scholars and the German word for source is Quelle.
son. The parable ends with the father inviting the latter to join the family and waiting patiently for his reply. There is no condemnation, no coercion. It paints a powerful and moving portrait of God's attitude to us as God's flawed and fractious children.

The penultimate stage of Jesus' journey is Jericho. His arrival there is prefaced by a third prophecy of his passion and death in Jerusalem (18:31–34). As with the preceding ones in 8:22, 44–45 the disciples fail to understand. This bodes ill for their reaction to what will happen in Jerusalem. In contrast, the blind beggar who is cured 18:35–43 sees clearly and follows Jesus on his way. It is worth noting that Luke describes those who welcome his cure as 'people' rather than 'crowd'. A highlight of the Jericho stage of the journey is the scene with Zacchaeus: he is willing to provide hospitality for Jesus as his guest and in return receives from Jesus God's hospitality or welcome ('Today salvation has come to this house'). God's hospitality or generosity to those who work in God's cause features also in the parable of the pounds that follows (19:11–27).

The Infancy Narrative ended with Jesus found teaching in the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus now again enters Jerusalem, expels the traders from the temple and teaches there every day (cf 19:28–21:38). As one might expect this arouses the ire of the chief priests and scribes (the Pharisees are no longer mentioned); disputes erupt over authority and aspects of priestly teaching (significantly the resurrection of the dead in 20:27–40). Jesus then prophesies the end of the temple and the conquest of Jerusalem, signs of a definitive stage in the battle between good and evil inaugurated by the advent of Jesus. Those who remain loyal are assured of protection and deliverance on the day of the ‘Son of Man’ (21:5–36). Luke 21:37–38 provides a summary of and conclusion to Jesus' temple ministry.

The account of Jesus' suffering and death in 22:1–23:56 fulfils the earlier prophecies of his passion and reveals a Messiah who does not conquer and rule by force of arms but by unconditional love of all, even those bent on his destruction. It is also a revelation of his complete loyalty to the Father. The saving impact of this love even unto death is signalled in scenes such as the 'good thief' (23:39–43), the centurion's confession (23:47), and 'all the people' who return home 'beating their breasts' (23:48).

Luke's account of the resurrection unfolds in four distinct episodes. There is the initial announcement to the women that the apostles do not believe (24:1–12)—this is in line with their reactions to Jesus' prophecies

7. As pointed out by Bryne (The Hospitality of God) this is another important theme in Luke's Gospel.
of his passion. This is followed by the famous story of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus: they recognise the risen Lord in the breaking of bread and return to announce the Good News to the others (24:13–35). Jesus appears to this assembly, showing them how all that has happened is in accord with the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms, and instructing them to wait until they ‘are clothed with the power from on high’ (24:36–49). The Gospel concludes with his ascension and the return of this community of believers to the temple to await the gift of the Holy Spirit that is recounted in the Acts of the Apostles (24:50–53).
First Sunday of Advent


We spend a lot of time and effort in our modern world trying to secure our future. Perhaps because the future is unknown and therefore uncertain we are driven by a desire to inject some certainty into it, to try and ensure that it comes about in a certain way. I study to become qualified, get a job, obtain financially security, raise a family, and reach retirement, hopefully with sufficient security to settle into what the advertisements present as those (almost) endless and happy senior years. The effort to set all this up takes a lot of our time and the frustrating thing about it is that we are gradually running out of time. Each of us is inevitably becoming more and more ‘past tense’ as an occasional glance in the mirror will confirm. In a way there is a deep irony in modern life, our attempt to build and secure the future is effectively an admission that it is a futile one.

The Advent liturgy offers another way of looking at the human condition and the difference is nicely captured in the readings for the First Sunday. For the eye of faith there is no end because we are all becoming more ‘future tense’. Indeed such is our ‘future’ with God that even the idea of speaking about it in terms of time becomes inadequate. But, it does serve to sharpen the contrast between the two perspectives.

The passage from Jeremiah is part of the so-called ‘scroll/book of consolation’ that commences in chapter 30. By the time a reader arrives at chapter 29, Jeremiah has pronounced the end of the old (failed) order of the kingdom of Judah. All those things in which it had invested so much effort—and so much religious and political intrigue—will disappear: temple and city will be destroyed, people and king will be taken into exile in Babylon, the land will be become the enemy’s booty. Above all, the preaching of the prophets of ‘peace’ will be exposed as a lie. Jeremiah has seen off his rival Hananiah and written a stinging letter against lying prophets who had set up shop in Babylon. But, as the death knell sounds, a counterpoint is heard: the true prophet boldly announces a bright new
future. God will bring forth a virtuous branch for David, the old rival states of Judah and Israel will enjoy a new life of blessing, and the city that had become so unholy will be given a new name that honours the quality of life it provides. God is about the future, or better, the fulfilment of the promises. This is not to dismiss the value of the past: it is important, for two reasons among many. On the one hand, it provides an instruction that can help one make decisions now, decisions that are vital in relation to the future and fulfilment. On the other hand, and more importantly, it shows that God’s purpose will not be thwarted. God can turn death into life, disaster into blessing, an end into a beginning.

Faith of course is the key and faith, in this Sunday’s readings, means keeping one’s eye on the ball.

In the passage from Luke’s Gospel, Jesus paints an apocalyptic scenario to emphasise the importance of faith for his disciples. Those who are engrossed in their world, who only see things from their human perspective, will be unable to see the purpose and presence of God except as something terrifying and threatening. For them it will look like the end. But, for those committed to faith in Jesus, this apparent end is a ‘liberation’, the fulfilment of all their pasts and futures. ‘Watch’ is Jesus’ watchword to his disciples. This doesn’t mean keeping all night vigils; rather, it means keeping the eye of faith attuned and alert. As weak human beings, we need to ask God’s help so that we do not fall into the trap of trying to secure our future on our terms and become ‘blind’ to the ways of God. Once one lives the life of faith, hope and love in Christ, the future is already secure; there is no need to worry about it. This should enable us to live our daily lives with a measure of commitment and purpose, and discernment.

For Paul, in his letter to the Thessalonians, this is the kind of life we are meant to live and his urge to progress in it should find a ready response in us. As we prepare for the birth of Christ, our First Sunday of Advent turns our attention from year’s end and being a year older to the God who makes all things new.
The conviction that the future, the fulfilment that God has prepared for us, is assured can be sorely tested at times. Where do we find the wherewithal to continue hoping in the face of ongoing disappointment, to look beyond the limitations of a particular situation, to see hope for the future where perhaps we least expected it? Our readings for the Second Sunday of Advent offer food for thought in each of these areas via three figures—mother Jerusalem, Paul and John the Baptist.

Baruch was Jeremiah's faithful scribe and disciple who accurately recorded and passed on his words. Although the book of Baruch is now regarded as a much later second century BCE pseudepigraphal work in his name, it is nevertheless true to the portrait of Baruch in the book of Jeremiah. The book of Baruch resumes promises from the great prophecies of the past, particularly Isaiah 40–66, and reaffirms them. It is a tribute to Jewish faith that the people continued to hope in the promises about Zion/Jerusalem after centuries of disappointment. Despite the grandeur of Baruch's promises about Zion’s future, which are based on equally grand promises by his predecessors, Jerusalem remained a backwater on the world stage (hinted at in the first lines of our passage). But, in a flourish of poetry, Jerusalem is here assured that her splendour will be visible everywhere ‘under heaven’ and that God will bring all her children home. Here a past word is invoked in faith to fuel hope. For Christians, this prophecy evokes associations with Mary as mother of all the faithful.

Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians while he was in prison and prisons were tough places in those days: recall the description of Peter’s chains in Acts 12. Roman prisons could turn you in on yourself and break your spirit, and were probably designed to do just that. But Paul does just the opposite, writing with joy of the impact of the Gospel on the Philippians ‘from the first day’ and the bright promise of their future fulfilment in ‘the day of Christ’. Notice how the Gospel, and the one who does its
'good work', does not impose or restrict: rather, one's freedom is enhanced to make decisions, in the words of Paul 'to determine what is best'. Even though he is physically in prison, Paul soars free in the spirit to be one in faith and hope with his community.

Scholarly introductions to Luke's Gospel note how our passage reflects his commitment to Theophilus (1:1–4) to provide an orderly account of the events 'that have been fulfilled among us'. Fair enough, but Luke is also an evangelist and master theologian. His introduction to our third figure in this Sunday's readings, John the Baptist, is as replete with theological import as it is with information. If Jerusalem is a backwater in the Roman Empire, then the wilderness where John wanders is the absolute boondocks. It is about as far away from the centre of the empire as one could get and certainly far away from its thoughts. No roads lead into it and no roads lead out of it. Hence the accounts in the Pentateuch of Israel 'wandering in the wilderness'. According to the Pentateuch, one needs the guidance of God to go into it (to Sinai) and to emerge from it (into the land). Old Testament prophets generally did not venture into the wilderness; the only time Elijah goes there is to flee the wrath of Jezebel, and there he wants to die (1 Kings 19:4). But, just as the word of God, the Torah, came to Israel in the wilderness of Sinai, so the word of God comes anew to John in the wilderness. Where humans fear to tread because it is a place of death, God creates a way of life that 'all flesh' can see.

Another feature of Luke's introduction is that John, a lone, remote figure in the vast command structure that was the Roman Empire, is commanded to announce an astonishing new project that eclipses any that the Empire might propose: construction of the 'way of the Lord'. Was John (or Luke) thinking of the proud network of Roman roads in quoting Isaiah's vision of God's royal road? Whatever the case, the metaphor resonates with our world of 'spaghetti junctions' and traffic jams—can I find my way through the labyrinth and will I ever arrive at my destination? In contrast God's royal road conveys Christ directly and unerringly to his destination—the heart of every human being. The advent or arrival of Christ, his coming into our lives, happens equally and immediately for all: there are no delays and no queues.
The readings for the Second Sunday of Advent began with Baruch's vision of God bringing 'mother' Jerusalem's children back to her. This Sunday's reading from Zephaniah speaks of daughter Jerusalem. The normal sequence is from virgin daughter to wife and mother but there may be more than initially meets the eye in this arrangement. Perhaps the Zephaniah reading was selected because it prophesies that the Lord 'is in your midst' and 'will exult over you' as a spouse exults over his bride. If the Baruch text exhorts believers to 'watch' for God coming from the east, the Zephaniah text envisages God's 'arrival' and rejoicing over Jerusalem. The fulfilment of God's purpose, of God's desire to be one with the people, is imminent.

A challenge for a faith such as Christianity with its strong eschatological flavour is how to mate the time 'in–between' with the announcement of God's grand plan and its fulfilment. There is no simple answer to this; it is part of the creative tension or dynamic of the faith, but the Bible offers a number of points for reflection. One is Jesus' exhortation to 'stay awake' in last Sunday's reading from Luke. It places the emphasis on believers to stand firm and manifest their commitment to God by their way of life. To do so is to acknowledge the presence in one's life of the God who is bringing the divine purpose to its fulfilment. Another is Paul's advice in this Sunday's reading from his letter to the Philippians. According to Paul, the time 'in–between' should not in any way lessen the sense of God in our lives or make people anxious. They should pray confidently to God for their daily needs and Paul assures them they will receive far more than these daily needs; they will receive the 'peace of God' that will guard and protect them; it is a share in that universal eschatological peace that marks the fulfilment of God's purpose.

Our Gospel passage tells of a time 'in–between' that is filled with expectation. It offers another portion of John's preaching that does not include his description of the crowd as a 'brood of vipers' in 3:7–9; perhaps
perceived as not so appropriate in the context of Advent. Luke’s portrayal of John’s preaching reflects something of the structure of a number of Old Testament prophetic books. There is the prophet’s commission and the message he is to preach (3:1–6); assessment of the current (sinful) situation (3:7–9); the call to repent (3:10–15); the eschatological fulfilment (3:15–17).

In 3:10–14, three groups approach John for advice: the crowd, tax collectors and soldiers. The instructions that John gives look quite practical and everyday but, surprisingly, they create an air of expectancy in the crowd (3:15), a hint that there may be more to verses 10–14 than everyday living, or that our daily lives are integral to God’s eschatological purpose. Two things are worth noting. First, the three groups who approach John would normally be suspicious of one another and John’s call for change hints at this. But they are at least united in their common question: ‘what should we do?’ Second, John’s injunctions appear ordinary enough but, in the context of his preaching, they allude to values associated with the eschatological age: signs of compassion (challenge to the crowd), the practice of justice (challenge to the tax collectors), the promotion of peace (challenge to the soldiers).

At times Luke’s crowds are shown to know their Bible and their air of expectancy is a correct interpretation of the significance of John’s words. However, if they need instruction for their daily lives they need it even more for the messianic age, otherwise wrong decisions may be made (a frequent theme in the Gospels). Hence, John’s teaching in 3:17–19. But here is one of Luke’s gentle ironies; as the Gospel unfolds we realise that John himself is also in need of instruction about the identity and mission of the Messiah. In 7:18, John is so disturbed by what he hears about Jesus that he sends messengers to ask Jesus whether he was mistaken. Luke 3:17–19 says something about the mission of Jesus but of itself is inadequate: there is always more to reveal, more to know. As we approach the feast of Christmas, Scripture readings like this challenge us to reflect on our understanding of Jesus and his mission. The festal, holiday atmosphere that surrounds our celebration of Christmas may give us a wrong, or at least a somewhat distorted, impression of what it is all about.
In our age of computers and mobile phones, we tend to toss words around with gay abandon, like millionaires tossing away banknotes. Perhaps it’s a way of maintaining a certain distance and freedom amid the welter of words, or a fear of being trapped by them. Things were different in ancient times; words were carefully weighed, particularly written words, because the nexus between word and action was, it seems, much stronger. The Hebrew term for word ‘dabar’ also stands for ‘thing/event’. Of course, writing at that time was expensive (think of the number of sheep skins needed for a biblical book) and time consuming, and only a minority could read and write. But more importantly I think, ancient people took their words seriously because they were acutely sensitive to their import and impact, particularly when they were writing about the mystery of God’s ways. Here, human discourse needed to tread carefully and respectfully, recognising its limitations.

We can see this in the first two readings for the Fourth Sunday of Advent. The text from Micah expresses a deep conviction, coupled with certainty and uncertainty. The deep conviction is about God’s care of Israel despite the failures and disasters that have beset her. The certainty is that this care will be manifested in a divinely designated ruler from Bethlehem of Judah (can’t get much more specific than this). The uncertainty emerges in the comment on the ‘time–between’. The Jerusalem Bible translates the Hebrew as ‘abandon’ while the NRSV has ‘give them up’ (basically the same idea). To my mind, this is too one–sided: the Hebrew verb can mean ‘give/set/put/place’ and a few other things besides. The text is expressing a conviction that God will be present to Israel in the interim (I will give/place them . . . ) but does not know how, and the ambiguity of the Hebrew catches the uncertainty. Our passage from Micah expresses hope and joy in a future that the speaker will most likely never experience. This hope encourages him/her/them to keep faith, however uncertain one may be.
about the ‘present’ signs of God’s presence. Living with uncertainty can be a sign of strong rather than weak faith. Weak faith may need certainties.

Care with words is also evident in the Letter to the Hebrews, but for a different agenda. It seeks to convey the uniqueness of Jesus’ saving death while respecting the authority of the established Word of God—the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. To do this, the author appeals to an Old Testament text, Psalm 40:6–8, to argue two things. One is its claim that God took no pleasure in holocausts (a reference to the temple liturgy); the other is to focus on doing the will of God. Admittedly, this is stretching things a bit because the thrust of the psalm and similar prophetic texts is to challenge the temptation to use the sacrificial liturgy to paper over the cracks within oneself and society (cf Hosea 6:6; Isaiah 1:10–20; Micah 6:6–8). But our author is in good company; Old Testament passages reshape and revise other ones to expand theological horizons. According to the reading, the key thing—for both Jew and Christian—is to do the will of God, and this Jesus did in a way that fulfils Old Testament sacrifices and thereby renders them unnecessary. The psalm text quoted can be invoked to show that the Old Testament was, in the limited manner of human words even inspired ones, pointing to this. In a way, the argument of Hebrews is in line with certain Rabbinic thinking that the temple sacrifices would cease with the establishment of the messianic age. They are an interim measure.

In the true spirit of the Hebrew ‘dabar’, the Gospel passage tells how words become actions and events and actions and events speak words. It is a powerful example of narrative as theology and Luke uses it skilfully to herald the imminent birth of the Word made flesh; the paradigm event in human history. In a very appropriate touch, he sets this theology of the union of word and flesh in the world of two women and the babies in their wombs. Mary has heard the angel’s word and it galvanises her into action; her word of greeting causes the flesh in Elizabeth’s womb to leap for joy. This in turn leads Elizabeth to utter a word that highlights the position of Mary in relation to all women without whom none of us would ‘take flesh’ and become human. This delightful and too brief scene (the limitations of human words) offers a proclamation and a promise: the imminent advent of the Word made flesh and the promise that this Word will ‘take flesh’ in the hearts of all who believe that the promise made to Mary would be fulfilled.
It is appropriate that Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus gets pride of place in the readings for Christmas—at both the midnight and dawn masses. It is the most detailed account and is fascinating for the contrast it draws between our world and God’s. Luke begins with the census decreed by Caesar Augustus and how the chain of command in the vast Roman bureaucracy operates to implement the emperor’s word. It works its way out from the centre through ‘officials’ to the boundaries of the empire. One has the impression that Luke understands the Roman world pretty well and is not hostile to it. In many ways it is a familiar world to us moderns and our own vast bureaucracies. The number of people who commute each day to work in an office; the intricate chains of command; the names and numbers on computer screens that hopefully correspond to real people out there with their needs and demands. When the boss cracks the whip to get something done, we jump to it. So it is in Luke’s world, the chain of command reaches out from Rome to touch an unknown couple in a distant small corner of the empire and they set out to comply with the census decree. And, like our own systems that sometimes break down, Joseph and Mary ‘fall through the cracks’ of the Roman system and end up without accommodation. And Mary is expecting her first child.

Luke may respect Roman institutions but he sees their limitations. It is at this point that he develops his powerful contrast between the two worlds. Where the Roman world is focused on the centre—the emperor—God is focused on what that world would regard as irrelevant, the fringes. The seemingly insignificant couple Mary and Joseph and their baby become the moment and the locus of a decisive divine action. Whereas the chain of command in the Roman world operates only through tried and tested officials, God’s chain of command trusts everyone. God’s angel does not go scouring the earth to find a trustworthy messenger of the good news of Jesus’ birth: the nearest ones, a bunch of shepherds, will
do just fine. Whereas Roman bureaucracy—and ours as well?—maintains loyalty through fear of penalties, the angel’s first word to the shepherds is ‘do not fear’. Whereas bureaucracies carefully guard their business deals from prying eyes, God has no secrets. The good news of the birth of the saviour is ‘to be shared by the whole people’. Whereas the nations of the world measure their worth in terms of power and wealth, the worth of God’s world is measured by a helpless baby. Finally, and it’s a nice Lucan touch, the shepherds (and the reader) are given a glimpse of the heavenly ‘office’ (the real ‘holy office’) where it’s party time; the whole heavenly host singing and praising God and rejoicing in the good fortune of us lowly human beings.

As well as drawing a contrast between the busyness of Caesar’s host and the heavenly host, there may be another point to Luke’s account here. The Roman Empire had to set in train a complex and lengthy process to find out how many people there were under the emperor’s rule; how many over whom he had to maintain control. In contrast, God does not need a census, knowing each creature immediately and intimately, and not for the purpose of exercising control over them but in order to free them from the kind of slavery that human beings impose on others. The shepherds are free to decide whether they will go to Bethlehem or not, they make their decision ‘Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing’. So it is with everyone that the saviour Jesus encounters both in his earthly and resurrected life; he frees us from the things that enslave us, that breed fear and hostility, so that we can make responsible decisions, and that is surely what being human means. If we make free responsible decisions like the shepherds and act on them then, like the shepherds, we become part of the treasured staff of that heavenly ‘office’. Note how Luke’s account of the shepherds’ glorifying and praising God ‘for all that they had heard and seen’ echoes closely his earlier description of the heavenly host.

(For reflections on the other Gospel passages for the feast of Christmas, readers can consult Sunday Matters for year A on pp 17–21 and for year B on pp 11–14.)
When we think of the Holy Family, we normally have in mind Mary, Joseph and Jesus. But what kind of Holy Family does Luke (and God who inspired him) have in mind in the Gospel for our feast? Jesus disappears and Mary and Joseph eventually find him in the temple busy with his Father’s affairs—and they do not understand what he means. One way of reading Luke is that via this passage he is sending an early signal to the reader that Jesus came to reveal the ‘Holy Family’ of the Father, Son and Spirit and that we are all invited to become members of this family, Mary and Joseph and all of us. From the Gospel point of view, the family of Mary, Joseph and Jesus only exists because of this other ‘Holy Family’ and it exists primarily for the sake of this family. The Trinity is its origin and end or goal.

In Luke 14:26 Jesus says that unless a person hates father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters he or she cannot be Jesus’ disciple. This tough saying fits well with the notion of the Trinity as the one family that matters above all others. Jesus’ message is that if we do not make him and his ‘family’ the centre of our lives then all our other families and relationships will not find their proper place or achieve their proper purpose. One can’t regard relationship with Jesus as a handy extra, something that complements the natural family (nuclear family in our society). One’s relationship with him must be central or it won’t work, such is the Gospel claim. Hence while the natural family extolled in the first reading from Ecclesiasticus is rightly treasured it is not the foundational relationship in the Christian community. Indeed, in terms of being welcomed into the family of Jesus, the Trinity, it does not matter what family background one comes from, whether the still standard model of mum, dad and the kids, the single parent family, the gay family or no family at all. Some people never know their family members because they may have died or become completely fragmented. In Christian terms, it’s not one’s background that
counts but one’s commitment to make Jesus the centre of one’s life and to live by Gospel values.

Our reading from Paul outlines some of the values by which God’s family, the ‘chosen race, his saints’ are meant to live. Paul employs the metaphor of a complete change of clothing to capture the sense of radical change and attitude that is involved in becoming a disciple of Jesus. In our modern consumer society we seem to treat clothing merely as an accessory; rapid fashion changes mean that people feel they must get the latest gear and toss the old stuff into the clothing bin. Do we have any sense of the deep symbolic value that clothing has had through much of human history? Perhaps no, perhaps yes. Our fashion frenzy may indicate a desperate and frustrating search for something that will express who we really are. We still take considerable care over clothing for weddings, ordinations, graduations and other occasions that mark major changes in our lives. The clothes may not make the man or woman but we like to think that, on certain occasions at least, our clothes say something about who we are and what we are on about. So, Paul’s metaphor may still speak to us about how we are meant to live our Christian lives.

No one can keep all the values or virtues listed by Paul and no doubt he knew it. We are fragile, limited human beings. Nor does he want us to become obsessed with monitoring our performance; this will only make us despondent about our failures. We need to remember the opening statement that ‘you are God’s chosen race’ and God is committed to looking after the saints by bestowing on them the graces they need, as long as they are open to them. As children in God’s family we will grow in virtue; it will take time but God is the perfectly patient parent and, like any parent, delights in our growth. Awareness of this should bring peace to our hearts and fill us with gratitude rather than anxiety. In a nice touch, the passage from Colossians concludes with an exhortation to the natural family of husband, wife and children. They will need to grow in virtue like every other member of God’s family but the implication is that in doing so they serve as a model for us all. Of course the perfect model here is the Holy Family of Mary, Joseph and Jesus the family that serves more than any other as a model of the ‘Holy Family’ of the Trinity.
Mary the Mother of God


The famous blessing in Numbers that Aaron and his sons are to pronounce over the people of Israel celebrates the greatest boundary ‘violation’ that the Old Testament could conceive: God dwelling on earth among the people. It’s a big moment and the Old Testament provides a long prelude to it.

The Bible begins with a story of boundary violation; Adam and Eve wanting to transcend the human condition and be like God. Paradoxically, this boundary violation creates a barrier between them and God from whom they now hide. Same God but now perceived as someone to fear rather than to trust. Just before the flood story, there is in Genesis 6:1–4 a brief report about the ‘sons of God’ begetting children via the ‘daughters of men’. The report is cryptic but the message is clear enough: this mixing of the divine and human, the heavenly and the earthly, is just not on for the Old Testament, partly because rituals of this kind went on in the cultures round about Israel. The Torah spends considerable effort to ensure that the people know their place in relation to God and keep it. Yet in a typical Torah move, once appropriate boundaries have been established between God and Israel so that Israel knows its place as God’s creature, though chosen by God, the text sets about showing how certain boundaries can be crossed on God’s authority: intimacy with God on God's terms. Moses, Aaron and seventy representatives of the people are invited to ascend mount Sinai and dine in God’s presence. Then, in a climactic move (Exodus 25:8), Moses is instructed to build a sanctuary so that God may dwell in Israel’s midst—God pitches a tent (shekinah) among the Israelites in order to bring them blessing.

Despite the intimacy symbolised by the tabernacle/tent (God’s dwelling) in the midst of Israel, the feast that we celebrate today would be regarded in Old Testament eyes as the ultimate boundary violation between divine and human, a kind of revisiting of Genesis 6:1–4. The notion that a woman could be the mother of God is an extraordinary, even outrageous,
one when you think about it. How can the time-bound, location-bound and fleeting human life of a woman mother the infinite, eternal, transcendent God? Yet it is due in part to the Old Testament conviction that the transcendent God is thereby able to be completely immanent (and vice-versa) that Christianity is in turn able to articulate its belief that Mary as the mother of Jesus is thereby also the mother of God.

The Church’s proclamation about Mary also stems from its faith proclamation about Jesus. Because we believe he is God, Mary as his mother must therefore be the mother of God (in the Greek church the preferred term is theotokos or ‘God-bearer’). Our belief that Mary is the virgin mother of Jesus acknowledges the divine initiative in his conception and his divinity. Hence the frequent use of the phrase ‘the virgin mother of God’.

In an important way therefore, the feast of Mary as the mother of God celebrates the removal of the last boundary or barrier between the divine and the human—done of course on God’s initiative, not ours. Its removal does not mean that the difference between human and divine is blurred or obliterated. Far from it. According to the Old Testament narratives, the attempt to transcend the human condition on our terms ends up creating more problems than it solves. We become more divided from God and from ourselves. Ironically, in our desire to transcend boundaries or barriers between ourselves and the person or thing we desire we end up erecting more in their place. When God removes these barriers through the life and grace of Christ, we are finally able to see our selves and our relationship with God in its true light, not the distorted feeble light of our own making.

Another important aspect of Mary as mother of God is that she exemplifies the dynamic purpose of this relationship between God and our selves. Being the mother of God involved her full co-operation in the purpose of God; in other words, her discipleship (‘let it be done to me according to your word’). Luke notes on several occasions that Mary ‘treasured all these things and pondered on them in her heart’. As mother, Mary conceived the Word of God in her womb and brought him forth for the world. Jesus, as Son of God and Son of Mary gives his life in order to make us sons and daughters of God. Hence, she is not only the mother of God but our mother as well. As disciple, Mary conceives the word of God in her heart and brings it forth in her life for the world. She is not only the faithful disciple of Jesus but our model of discipleship as well.
The Greek term Epiphany means a ‘manifestation’, especially a manifestation of the presence of the Divine in our world. This does not mean that God drops in from time to time, making as it were the occasional visit after creating the whole thing many billions of years ago. God does not inhabit any world because God is creator not a creature. No matter how many billions of universes we may discover God is present to all as creator without being part of any of them; without the creator’s presence they and we would cease to exist. We are the creatures who live in a world of time and space and are bound by it; hence we can only perceive things within this context. God understands this better than we do and reveals his presence at particular times and in particular places. These manifestations or revelations, and our perception of them, are meant to point to and assure us of God’s enduring, creative and saving presence. But the Bible claims that only those who have faith can perceive such manifestations of the divine; for others such claims are perceived as a threat that needs to be countered or demolished; for non-believers they are simply phenomena within creation or a particular combination of chemical reactions within one’s body.

For Christian faith of course, Jesus is the definitive manifestation of this creative and saving presence of God in our world. Although like us he lives for a certain time and within a particular place we believe he is the eternal Son of God and that the incarnation of this divine being in human form is of significance not only for all of humanity but also for all of creation. Once one starts making faith claims about the significance of Jesus’ ‘appearance’ it is likely to generate powerful reactions for and against, and we can see this in Matthew’s account of the visit of the ‘magi’ (apparently a Persian word) or ‘wise men’. In my judgement the account needs to be read in conjunction with a second ‘Epiphany’ text in Matthew’s Gospel, namely the account of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The Gospel is thus
framed by two accounts of the manifestation of the divine in the figure of Jesus and it is worth looking at the parallels between them.

The cosmic significance of the advent of Jesus is signalled by Matthew’s use of the star motif, widely perceived in the Ancient Near East as heralding a highly significant and imminent birth or other event. A star high in the heavens can be seen by all but, according to Matthew, the true significance of this star is only perceived by those with faith—the wise ones from the east who profess their belief that the star signals the birth of the ‘king of the Jews’ to whom they owe homage as their Lord. The manifestation of God via the star touches truth seekers everywhere, even those on the edges of the known world, and draws them to the central manifestation of God’s presence in the child Jesus. Those whom one would expect to be alert to such things, the chief priests and scribes—the wise ones in Jerusalem—do not perceive the star or its significance. The arrival of the visitors and their quest disturbs rather than gladdens them. King Herod exemplifies those who perceive such faith claims as a threat to their own position. Their distorted perception of reality drives them to eliminate the threat, an absurd reaction—according to the Bible—given that God is their saviour not their destroyer.

Matthew’s account of the visit of the wise men is tinged with foreboding and danger; in this sense it points to his second Epiphany account, that of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Here we find another cosmic sign—an earthquake—that leads other outsiders, the centurion and his squad, to profess their conviction that ‘Truly this man was God’s Son’ (27:54). In contrast, the chief priests and elders in Jerusalem remain unmoved while the governor, Pilate, delivers the execution order because of fear about his position rather than because of any wrong that Jesus has done. As the death of Jesus is marked by a cosmic phenomenon, an earthquake, so is his resurrection. It is as if the whole earth opens for the manifestation of the resurrected Jesus, and the blazing light of the angel illuminates this central site as the star illuminated the location of Jesus and Mary for the wise men.

It is well to remember that it is not only the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and the governor Pilate who fail to see the saviour of the world in their midst. Jesus’ own disciples abandon him when he is arrested and executed. Fear distorts their faith perception of reality and they see in the crucified Jesus no manifestation of the divine, no enthronement of the Messiah, the king of the Jews. We also need to avoid the tendency to think that what is recounted in the Gospels is ‘past tense’, we live in the time of the resur-
rected Jesus, the presence of the Holy Spirit and the community of the true Church. But Matthew is surely signalling that if the manifestation of God in the person of Jesus was a massive challenge to his contemporaries then it is also a massive challenge to our generation and indeed any generation. Jesus is forever contemporary, a sign of the presence of God in our midst and our desperate need to be transformed. The precise nature of the challenge may be different because each person and each generation is unique but it would be a fatal mistake to think that after two thousand years we have got things pretty well together.
If modern commentators on the book of Isaiah are right and today’s reading was formulated during the Babylonian exile of the sixth century BCE then it is an extraordinary text. Where one might expect a prophecy of God’s triumph over the foreign power that has enslaved God’s people, we are introduced to a servant of God who will ‘bring true justice to the nations’. True justice, the justice of God, means peace and promotion of the ‘cause of right’; there will be no clamorous military parades through the streets before cowed onlookers, no smashing of enemies reduced to impotence. Some may clamour for the customary glories of victory but this servant will not be in it: he will not waver from God’s purpose until his mission is accomplished. The passage commences with God introducing the servant and his mission to an audience or reader (the whole world) before personally addressing the servant and informing him of the mission to which God has called him.

Modern commentators have also identified this text as the first of 4 such poems in the book of Isaiah that have come to be termed the ‘suffering servant songs’. Readers may like to consult the other three at 49:1–6; 50:4–9 and 52:13–53:12. In the second the servant undertakes his mission to the nations but experiences frustration and failure. He is reassured of God’s presence and power and in the third song proclaims his commitment to the mission despite rejection and beatings. The fourth and longest song tells of the suffering and death of the servant but also proclaims that through his death this innocent righteous one will make many (the nations) righteous. Even though the servant is presented as an individual throughout, he is named Israel in 49:3. If the poems are meant to be read as integral parts of a whole then they present Israel’s mission to be a light to the Gentiles in a new and challenging way. For Christians, Jesus is the Israelite who is able to fulfil Israel’s mission. The presentation of the servant’s mission, his rejection and persecution, and the saving nature of his
death, foreshadows the Gospel story of Jesus in an uncanny way. One can see why New Testament writers were fascinated by such prophecies in the book of Isaiah.

The baptism scene in Luke is structured in a similar way to the first servant song. As it commences with the voice of God addressing an audience, so Luke’s account commences with John addressing the people (and readers of the Gospel) about the imminent advent of the Christ in their midst and his mission. John, the loyal prophet, proclaims the Word of God and assures his audience that he is not the Christ, the Messiah (anointed one). He also emphasises the difference between his baptism and the one that the Messiah will administer. John’s baptism is an acknowledgement of sin and a sign of repentance, Jesus’ baptism conveys a power (of the Holy Spirit) that will transform those who receive it—a new birth in the Spirit. Who are those who will receive it? All who acknowledge their sinfulness and need of God’s healing hand. Jesus’ commitment to the healing of all such sinners is expressed by his participation in John’s baptism, a compelling expression of solidarity with sinners by the sinless one. One could say that it is a narrative expression of the truth that God hates sin but loves all sinners. By the same token, one can only receive the cleansing (fire) and empowering gift of the Spirit when one acknowledges one’s sinfulness. If one does not acknowledge the need for God’s healing then this ‘sacrament’ is of course meaningless. God will not impose it; as lover God invites but never imposes.

The final part of the baptism scene in Luke has God address Jesus directly, as God addresses the servant in the Isaiah text. God’s words proclaim Jesus’ divine status and relationship to God, and signal the mission for which he is the chosen/favoured one. It should be noted however that the Lectionary text (Jerusalem Bible) is a variant reading that seeks to harmonise Luke with Matthew and Mark, and probably also with the text of Isaiah. The other and probably original reading has ‘today I have begotten you’, echoing Psalm 2:7. Jesus’ baptism is likened to the coronation of a king proclaimed in this psalm, it commences the reign of the kingdom of God in which the king offers his suffering and violent death for the salvation of the many, both Jews and Gentiles. In Luke 12:50 Jesus likens his death to a baptism, a death that opens for all a passage from the death of sin to the life of grace.

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles can also be seen to echo aspects of the passage from Isaiah, albeit in a somewhat different way. The God-fearing Cornelius represents the Gentiles who await God’s salvation.

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God does not delay and sends an angel to inform Cornelius how to get it—send for Peter. For his part Peter is cast as a servant of God who needs to be taught—about the Gentile mission. It is an indication that despite texts such as those in Isaiah, the salvation of the Gentiles still appears to be a radical and difficult notion to grasp. But, once taught by God Peter embarks on the mission and announces that the Gentiles are equally welcome in God’s house. God has no favourites or, to put it another way, all are God’s favourites. For a third time in the story God takes the initiative by sending the Holy Spirit upon all gathered in the house of Cornelius. It is a sign that they too are worthy of being baptised and becoming heirs to the kingdom of God. Also, like the servant in Isaiah, they are called to be God’s servants and to participate in God’s saving mission, each in his or her unique way.
First Sunday of Lent
Deuteronomy 26:4–10; Romans 10:8–13; Luke 4:1–13

Paul’s opening line in our second reading for this Sunday provides a nice summary of Scripture: ‘The word, that is the faith we proclaim, is very near to you’. Scripture is a proclamation of faith in words and this means that it is not history in the sense of recording the past, although it will use traditions, stories, songs and some facts from history to proclaim its faith. Each of the Gospels is a proclamation of faith and each employs traditions about Jesus and creates his story in a somewhat different manner. Thus, Mark’s account of the temptation of Jesus is very cryptic: the Spirit drives him into the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan. The wild beasts and angels are with him. Mark’s claim is that Jesus is the one who reconciles the troubled relationship between human and animal (the wild beasts are portrayed with Jesus), between earth and heaven (the angels). The wilderness is turned as it were into paradise. Mark then goes on to tell how Jesus enters the much more forbidding wilderness of our lives and hearts in order to turn them too into a paradise.

Luke and Matthew expand Mark’s basic account to highlight three temptations (the Bible likes doing things in threes), but each does so in a different order. Here we will reflect on Luke’s version. As I read it, Luke creates a prelude to his larger story: Jesus repudiates each temptation of the devil and the ‘how’ of his repudiation emerges as one reads the Gospel and Acts of the Apostles (Luke’s two volume work, now separated in the canonical arrangement of the New Testament).

The first temptation to turn stone into bread is about the exercise of power. Jesus has divine power and the challenge for any person with power (ourselves as readers are included) is whether one uses it for one’s own gain or the benefit of others. The Old Testament quote that Jesus uses to refute this temptation shows that he is on about God’s purpose as expressed in the divine word. And, as one reads the subsequent Gospel
story, Jesus is always using his power to promote the cause of God, which is to bring healing and teaching to humanity (the other).

The second temptation is about the kind of kingdom that Jesus comes to build—a prominent theme in the Gospel. In an ironic and somewhat mocking scene, Luke has the devil allow Jesus to see the whole history of the world’s empires and kingdoms ‘in a moment of time’. Anything that the devil identifies as desirable is in reality most undesirable. Luke, who lived in the Roman Empire, knew its strength and weakness. What are called civilisations do produce some nice things but, in my view, they are mainly about some living well at the expense of others. Kingdoms are founded in part on injustice, greed and indulgence, and unless transformed, these flawed foundations will bring about their eventual demise—as has so often been the case. The bigger a kingdom becomes, the more it consumes and the more it has to take from others to feed its appetites and needs. The kingdom of God that Jesus comes to establish is quite different, as one learns in reading Luke’s Gospel and Acts.

The final temptation is, in a sense, the one to which the other two are pointing in Luke, and is the most important of all. It involves one’s understanding of the nature of God. The devil takes Jesus to the place of the presence of God in Jewish tradition, the Jerusalem temple, and challenges him to test God’s loyalty and care as a parent. After all, Jesus claims to be the Son of God. An important aside to note in the temptation story is that the devil can quote Scripture for an evil purpose, a timely warning to all users of Scripture. In contrast, Jesus quotes it for a good purpose. He repudiates this final temptation because it would create a false idea of God and one’s relationship with God. God always has to do what I want rather than I do what God wants. God is the one who changes, not I. For example, I ask God for rain because there is a drought but do I change my wasteful use of water?

Another reason why Jesus rejects this false notion of God is that it would create a false notion of ourselves. The Bible says at the beginning that we are created in the image and likeness of God. Hence, we can only come to a true knowledge of ourselves as God’s image and likeness if we have a true idea of who God is and of our relationship with God. Hence, Jesus spends most of the Gospel story in Luke proclaiming by word and deed and his whole life who ‘God the Father’ is and the nature of God’s relationship with us. The challenge that Luke presents to us, which echoes Paul’s call to faith, is whether we are willing to change in the way that Jesus wants us to, and whether we sincerely believe that this is the best thing for us.
We live in an era that hankers for the definitive or peak experience and we can spend a lot of time and money trying to make it happen. In the religious arena, there can be a tendency to think that the people of biblical times had it better than us: after all they were inspired by the Holy Spirit to produce the Bible, and the disciples had the extraordinary good fortune to live with Jesus. If only we could recapture something of their experience—and Lent can be seen as just the time to try and do so. One of the contributions of historical–critical analysis of the Bible is that it blew the cover on this notion by showing how biblical people were flawed folk like ourselves and that they experienced much the same successes and failures, joys and sorrows, loves and hates as we do. True, they were inspired to produce the Bible but the church community continues to be inspired to interpret and live it. The Holy Spirit did not retire once the canon or list of inspired books was settled.

This understanding of the biblical world emerged primarily from a close analysis of the text. Biblical authors had a realistic view of themselves and their people, as is evident in the stories they produced such as the one from Genesis. Immediately prior to God’s promise to Abraham about numerous progeny, our ‘father in faith’ is shown having a good old whinge about the lack of it. An encouraging thing about this is that God accepts us as we are, as long as we are honest about who we are. A feature of the Bible is that its better characters do not hide their feelings, no matter how bad they may be. In our story, God responds to Abraham and sets out to assure him (and the reader) that God means what God says. If we stay on the level of the story’s portrayal of Abraham, this is a crucial moment for him, a kind of peak experience. Yet, in the very next chapter Abraham seems to have forgotten God’s words and accepts Sarah’s scheme to produce an heir. Is the text implying that peak experiences won’t necessarily change you for the better?
One could say something similar about Luke's account of the transfiguration. The disciples are with Jesus on the mountain; a favoured biblical site for peak experiences of the divinity. They see him transfigured and two of the heavyweights of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah, conversing with him. We want peak experiences to linger like the taste of a good wine, and Peter tries to do just that. Luke's comment is kind; 'he did not know what he said'. It will take quite a bit of time and effort for Peter and the others to learn what it means to be disciples but God takes them as they are. Not only do they enjoy a privileged experience but they are also given a privileged insight into Jesus' relationship with God ('my son, my chosen one'). Surely this is the one to whom they will 'listen', but do they and does this powerful experience change them? Apparently not or at least not yet. The next day, back down the mountain and back into our ordinary world, a man complains that Jesus' disciples have failed to heal his son. They subsequently fail to grasp Jesus' teachings and end up squabbling among themselves.

A powerful experience can have a powerful effect but biblical texts such as this one sound a cautionary note. Biblical writers were well aware that it is one thing to tell a story about a peak experience in order to make a theological point but it is another thing to actually be changed by one. A person believes or claims to have had such an experience and the risk in this is evident. Rather than hanker for what we think is that marvelous personal moment with God, it may be wiser to stick with those ordinary moments of human life and to learn how God is in them—they are the real peak experiences. Paul's readership in Philippians seems to be in some difficulties but what action does Paul recommend? That they 'join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us'. This looks like pretty ordinary stuff but, as Paul points out elsewhere, God is in flawed human beings such as Paul and his 'saints'. As the history of Christianity has often shown, the extraordinary power of God is to be found in those who seem so ordinary.
Third Sunday of Lent


Our readings for the Third Sunday of Lent bring home the importance of making decisions, and hopefully making the right ones. Having the dignity to make decisions about our life is a mark of freedom and the Bible has a deep respect for this. It invites, challenges and commands, but it never imposes. One reason for this of course is that the Bible is the Word of God and as a lover God never imposes on the beloved—our selves. This would deny our freedom to accept or reject.

The reading from the Gospel touches on two very topical areas of decision-making: the tendency to think that the problem lies with the other not me, and the tendency to procrastinate. One of the most popular themes in storytelling is overcoming the monster, the threatening evil: witness the number of books, movies and computer games devoted to the battle against evil. To combat evil is important but, as Jesus points out in the Gospel, we tend to think that the evil is in the other person rather than myself. He challenges the assumption among the disciples that the Galileans slaughtered in one of Pilate’s purges or the ones who died in the collapse of the Siloam tower shows that they must have done something wrong: bad acts lead to bad consequences. Have a look at yourselves first, he recommends, before you sit in judgement on unfortunate others.

As we are tempted to avoid shouldering responsibility and blame, so we tend to avoid making decisions, particularly those that require us to change in a direction that we know will be challenging and difficult. The parable of the fig tree is a timely warning that life is short and it’s full of decisions. To put off making a decision is to make a decision nevertheless. Why not get involved in our lives rather than settle for being merely spectators?

Decisions are important and unavoidable, but what kind of decisions should we make? A change is not necessarily a good thing; I may end up worse. In an attempt to encourage his Corinthian Christians to make
good decisions, Paul invokes the example of the exodus generation who, according to the book of Numbers, perished in the wilderness for repudiating the gift of the land. Paul is conflating a number of themes from Numbers but the key one in relation to the demise of the exodus generation involves the land. In the story, the people judge that the land God promised them is evil whereas the land of slavery, Egypt, is good—an ironic example of the distorted perception of reality that occurs when we give in to temptation. According to the book of Genesis, God saw that all creation was ‘very good’, hence to call the land evil is to repudiate God. God will not impose on the people a land that they perceive as evil, hence they will spend the rest of their lives in the wilderness and die there. According to Numbers this takes forty years, a round figure that is reflected in the forty days’ of Jesus’ temptation in the desert and our forty days of Lent. God promises the wicked exodus generation that their children, whom they accused God of bringing into the wilderness to become the booty of enemies, will inherit the land—and so they do. Bad decisions can have deadly consequences.

The first reading from Exodus provides an appropriate conclusion to our reflections because it contains a torah or teaching about right decision-making. The story of Moses is a classic example of its kind because, before he encounters God, he is cast as a ‘double monster’. On the one hand he is hunted by the Egyptians as a murderer, on the other hand he is hated by his people who think he is an Egyptian. As in the Gospels, God often calls the most unlikely and unpromising characters to discipleship. Moses must make the decision to accept or reject the call.

According to the story, there are three components in Moses’ transformation from outlaw and outcast to lawgiver and leader, and each involves a decision. The first is to accept God’s way of doing things rather than his own—which led to his pariah status. The second is to accept that he is to be in it for God’s sake not his own—God is committed to delivering ‘my people’. The third is to believe in God’s assessment of him rather than his own—in the passage that follows our reading Moses plays the ‘I am unsuitable’ card to no avail. Each vocation is unique, never to be repeated on the face of the earth, and each is capable in God’s eyes of much more than we can ever imagine. Empowered by God, Moses becomes Israel’s leader, lawgiver and paradigm prophet.
Fourth Sunday of Lent


Last Sunday’s readings offered an opportunity to explore, in a brief way, a major theological topic in the Bible: the God–given freedom to make decisions and the importance of them. This Sunday’s readings, and in particular the classic parable of the prodigal son, offers an opportunity to explore another topic that permeates much of the Old and New Testaments: our distorted perception of reality. The Bible begins with it (almost) in the Garden story: once the couple fall for the serpent’s advertising blurb (eat this and you will be divine) their perception of things becomes distorted: what was seen as good is now seen as evil (God, each other). The reading from Joshua reports the end of Israel’s long journey from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the promised land. It’s a long journey from distortion to (some) clarity of perception. In the unknown desert where one has to trust in God and God’s at times troubled servant Moses, Israel looks back to its time in Egypt and sees it, not as slavery, but as ‘the good old days’. God’s manna is compared unfavourably to what a distorted perception thinks was normal fare in Egypt (onions, garlic, leeks, surely a Jewish joke because nowhere in the text is eating such fare reported). This rebellious exodus generation is replaced by a new generation that is prepared to follow God: to look forward not backwards. Is the Pentateuch implying that one can only become fully oneself (Israel) by ultimately discarding the old self–obsessed self? According to the story, this took forty years! The new generation demonstrates true fidelity and eventually celebrates Passover, the sign of God’s liberation, in the land.

Israel’s journey in the Pentateuch is linear, from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the land. In this context, looking back proves dangerous and destructive. In contrast, the journey of the prodigal son is circular, beginning from the father and returning to the father. In his case, looking forward proves to be dangerous. For this self–absorbed young man, the future seems to provide the promise of realising his destiny and the past
is quickly forgotten. But, it proves a distorted vision that leads to disaster. Jesus’ description of his adventures is a familiar one and perhaps that is the point. We continue to be suckers for the same old advertising blurbs even as we claim to be free of them—Adam and Eve again and again. It is only when the prodigal son has been stripped of all his delusions that he is able to look back to his past life and begin the recovery of his true self. The new self that he sought by leaving his father is now the old self that he must discard by returning to his father. But, in a nice ironic twist, this apparent return to his ‘old world’ turns out to offer something that is new and transforming: he discovers a father who is full of forgiveness and who welcomes him in a way beyond his wildest hopes. As Paul puts it so well in Second Corinthians, ‘the old creation has gone, and the new one is here,’ and it is all due to God who has reconciled us through Christ. What Paul adds is that there is more to this than our reconciliation with God, crucial though this is. God’s purpose is for us to become ambassadors of this reconciliation in Christ. We do this most effectively by first confessing that we, like the prodigal son, are those have been so generously forgiven by God.

The older brother suffers from his own distorted perception. Because he has been the unchanging one, ever present and reliable, he thinks this gives him the proper perspective on his brother. But he can’t allow his brother to change; he must remain that ‘past’ brother who squandered all in the vain quest for a ‘future’. Our inability or unwillingness to see the other properly, the ‘splinter in our eye’, can distort our perception of the past or the present, or our plans for the future. Jesus portrays the father offering this bitter son the same reconciliation as the prodigal son and ends the parable, as it were, with a question mark. Can such an intransigent and hostile attitude change for the better? God is always offering us forgiveness, even now: do we do as much to those who offend us?
Fifth Sunday of Lent

Isaiah 43:16–21; Philippians 3:8–14; John 8:1–11

For a people languishing in exile in Babylon, and elsewhere in the Babylonian Empire, this passage from Isaiah may well have appeared quite outrageous or at least improbable. It promises an imminent deliverance by God that will put the exodus from Egypt (‘a way through the sea’) in the shade. Israelites may be skeptical but, jackals and ostriches, animals that are evidently not easily impressed, will give honour to God! However, the really striking feature of this text for readers of any generation is the reason why God is resolved to deliver ‘my chosen people, whom I formed for myself’. As the final line of the passage states, it is in order that Israel can praise God. The text may promise something greater than the exodus but its theology is akin to what we find in the book of Exodus: in 6:7 and 7:5 God announces that all the wonders to follow will bring Israel and Egypt to know ‘that I am the Lord’. According to the Old Testament at least therefore, all that God does in creation is for the greater glory of God.

If all that God does is for the glory of God, then it follows that all we do is or should be for the greater glory of God. But the greater glory of God also includes the greater glory of our selves as God’s children. If we are to keep our focus firmly fixed on God, this is because God is firmly focused on each one of us in a unique ‘I–thou’ relationship. Once God becomes the centre of our lives, all the other aspects of our lives can fall into place. If our relationship with God is a nice addition to my life, like an accessory, the Bible’s claim is that these other things won’t find their proper place. Paul states this clearly in Philippians. Compared to his relationship with Christ, all the things in which Paul put so much store pale into insignificance. But once he made Jesus the centre of his world, far from being enslaved he became a free man through the righteousness that comes with faith in Jesus. He can proclaim this joyous freedom while writing to the Philippians from prison.
The Gospel passage offers another angle on the freedom that Jesus brings. The story of the woman taken in adultery is a unique Gospel text because it is not in the earliest manuscripts and was probably inserted into John's Gospel at a rather late date. It has the crisp flavour of stories in the Synoptic Gospels, particularly Mark, and so could well have been a ‘floating’ story from an early collection that, for reasons unknown to us, ended up in John. The contrast between the behaviour of the Scribes and Pharisees on the one hand and Jesus on the other is telling. They are not interested in ‘the woman’ as such: as an adulteress she belongs with other ‘women’ of this type that the Mosaic law condemns. Nor are they really concerned for the law. The texts that they appeal to—Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22—require both the man and the woman to be executed. Are they appealing to the law to uphold the law or to suit their game? The woman is a pawn or object to be manoeuvred in a way that will gain them an advantage over Jesus, their real target.

Jesus will not be drawn into this cruel and pointless game and silently makes the point by doodling on the ground (something like noughts and crosses?). He rises to speak twice: the first time is to turn the focus of the Scribes and Pharisees onto themselves, to look at themselves as persons, human beings like the sinful woman (‘let him who is without sin cast the first stone’). The second time is to address the woman; he is the first person in this story to speak to her. The woman, who has been twice imprisoned, by her own adultery and by her persecutors, is freed from both by Jesus to go her way, free to accept his challenge to avoid sinning again or not to do so and presumably sin again. If she makes her encounter with Jesus the centre of her life (which does not mean she has to physically join his band) and thereby avoids sin, she will give glory to the one who liberates her and glorifies her.
Palm Sunday


The names for this Sunday, Palm or Passion Sunday, as well as the readings, invite us to compare the account of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem and the account of his passion and death. A common interpretation of the arrangement of Luke’s Gospel sees Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem as a key stage in a journey that begins in 9:51—‘he set his face to go to Jerusalem’. There is the journey to Jerusalem, the entry into the city and teaching in the temple, and the climax of the journey with Jesus’ death and resurrection. The journey begins with Jesus sending messengers among the Samaritans to announce his coming. They reject him because he is heading for Jerusalem. When Jesus arrives outside Jerusalem, he sends two disciples to prepare for his entry. This time it is the Pharisees who react with hostility and Jesus weeps over the city. Finally, Jesus sends Peter and John to arrange the Passover meal, a sign of the imminent fulfillment of the purpose of this journey.

Not only are there these structural connections but thematic ones as well. The Samaritans reject Jesus because he is making for Jerusalem. Within the larger context of the Gospel, the implication is that it will only be by Jesus’ death and resurrection that this age old animosity and division can be healed. The disciples accompany Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem with rejoicing and praise, but this is met by hostility from some Pharisees. Far from rejoicing over the holy city, Jesus weeps over it because it will reject the messenger of peace in its midst. In an ironic reversal, Jesus foresees that the city where he will become its victim will itself become a victim. Yet Jesus’ death and resurrection promises life for the city that will itself experience death. It is generally agreed that Luke’s Gospel was written in the wake of the sack of Jerusalem in AD 70. It is also worth noting that the disciples’ joyful cry as Jesus enters Jerusalem echoes the song of the heavenly host at his birth in 2:14. The human journey of Jesus begins with the announcement of peace on earth to those who enjoy God’s fa-
The disciples echo this announcement but with a difference. Jesus is proclaimed as king but peace is now not associated with earth but heaven. His entry into Jerusalem brings anything but peace on this part of earth; there is growing division and the authorities plan his demise. The charge of claiming to be a king will be a key element in their case against him, yet Jesus never uses the title in reference to himself in Luke’s Passion narrative. The accepted but distorted meaning of kingship needs to be rewritten first: it is only when Jesus is nailed to the cross with the statement ‘This is the king of the Jews’ above him that one can begin to understand what kind of king Jesus is and the nature of his royal realm. It is only in the power of his death and resurrection that the peace, which heaven (God) has decreed for the earth, can begin to make its home in those who enjoy God’s favour.

Who are offered God’s favour in Luke’s account of the Passion? No doubt all are, and Luke parades quite a variety before the reader, more than any other evangelist. There are the disciples and apostles who betray him and fail him, even Peter; there are the Jewish authorities who plot to bring him down; there is the Roman governor Pilate who fails to govern justly; there is Herod the king whose treatment of his citizens forms such a contrast to the way Jesus treats his citizens; there are those who mock him, the women who accompany him and weep for him, the two thieves crucified with him, the centurion and the crowds. Jesus offers God’s favour in a variety of gestures of reconciliation and solidarity to all those who are involved in his passion and death. These gestures culminate in his prayer on the cross ‘Father forgive them for they know not what they do’. But among all these for whom Jesus makes his final journey to death, Luke singles out one person, the thief who alone of all those around Jesus asks his favour and receives it. The exchange between Jesus and this criminal is a dramatic moment in the Gospel. Jesus’ journey is undertaken for the salvation of all but reaches its (initial) fulfillment in just one. So precious is each of us in God’s eyes that the salvation of just one makes it all worthwhile. But of course, God does not stop there.
The Eucharist is a powerful symbol of how the extraordinary, the divine, can be present in what looks to be so earthy and ordinary. Holy Thursday provides the prime occasion in the liturgical year to celebrate this.

The account of the Passover in Exodus provides its own powerful example of the divine in the ordinary and how God makes it extraordinary. Nothing could look more ordinary and innocuous to the outsider than a bunch of slaves eating a simple meal in the ghettoes of a foreign land (here Egypt): this is what slaves do and always have done. But the text of Exodus 12:1 has God say ‘this month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you’. Israel is about to enter a new time zone. As the slaves celebrate with their simple fare, God brings about their transformation from slavery to freedom; a people free to journey with God to the promised land. This freedom will be enshrined in the Decalogue with its Sabbath command. Slaves never have the freedom to rest; God’s people do.

Paul’s account of the Eucharist provides a telling contrast to the celebrations he is combating in Corinth: indulgent and elitist parties. The way he describes what Jesus did at the last supper catches something of the ordinary and everyday: the breaking and distribution of the bread, the sharing of the cup. It is the words accompanying these simple gestures that signal the extraordinary and Paul takes care to remind his readers of them. Paul’s Corinthians are focusing on the bread and the wine; Paul’s care with the words that Jesus spoke is a reminder to them of what they have lost sight of. If the gestures lose contact with the words, or vice versa, then the extraordinary reality that is the Eucharist remains ordinary and can even become debased.

John’s version of the last supper, unlike the Synoptic Gospels, does not contain the ‘institution’ of the Eucharist. Instead, John has the foot–washing episode. The difference is presumably significant and, on reflection,
the foot–washing seems to symbolise much of what the Eucharist is about. In describing the scene, John gives considerable space to Peter’s reaction and the exchange that takes place between him and Jesus. Peter’s astonished reaction to Jesus’ gesture signals that a long–standing boundary, that between servant and master, is dismantled by the actions and words of Jesus. In our world, a master can play the role of servant and vice–versa, but Jesus is not role–playing. The one who is Lord and Master, is also the servant of all. He may put on and take off the servant’s towel but he remains their servant, giving his life for all. But the one who is servant and slave of all is at the same time the Lord who has the power to deliver all from their slavery. Again the ordinary and the extraordinary are united. In Jesus it is impossible to say that the servant is the ordinary side and the Lord is the extraordinary, or vice versa. To put this another way, Jesus is the one in whom such accepted, normal, boundaries are demolished; the one who is able to bring together and unite human beings who are divided by race, class or whatever other boundaries we erect to keep others out and keep our turf safe.

Our participation in the Eucharist provides an assurance that we have the presence and power of Jesus to continue his work of reconciling what is not yet reconciled, of uniting what is still divided. And this is not only about our relationship with others but also, and perhaps even more importantly, about ourselves. Jesus dons the servant’s towel to wash his disciples feet and once Peter has got over his initial shock, he recognises his need to be washed clean all over (feet, hands and head).
The following reflection is on the Passion Narrative according to John, the one customarily read on Good Friday. A reflection on the Passion Narrative according to Luke, the one for Year C, is provided in the reflections for Palm or Passion Sunday.

There is a fine terracotta ‘Deposition’ in a church in Bologna, just off the main piazza. To one side is Mary Magdalene weeping and rushing to embrace the dead body of Jesus; to the other side is Mary the wife of Clopas, grieving at the sight of a mother with her dead son. The foreground has Mary with the dead body of Jesus. It is as if she has moved from grief over his death to contemplation and prayer. Behind them all stands the evangelist John, absorbed in the scene, with a hand raised to his cheek in an insightful rather than a grieving gesture.

This work of art captures something of John’s account of the Passion: it offers unique and profound insights into the meaning of Jesus’ death. What looks to have been one particularly ugly and brutal episode in the history of a backwater of the Roman Empire is revealed, in John’s account, as the great sign of God’s saving purpose. In an allusion to the crucifixion in John 3:14, Jesus likens it to Moses’ bronze serpent in the desert (Numbers 21). The power of God can transform what is death dealing into that which is life giving. One can see this in the history of Christian art where the crucifix, a symbol of someone condemned and brutally erased from the Empire, becomes a key symbol of life, a beautiful thing that people venerate rather than recoil from in horror.

The prologue of John’s Gospel proclaims that ‘the Word became flesh.’ One can read the Gospel as the progressive unfolding of this event and its meaning in the person of Jesus, an unfolding that reaches a climactic moment in the narrative of his passion, death and resurrection. This is signalled in the garden scene: those sent to arrest him seek a ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Jesus acknowledges ‘I am he’ and they fall prostrate as is appro-
priate before the one who bears the divine name (cf Exodus 3:14). Some see this as a sign that, in John's Passion, Jesus is in full control, marching regally and calmly to his death that is his victory over death. I prefer to see the scene as a sign that Jesus, the Word made flesh, gives himself into their hands, in obedience to the Father's will. Jesus' passion and death are not so much a manifestation of power and control but of God's love, and that love is most perfectly revealed in the one who gives himself into his executioners' hands and loves them to the end, and beyond.

At a number of stages in the narrative John is careful to point out how the words and actions of those involved in Jesus' passion and death fulfil the Scriptures. Like the serpents in the book of Numbers, the plans of those with deadly intent towards Jesus are embraced within God's saving purpose, even 'the Jews' with whom the Gospel seems to be particularly in conflict. Jesus suffers and dies for them and for us all. It is worth noting that John doesn't soften the nature of Jesus' ordeal: he reports that Pilate had Jesus scourged, crowned with thorns and mocked.

The love of Jesus that can endure hatred and rejection is a life–giving, transforming love. John shows this in a series of scenes at the cross. The first is where Jesus bestows on the beloved disciple a share in a most precious relationship; that of being the son of Mary. The second is when, on being offered wine to assuage his thirst, he 'gave up his spirit', a statement that recalls the promise of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' last–supper discourse. The third is when the side of the dead Jesus is pierced and from it flows blood and water, long seen in Christian thought as signifying the sacraments of the Eucharist and Baptism.

In order for this self–giving, transforming love of God to be authentically revealed the truth must be spoken: the truth about Jesus, about the world, about his mission. Thus John begins with Jesus proclaiming 'I am he' and recounts a number of trial scenes that reject his truth. One is particularly significant for us as readers. Paraded before the high priest, Jesus tells him to ask the ones he has taught, 'they know what I said'. This scene is framed by Peter's repeated denials that he is a disciple. Peter's 'I am not' contrasts tellingly with Jesus' 'I am he'. Jesus had entrusted his truth to Peter who fails him. Yet, Jesus loves Peter. So it is with us: Jesus gives himself completely into our hands and loves us even when we prove unworthy of that love.

After reading John's account of the Passion, one might also say that it is the Father's will that God and the nature of God be manifest no matter what reaction this provokes in human beings, and that Jesus is the Son
to whom God entrusts this most crucial mission. God is love and this is made most manifest in a situation of greatest hostility towards the Son, his execution, ironically for claiming to be the Son of the Lover. God shows love for or loyalty to humanity in the midst of hate and death by remaining loyal to us, by not responding to our violence with violence. But an essential component of God’s love for humanity is to raise Jesus from the dead. It is by revealing love for the Son in raising him from the dead that God reveals love for the world. All else depends on and has life because God loves God. The astonishing claim of Christianity is that we are invited to share in the divine love within the Trinity.
As one listens to the series of Old Testament readings during the Easter vigil, one could be forgiven for thinking that God has an almighty ego. When Abraham passes God’s ‘test’ of detachment from his son Isaac, God does not say ‘blessed are you Abraham’ but ‘now I know you fear God’. According to the reading from Exodus, the whole purpose of the deliverance at the sea is that the Egyptians and Israel ‘will learn that I am the Lord’. There is no let up in the subsequent readings either. According to the two passages from Isaiah, the Lord is ‘called the God of all the earth’, and nations will come streaming to Israel not for its sake but ‘for the sake of the Lord your God’. The reading from Ezekiel is even more strident.

Perhaps a clue to God’s unswerving resolve to be acknowledged by all lies in the first reading from Genesis, which claims that the human being is made in the image and likeness of God. The implication of this claim, when read in conjunction with the subsequent readings, is that we will only be able to live in the image and likeness of God when we know who God is. Hence the Bible expends a lot of text telling its readers about God’s name and nature, as well as identifying false images of God and false gods. For Christians, Jesus is the perfect image and likeness of God who has come on earth to show us how we can become like him. The way Jesus reveals God is a surprising and even shocking one, particularly when one thinks of the crucifixion as an image and likeness of God. Perhaps this shows just how mysterious God is and how little we know, particularly when we think we know. In a sense, it justifies the Old Testament harping on our need to ‘know that I am the Lord’ and correcting false knowledge. With the grace of God we can come to see that the crucifixion is a revelation of the nature of God because the crucified one is the resurrected one. The perfect image and likeness of God bears the marks of his suffering and
death in his glorified body. These thoughts can provide some background as we now turn to reflect on Luke's account of the resurrection.

This is a carefully arranged series of episodes that all take place 'on the first day of the week'. It begins with two heavenly messengers appearing to a group of women visiting the tomb; it concludes with Jesus himself appearing to the assembled disciples in Jerusalem. Within this frame are two references to Peter: in the first he is the only disciple sufficiently impressed by the women's story to visit the tomb and is amazed at what he discovers; in the second the disciples report that Jesus has appeared to Peter (Simon). The middle ground is occupied by the story of the disciples on the way to Emmaus and their recognition of Jesus in his words and in his breaking of bread. This chiastic or ABCB'A' structure is a classic example of biblical literary art in which each element of the structure is interrelated, with emphasis normally on the central element. In this case, it is the Emmaus story, and for good reason. It emphasises that the resurrection is a revelation: one cannot simply 'see' the risen Jesus as we see people and things in our world; Jesus is no longer contained by our world and to see him one's eyes need to be opened. At the same time the story combines word and action in an evidently sacramental fashion: Jesus' teaching on Scripture culminates in the breaking of bread, at which point he is 'seen' and vanishes from sight.

Our passage, Luke 24:1–12, commences this narrative sequence and a key to its role lies in the two men in dazzling garb who appear to the women at the empty tomb to explain, or better to reveal, its meaning. Their appearance and their words invite the reader to recall other heavenly visitations in the Gospel narrative, in particular the infancy narrative and the transfiguration. In the infancy narrative, angels appear to shepherds and tell them where to find the child Jesus. The heavenly messengers vanish and their role is assumed by this unlikely crew (shepherds in those days were often viewed as dodgy characters). They visit the manger, see the child, and return proclaiming the good news of his birth. In our Gospel passage, another unlikely group is chosen (as the disciples' reaction to the women shows) to be the bearers of the good news of the resurrection. But, whereas the shepherds were told where to 'find' the baby and could visit his manger, the women are told about someone who is 'not here', who no longer lives within our categories of space and time, who is no longer limited to a particular time and place.

In the transfiguration scene, Moses and Elijah talk with Jesus about his impending 'departure' in Jerusalem. A heavenly voice instructs the dis-
ciples to listen to him; Moses and Elijah vanish and the disciples are left alone with Jesus, but they do not listen to his words or understand that he is the fulfilment of the Torah and the Prophets. It is vital for the proclamation of the resurrection that this failure be rectified. A new group of disciples, the women, begin the process. Their heavenly visitors proclaim that Jesus’ resurrection is in accord with all that he said in Galilee and the women ‘remember’ his words: that is, they grasp their meaning. It is a crucial first step. Another crucial step is taken in the Emmaus story where Jesus explains how the suffering and glory of the Messiah is the fulfilment of all that Moses (Torah) and the Prophets proclaimed.

Finally, with all the disciples gathered in Jerusalem, Jesus appears and authoritatively links the words ‘that I spoke to you while I was still with you’ (what the women ‘remembered’) with Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. On the authority of his pronouncement and the disciples’ understanding of it, Jesus can commission them to be witnesses from Jerusalem—for Luke the centre from which the good news spreads throughout the world.

Luke’s concern to link Jesus’ resurrection to the Torah, Prophets and Psalms, his reports of the disciples’ scepticism and disbelief, signal a major challenge that the early church faced, to explain the resurrection in relation to the established Scriptures. One may discern inklings of resurrection theology in the Old Testament (Isaiah 53:12?) but its primary concern is with this life. To claim that the death and resurrection of Jesus is the fulfilment of all that Torah, Prophets and Psalms are about amounts to a massive transformation of their thinking. One senses in Luke the urgency to proclaim the resurrection yet, at the same time, the enormous challenge it must have presented to the disciples and their established world of meaning. Where might the urgency and the challenge lie today for us who believe in the resurrection?
An extraordinary thing about the resurrection of Jesus, so our readings for this Sunday imply, is that although it is nothing less than a revolution in the way one thinks about God, about Jesus, and about our selves, it brings peace. The peace referred to in our readings is not the ‘rest’ that we hope to enjoy in the afterlife but a peace that touches our lives on earth, and it is pretty lively. The resurrection signals a transformation in our lives even now. The key of course is the gift of the Spirit; the sign that Jesus died and rose for our sakes, to enable us to enjoy even now the life-giving peace that graces the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit.

The link between Jesus’ death and resurrection and the gift of the peace-bearing Spirit could hardly be closer than in John’s Gospel: as Jesus ascends from the tomb to the Father, he greets his disciples with peace and breathes on them the Spirit. What are the characteristics of the gift of peace that accompanies the Spirit? First and foremost, it is a peace that is meant for all and we are all like the disciples, living in fear behind our ‘closed doors’, as in a tomb. As the Father sent Jesus, so he now sends the disciples to bring peace to all those in need of it. The key that keeps the doors of our hearts locked up, fearful of ‘intruders’, is our sins. Hence, the disciples receive the power of the Spirit to forgive sins as Jesus did. But the Spirit of peace is also the Spirit of truth. Where the presence of sin is denied, the disciples must speak the truth because to know the truth is a person’s only chance of real peace. As Jesus spoke the truth in the face of falsehood, so the disciples are empowered to recognise and be loyal to the truth. True peace can only be bestowed when falsehood, deceit and denial have been exposed and removed.

By the same token peace is not withheld from those who express honest disbelief and denial of the Gospel claims, as Thomas does in our passage. When Jesus appears to the disciples and Thomas is among them, he extends the greeting of peace to them all and then approaches Thomas
personally about his doubt. The genuine sceptic is not excluded from Jesus’ presence because he sees such a person as a seeker after truth, honest and hiding nothing. The scene with Thomas reminds one of the famous saying in Revelation, ‘would that you were cold or hot but because you are lukewarm I am going to spit you out of my mouth’.

When we turn to the Acts of the Apostles, we can see that the gift of peace reaches beyond the church community to those who are ‘sick and those tormented by unclean spirits’. The gift of peace will only reach others if the community itself reaches out and our passage from the Acts of the Apostles tells how the community worshipped publicly and the apostles worked among the people. The community ‘increased steadily’ because people discerned the presence of God there and surely one of the signs that convinced people to join was the peace that reigned within the community and which it offered to others.

Finally, the reading from the book of Revelation shows that the Spirit of peace enables one to endure the trials of persecution and hostility with faith and hope. Far from causing fragmentation and despair in the community, John proclaims that ‘our union in Jesus’ enables him and others who endure persecution to share their sufferings and their kingdom. One may say that the sufferings that Christians endure paradoxically bring peace because they are a sign that one belongs to the kingdom that Jesus inaugurated by his own death and resurrection.
In Christ’s death and resurrection we have been reconciled with God and with one another, and made heirs of the kingdom. This is a key element of our faith but it does not mean that after his ascension Jesus passed the baton to the Holy Spirit and took a well–earned break. His reconciling ‘work’ goes on, as this passage in John’s Gospel reveals. It is a sensitive portrayal of the human and divine in Jesus. We have discovered how important it is for reconciliation that the parties involved ‘revisit’ the past in a way that enables them to identify those areas in relationships that need healing. In his encounter with the disciples at the sea of Galilee, Jesus’ sensitivity to the fragile human condition is to the fore. He invites them to revisit key moments in their relationship where failure occurred and offers reconciliation. There are no demands, no conditions to be met except acceptance of what is offered.

The miraculous catch of fish evokes, within the larger Gospel tradition, the initial call of the disciples. Within the context of John, it may evoke the great harvest that Jesus promised the disciples (4:31–38). The ones who had failed him are invited to rejoin and renew their fellowship. A sign of this is that the disciples recognise it is the risen Lord: he reveals himself to them as the one who, in John’s account, has ascended to ‘your Father and my Father, to your God and my God’. In being welcomed by Jesus to rejoin the fellowship of disciples, they are welcomed by God.

The evocation of their call to be disciples is followed by the meal on the shore of the lake and its clear echo of the intimacy of table fellowship that they enjoyed with Jesus during his ministry. Within the context of John’s Gospel, one thinks particularly of the extended account of the last supper and Jesus’ discourse. From the intimacy of this meal, one had gone to betray him, one to deny him and the others (except the ‘beloved disciple’) to abandon him.
The third reconciliation scene in our Gospel passage (and the Bible likes doing things in threes) is Jesus’ approach to Peter. The one who had denied him three times is now made the shepherd of the fledgling Christian flock. The threefold profession of love that Jesus draws from Peter recalls his threefold denial. It is not so much designed to assure Jesus of Peter’s love; as Peter himself says ‘Lord, you know everything’. Rather, it is meant to assure Peter than forgiveness is complete; nothing is withheld. No matter how bad we might think we are, and Peter no doubt thought he was pretty bad, we are precious in the eyes of Jesus who desires to form an ever deeper and more trusting relationship with us.

Any consultant or manager would tell you that you would be a mug to entrust the future or your business to such a bunch of individuals as this. Even in the Church, would we entrust key aspects of its mission to men with their ‘record’? Yet God does and entrusts them with even more than before. Thank God for God’s forgiveness because as a rule, human beings don’t forgive willingly: we may complain about memory lapses as we age but when it comes to recalling past hurts, our memories seem to remain pretty sharp. No wonder David said in 2 Samuel 24, ‘let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into human hands’.

Transformed by the reconciliation that Jesus brings, this group of fragile human beings is able to do great things. According to the passage from the Acts of the Apostles, it was not long after the resurrection that the preaching of the apostles ‘filled Jerusalem’ and greatly disturbed the authorities. They have become effective witnesses of the Gospel message. Nor do they shrink from the accusations made against them by the high priest. Because of their own experience of sin and reconciliation, they know that it is vital for all Israel, not just the high priest and the Sanhedrin, to hear the Gospel message even if, at this point, it is too challenging and difficult for them to accept.

Our reading from the book of Revelation proclaims that the ‘lamb that was sacrificed’ will triumph and that all creation will rejoice as a result. I sometimes ask myself whether, if the animal world took a vote, the majority would say that human beings have been good news for creation. I doubt it but one lives in hope. At least the book of Revelation believes that all the living things in creation will eventually vote yes, not so much because of what we are, but because of the salvation that the ‘lamb of God’ has accomplished and will bring to perfection in us.
After celebrating the joy of Easter in the preceding Sundays, this week’s readings sound a more sombre note. Although the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, tells about the great moments of our salvation it never loses sight of the reality of the human condition ‘in via’, with its triumphs and failures, its loves and hatreds, its hopes and fears.

In the reading from Acts, Paul and Barnabas are preaching the good news of the resurrection in Antioch and having considerable success. But no pastor likes to see his or her congregation going elsewhere and so the Jews of the local synagogue try to stop the haemorrhaging by targeting the successful duo. It is a seminal moment in Acts because this seems to be the first time that Jewish rejection of the good news is linked with the Gentile mission. Paul and Barnabas’s words carry a note of finality that is disturbing to modern western ears: ‘since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life’. Perhaps they are flung at the blasphemers in an effort to challenge them about the seriousness of what they are doing. Black and white or contrasting statements are employed in Semitic languages for rhetorical effect and it is difficult for us to gauge their precise meaning. The episode reveals two deep fissures opening up in Paul and Barnabas’s world: between themselves and this group of Antiochene Jews, and between Jews and Gentiles. The divisions are regrettable and painful but they can only be healed when the truth is acknowledged, and Paul and Barnabas cannot give up on this.

The book of Revelation transposes the kind of local division and strife that Paul and Barnabas encounter in the passage from Acts onto the universal plane. The particular and the universal are not meant to be separated: a present situation is in some sense a manifestation of more general issues and conflicts; one’s conviction about God’s universal triumph has an impact on one’s conduct in the present moment. Our passage from Revelation is preceded by the account of the seven seals and the four
horsmen: a vivid portrait of great trials. From it, in John’s vision, emerges the symbolically perfect number of one hundred and forty four thousand from the tribes of Israel who are sealed for life: they are joined by an innumerable multitude from all nations who ‘have come out of the great ordeal’. The vision offers hope that the divisions between Jew and Christian, between Jew and Gentile will ultimately be healed.

The great vision of the book of Revelation proclaims its faith that, in Christ, division will finally give way to communion, hatred to love, fear to hope, failure to success. What God began in Christ, God will bring to its fulfilment. The reading from John’s Gospel affirms God’s commitment at each stage of our journey to fulfilment, but particularly those stages where there is a threat to ‘the flock’. The passage unites the work of Jesus and the Father via a close biblical parallelism. Jesus says of himself, ‘No one will snatch them out of my hand’; and of the Father, ‘no one can snatch them out of the Father’s hand’. The identity of the thief in this passage is left unspecifed, for good reason. Such is the bond between the shepherd and the sheep who hear his voice that no thief, however powerful or clever, can break that bond and steal the flock. It is a message that gives us confidence to face whatever situation may arise from our preaching and living of the Easter message.

8. As noted in translations, the preceding part of verse 29 can be translated as ‘What my Father has given me is greater than all else’ or as ‘My Father who has given them to me is greater than all’. The NRSV prefers the former, the JB and NJB the latter.
Fifth Sunday of Easter


It is initially rather disconcerting that the Gospel reading for this Fifth Sunday of Easter takes us back to the beginning of John’s account of Jesus’ passion and death. The passage begins with the remark that Judah left the last supper gathering—to betray Jesus. A clue is however provided by the words of Jesus that immediately follow and which refer to his glorification and the glorification of the Father. Paradoxically, Judas’s action that will consign Jesus to the grave is the act that commences his glorification—his return to the Father from whom he came. And he returns to the Father in order that he may bring us also to the Father, each of us in our unique lives on earth.

But, as Jesus prepares to leave this earthly life and return to the Father (I shall not be with you much longer), his care for the disciples is to the fore. He gives them a new command: ‘love one another as I have loved you’. As happens so often in John’s Gospel, what looks initially to be a straightforward statement or command turns out to be much more than that. Human beings and their relationship to one another and God are a mystery that is always unfolding its meaning.

To begin with, the command to love does not resonate with our understanding of love in the modern world. How can you command someone to love? Once you start commanding people to do things you have imposed on their freedom and love is the one area where we like to believe we are free: in English we speak of ‘falling in love’. But, so the Bible claims, whereas human beings command one another in order to impose on and enslave one another, God’s commands create freedom. This is clear in Exodus 20 where God proclaims the Ten Commandments of the covenant. The text begins with a statement: ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery’. Then the ten commands follow. The theology articulated here is that the ten commands are meant to enshrine and preserve the freedom that God won for Israel.
by delivering them from slavery. Obedience to God’s commands will ensure true human freedom. Instead of being a slave to hatred, one will not murder; instead of being a slave to one’s lust, one will not commit adultery, instead of being a slave to one’s greed, one will not steal. This freedom is assured as long as Israel is completely devoted to the Lord, as the first 4 commands of Exodus 20 outline. This enables us to see that the biblical meaning of love is not the same as our modern romantic notion. It does not refer to an emotion so much as to loyalty and commitment.

Jesus not only commands his disciples to love one another; to be committed to one another, he also presents this as a new command. Does this mean that the Ten Commandments and the great summary of these in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 are abrogated. Far from it, because these are the words of God. What Jesus does is present himself as the model of how these commands to ‘love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your might’ and ‘love your neighbour as you love yourself’ are fulfilled. Jesus is the one who perfectly fulfilled these commands in his obedience to the Father’s will and is, we believe, the freest person who ever lived. Hence there is no better model for his disciples to follow. And they made sure through the authors of our New Testament texts that this model was available for subsequent generations.

But the disciples came to realise that they could not love like Jesus unless they were empowered by the same Spirit that empowered him. Hence the importance of having the command to love one another as I have loved you preceded by Jesus’ announcement about his glorification. It is only through his death, resurrection and the gift of the Spirit that the disciples and our selves are able to emulate the love that Jesus embodied and demonstrated so perfectly. Hence, our Gospel passage for today is an anticipation of the feast of Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles provides an example of the freedom that love in the power of the Spirit brings to humanity. Paul and Barnabas recount how through them God ‘had opened the door of faith to the pagans’. The door of faith is the gateway to true freedom. But this doesn’t mean that thereafter everything is a bed of roses. Loyalty to one another is incarnational, lived out in our world where infidelity, betrayal and rejection will be experienced more often than not. Paul and Barnabas encounter just this in their missionary travels and have to exhort the disciples to persevere in the faith. But we gain heart from the book of Revelation’s conviction that God’s saving purpose will triumph in the end, despite all the setbacks and failures—in particular our own.
As our Easter Season approaches Ascension and Pentecost, the liturgy contains a Gospel reading that refers to the Holy Spirit. Appropriately for this pre–Pentecost Sunday, the chosen passage speaks of the Spirit within the larger context of the mission of Jesus and the relationship between Jesus and the Father.

Our passage is part of Jesus’ farewell discourse at the last supper. But this is a farewell that, in a sense, rewrites much of what one might expect from a farewell discourse. In the customary farewell, and there are a number of examples in the Bible, the leader provides final instructions for the community, promises provision for the future and may sound warnings, distributes gifts (eg, the inheritance; in the Bible this often takes the form of blessings), and comforts those who are saddened by the imminent departure. In some stories of a master’s departure, an assurance is given that there will be a joyful reunion of master and disciples once the mission is complete.

We can identify the instruction element in Jesus’ statement that ‘If anyone loves me he will keep my word’ and its reverse a few lines later on. The striking thing about this is that if the condition of love is fulfilled then the consequence ‘will’ follow. Wouldn’t we tend to put this the other way round? ‘If you keep my word, then I will know that you love me’. We know from the larger context of John’s Gospel that one can only love Jesus when one has first received the gift (grace) of Jesus’ love. ‘Without me you can do nothing’. Those who accept Jesus’ gift of love thereby become obedient and loyal, keepers of Jesus’ word, as he was obedient and loyal to the Father. The love of Jesus shapes one’s whole moral life. There is something of Augustine’s famous saying here: ‘love and do what you will’. André Comte–Sponville makes much the same point: ‘we need morality only for want of love, which is why we need it so! Duty expresses and reveals this truth: it obliges us to do that which we would do simply out of
love, if in fact we loved.’ If only—but what is impossible for human beings is possible for God.

The provision component of the farewell discourse has, it seems to me, two elements. The first is the promise that the Father and Jesus will make their home in the loving disciples. In many a farewell discourse, the promise is made that the disciples will rejoin their leader once the mission is accomplished, or at journey’s triumphant end. One has the sense that this kind of end is still far off and there are dangers to negotiate on the way. John’s Gospel rewrites this by proclaiming that journey’s end, God’s home, is within the believer. Jesus’ departure via his death, resurrection and ascension to heaven are really stages on a journey that reaches its end—according to this passage—within us. It is an astonishing expression of God’s unconditional commitment to humanity, to the world, and an equally astonishing rewrite of traditional notions about heaven; God’s ‘dwelling place’ which of course is ‘no place’. God is not bound by any time and place. Heaven, the presence of God, is within each of us.

The second concerns the promise of the Holy Spirit. John’s portrayal of the Spirit as a teacher forms quite a contrast to the power-filling Spirit of the Synoptic Gospels. This is an image that has tended to dominate Catholic circles, at least since Vatican II and the rise of the charismatic movement. The Spirit as teacher conjures up more an image of a steady, patient, presence, someone who is not dominating and shares all their knowledge (‘he will teach you everything’). There may be an echo of this in the passage from Acts where one can read the Apostles’ appeal to ‘the Holy Spirit’ as an appeal to their teacher or adviser. John’s text on the Spirit can also be seen to catch the element of warning that is sometimes found in farewell discourses. That the disciples need to be reminded of all that Jesus said to them implies that they may forget and fail to keep his word. But they will not be abandoned; the Spirit will be as loyal as Jesus and the Father.

This brings us to the gift component and in this case it is ‘peace’. One can hear the Old Testament term ‘shalom’ in the background but this normally refers to a well-being that can be experienced, touched and tasted. John’s use of the term goes to the heart of what constitutes personal well-being, the forgiveness of sins. Jesus came to take away the sin of the world and in this lies its peace. The gift of forgiveness and reconciliation is always offered, always available, as the post-resurrection stories in John will show.

A common element in farewell discourses is the comfort offered to those saddened by impending departure. In another radical rewrite of this element, Jesus says that the disciples should be glad, not sad, that he is going to the Father. Glad, because this will result in the Father and the Son making their home in the disciples. Of course, as one thinks about this within the larger context of the Gospel and the New Testament, this is not the ultimate goal of God's purpose; the Father and the Son make their home in us in order to lead us home to them.
The account of Jesus’ ascension plays two important roles in the New Testament and we can see them in these readings. On the one hand it brings the accounts of the resurrection to a conclusion: it is effectively the last resurrection story because the resurrection is about Jesus rising to glory. Once the disciples came to believe that their master had risen from the dead, the resurrection appearances needed to come to an end; to have the ongoing expectation of Jesus appearing on earth would have distracted the disciples and the Church from its mission to preach the Gospel. It would also have created tension with the notion that Jesus is present in the community of believers, as well as the theology of the Holy Spirit. We can see Luke coming to grips with this issue in both the conclusion to his Gospel and the introduction to the Acts of the Apostles.

The differences between the two texts are striking and show that theology is to the fore, not history. Any contemporary student writing an essay with these discrepancies would receive a sharp rap on the knuckles. But the evangelists, thankfully, operated in a freer, more creative domain. In Luke’s Gospel, the focus, appropriately, is on Jesus. The resurrection appearances and the ascension all take place on the same day, the first day of the week (24:1), a hectic day to say the least! There are echoes here of Exodus 12:1 where Passover (and Israel’s liberation from oppression) is the beginning of a new era of freedom for Israel: ‘this month shall mark for you the beginning of months’. In like manner, the resurrection and ascension reveal a new presence of Jesus among us as our glorified Lord. He is no longer bound, as we are, by the limitations of time and space. One cannot see Jesus as before; he now reveals himself in our world of time and space without in any way being confined by it.

Luke’s account of the ascension in his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, focuses more on the disciples and the world of the emerging church. The work of the incarnation continues on in our world of time...
and space and Luke draws our attention to the forty days of instruction that Jesus provided for the disciples before his ascension. In biblical terms, this is a perfect period of instruction. An important feature of this instruction is to calm expectations of an imminent ‘finale’ (‘are you going to restore the kingdom of Israel?’) and to focus the disciples’ attention on their role as Jesus’ witnesses rather than on trying to know the course of history in advance. They are to become co-workers of the risen Lord in the completion of his mission on earth; when this is to be completed is God’s business. The angelic messengers in the Acts account make the same point. Just as they directed the women away from the empty tomb so here they direct the disciples’ gaze back to earth and to the task at hand.

The second feature of the ascension that the New Testament emphasises is the status of the risen Jesus and his purpose. The risen Jesus is the exalted heavenly Jesus. He did not rise back into this world—this would be resuscitation—but to heavenly glory. One could say that the ascension makes explicit the exaltation that is embedded in the notion of resurrection. The purpose of it is expressed dramatically in our reading from Ephesians.

The picture of heaven that this text evokes is a bit like an enormously powerful corporation or business devoting all its energies to something that looks to be completely without profit or advantage. Not the kind of thing we are likely to see in our world. But, this is God’s business and unlike our businesses that are primarily about their profit margins, God’s business is about our profit. God is utterly devoted to the glory of this fractious, unreliable and at times pretty inglorious creature—the human being. The pledge that this is indeed God’s purpose and that it will succeed is the exaltation of Jesus our brother above all heavenly and earthly powers: our destiny is to share in this glorification of our humanity. The heavenly powers are very glad at the prospect of this, rejoicing at our glorification. We will certainly need their support because our weaknesses and failures are all too evident. Thankfully, the bond between Jesus and ourselves is unbreakable because God has made him the Head and the Church, ourselves, his body. We tend to say of someone who gets us through a crisis: ‘she keeps her head’. Whenever we find ourselves in a crisis, perhaps our cry should be ‘our Head will keep us’.
Pentecost Sunday


Luke's setting of the gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts may well have in mind the Jewish tradition of commemorating on the fiftieth day the theophany at Mt. Sinai that heralded the great gift of the Torah (Exodus 19). According to this account God descended in a mighty storm, in fire and smoke, and spoke the words of the covenant. According to Luke's account in our reading the coming of the Holy Spirit is heralded by a mighty wind and by tongues of fire and it is the apostles who speak about the marvels of God. The Word of God took human form in the person of Jesus. The Word of God now exercises its power within the human realm through the words of the Spirit filled apostles. Luke does not portray the gift of tongues as a return to 'before' the tower of Babel. Far from it. In that story, human beings had one language and few words. Pentecost is not about the 'restoration' of one language for all of humanity but a celebration of the rich diversity of languages and that each is equally capable of being a bearer of God's Good News. It is a confident proclamation of unity in diversity. Furthermore, according to Acts, there is no one sacred language; rather, all languages are sacred.

The mighty wind, the tongues of fire, the gift of tongues all signal that the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of power. Our experience of human power is that it tends to dominate and can be a rough handler of its subjects. In contrast, God's power is perfectly attuned to the nature and needs of its recipients and empowers them in the most appropriate way. Thus, the painstaking work of a biblical scribe is just as inspired (filled with the Holy Spirit) as the preaching of a charismatic prophet, the halting English of a new immigrant as the polished discourse of a seasoned barrister.

The Holy Spirit is a Spirit of power but many other things besides. Our readings for the feast of Pentecost invite reflection on some of them.

The reading from the First Letter to the Corinthians proclaims that the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of unity. All of us are baptised in the one Spirit
and ‘one Spirit was given to us all to drink’. The work of the powerful, yet
gentle and persuasive, Spirit is to make one community of peace out of
human beings who are too often in conflict and divided from one another.
Yet the unity of the Spirit is not a defensive, ‘wagons in a circle’ kind of
unity. True, the Holy Spirit protects the community but at the same time
is always reaching out to those outside, especially those who threaten the
community. The disciples are sent to preach ‘to the ends of the earth’ in
Acts because they are promised that the Holy Spirit will be with them.
Moreover, as the Spirit of unity enters each human being that welcomes it,
it makes each human being what it is meant to be: its own particular unity,
no longer divided within itself or from others. As Paul expresses it, ‘work-
ing in all sorts of different ways in different people’. Unity and diversity
again. It is only when human beings have been so healed by the Spirit that
they can form a larger unity, a community of love and peace.

The Gospel of John teaches that the Spirit is also a Spirit of Freedom;
the risen Jesus breathes on the disciples and bequeaths to them the power
to free us from the sins that imprison us and divide us from God and from
one another. Only when freed from sin can humanity find true peace.
But John’s Gospel also teaches that the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of Truth: ‘for
those whose sins you retain, they are retained’. We can only become our
true selves when we accept the judgement of God about ourselves. In our
modern world we find it difficult to warm to the notion of God as a judge
because our popular image of the judge is one who puts people behind
bars. In the biblical world however, where there were no scientific acad-
emies or universities in our sense of the term, the word of a judge served
as a powerful symbol of truth and reliability. Judges spoke the truth and
delivered those who were wrongly accused and oppressed. God is there-
fore the judge par excellence. God’s judgment that we are sinful and in
need of healing is part of our deliverance from the oppression of sin. How
can we be healed if we deny our sinfulness or conceal it? Before a wrong
can be righted it needs to be acknowledged. For truth’s sake therefore,
sins need to be retained so that the sinner may one day enjoy the grace of
forgiveness.
Drawing contrasts can help to sharpen our ideas, and we all work with ideas of God. Try this one from a few thousand years ago. In the beginning a father (heaven) and mother (earth) god begot a brood of divine children to look after the various aspects of creation. But they, jealous of mum and dad’s relaxed life–style, went on strike. Mum and dad put their heads together and came up with the idea of another being to do these menial tasks—the human being. But, to ensure there were no more rebellions, they placed a drum inside human beings to remind them they were slaves of the gods. In that society, slaves apparently worked to the beat of the drum. We like to think that when our hearts beat fast, we are, as it were, fully engaged. Not so according to our story. That’s just the gods turning up the tempo and they can turn it down or turn it off at will. A wonderfully cynical portrait of the divine, tinged with envy and fear. It would resonate with many moderns who reject the notion of God because they believe it fosters a fearful, slave mentality in human beings.

Compare this with the book of Proverbs in which Lady Wisdom, at the dawn of creation, delighted to be with human beings. The strict monotheistic theology that gradually emerged in Israel claimed that God is absolutely perfect and has no needs at all, certainly no need for a human being. Why then did God create us, Israelites asked themselves? Their answer: God delights in creating and God’s particular love and delight is to create human beings. It is a wonderful testament to the faith of Old Testament theologians that they can make this claim and in the very same book provide a long list of the wicked things that human beings are capable of doing (Proverbs 10 – 30).

The notion of YHWH who alone is God is a powerful one but that word ‘alone’ can create some uneasiness for us human beings who are social animals. Perhaps this is why the Old Testament also claims that there is a heavenly court populated by all kinds of angelic beings, even
a ‘satan’ who acts as a kind of troubleshooter. The trouble is, that for a monotheistic religion, these heavenly beings can’t be gods. Our Christian faith claims to resolve this problem by proclaiming that God is a Trinity of persons. Within the Godhead there is the perfect community.

A new problem can arise at this point however; one might think that the perfect community has no need or interest in any other kind of community. As if to counter this, our faith proclaims that it is the very nature of God (Father), God’s Word (Son) and God’s Spirit (the Holy Spirit) to desire to share their life with us. The great sign of this is that the Son became flesh in Jesus Christ and gave his life for all of us so that we might share in his life, the life of the Trinity. As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, it is ‘through Jesus Christ that we have entered this state of grace in which we can boast about looking forward to God’s glory’. He then goes on to remind his readers that this is not just something in the future; our faith in Jesus transforms our earthly lives now and this can be seen most vividly in the way we are (should be) able to bear our sufferings, as Jesus bore his.

Another sign that the Trinity is intent on sharing its life with us is Jesus’ promise in the Gospel that the Spirit will be bestowed on the community to lead it to the complete truth. Our God is not a God of secrets, one who jealously conceals divine knowledge and power from us, as the serpent falsely claims in the garden story. In our passage from John, Jesus goes on to say that ‘Everything the Father has is mine . . . and all he (the Spirit) tells you will be taken from what is mine’. The life of the Trinity is one of complete sharing, nothing is withheld from the other. So too, the Spirit will withhold nothing from us about our life with the Trinity. That is why in another place in John, Jesus says ‘I do not call you slaves any longer but friends’. Our Bible has brought us a long way from that ancient story but, sadly, its sentiments linger on even among contemporary Christians.
Body and Blood of Christ

*Genesis 14:18–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; Luke 9:11–17*

Taken by itself, the famous miracle story of the loaves and fishes does not really point to the Eucharist. It is, along with the extraordinary catch of fish, the healing of people afflicted by disease, another miracle story. The founders and holy men and women of other religions are associated with miracles. When teaching in Pakistan some years ago I was taken to visit one of the ancient city sites in the Punjab and saw nearby a large white-washed tomb of a famous Sufi mystic. Around it were crutches, flowers, gifts and messages of thanks from those who believed his intercession had led to their healing—just like Lourdes.

Perhaps one point of such stories in the Gospels is that they proclaim that God meets us where we are, both in terms of our needs and in terms of our faith. We are all in need of some kind of healing and we all tend to think of God as a wonder worker who can bring about our healing. It’s an honest but also a pretty limited notion of God: we expect the divinity to sort things out and then remain discretely in the background like a waiter, until summoned to fill some other need. The Gospels show Jesus does not reject this limited view. He accepts us as we are in order to take us beyond our present limited horizons to something that no human being could have envisaged if Jesus had not actually initiated it. Even when Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper, its meaning did not really sink in for the disciples. It was only in the light of his death and resurrection that its extraordinary reality transformed their thinking and enabled them to see the mission of Jesus in a new light. It was all leading up to this defining moment in which the giver is himself the gift—this is my body which is given for you; this is the cup of my blood which is poured out for you. The whole purpose of Jesus’ life and death enshrined in a morsel of bread and a cup of wine: so simple and so ordinary, it’s the kind of thing that one who is looking for the wonder-working God could so easily miss. To make the connection is itself of course part of the gift, part of the trans-
forming power of the Eucharist. The Gospels were written in the wake of this transformation and are shot through with allusions to the Eucharist. We enjoy the benefit of reading them in this light but there is a danger that we can take things a bit too much for granted.

I remember a priest telling me about his work as a hospital chaplain soon after he was ordained. It was a large hospital and he was kept busy dispensing the sacraments and offering words of comfort. He felt rather sorry for the Protestant minister, a friend of his, because he could not offer patients the comfort of the Eucharist. One day, as he rushed about on his rounds, dispensing the Eucharist, he happened to see the minister sitting quietly with a patient in a ward; both engaged in silent prayer. This was all the minister had to offer but the priest saw that it was an intimate presence of Jesus to someone in need. He was so busy handing out hosts he had become a kind of eucharistic dispensary: that notion of the wonder-worker, the medicine-God is like a default setting that we can easily revert to when under pressure.

The Gospel says that it is better to give than to receive and indeed it is. But in order to be become givers, we need first of all to receive and we need to appreciate what it is that we receive. The Eucharist is Jesus’ greatest gift to us in this life, a complete self-giving that transforms our life and draws us into an intimate relationship with him and his mission. This is not only because of Jesus’ presence in the Eucharist but also because we in our turn become bearers of the gift, in ministering communion to one another. It is extraordinary to realise that not only has Jesus given us the gift of himself but that he also he invites us to join him in offering himself to our brothers and sisters.
There is a lot of talk these days about our rights and responsibilities, and rightly so. We expect to enjoy appropriate rights but we acknowledge that we also need to ensure, as far as possible, that others enjoy these same rights. Rights and responsibilities are crucial in developing the relationship between individual and society, quite a challenge for the modern western world with its emphasis on the individual.

Another way, a biblical way, of thinking about rights and responsibilities is gifts and commitment. The ‘theological’ value of this terminology is that it reminds us of God’s initiative: we receive appropriate gifts from God that enable us to become who we are meant to be and to play our part in God’s purpose for all of humanity.

The reading from Isaiah in the Second Sunday’s liturgy places emphasis on the commitment side of this nexus. A prophet is called and gifted by God to proclaim a message but, as more than one prophet discovered, it can be difficult to maintain faith in the efficacy of the prophetic gift when one meets rejection and disappointment. The prophet in Isaiah 62:1–5 vows to keep proclaiming Zion’s vindication even though there is no sign of it taking place (if so, no need for this text). In the opinion of many commentators, chapters 56 – 66 of Isaiah are a post–exilic addition that reflects the hopes and disappointments of those struggling to rebuild after the Babylonian exile. Whoever authored this text saw it as vital to keep faith in the promises for the ‘sake of Zion’ and its people, a small spec in the vast Persian Empire. There may not seem much sense of gift here but it is a vital ingredient for maintaining commitment.

In contrast, the reading from 1 Corinthians celebrates the gifts of the Spirit and their wonderful variety. Nevertheless, Paul reminds his readers that each gift is ‘for the common good’. In other words, these gifts are not just for oneself but also for the community and one needs to be committed to using them for the good of the community. Unless we do so we misuse
the gifts and fail as human beings. That is, we fail to realise the fullness of our humanity as God intends it. The passage ends with Paul observing that it is the Spirit who allots the gifts. They may not turn out to be the gifts I wanted but they are the ones that will enable me to become fully human and to contribute to the building of God’s community. Our gifts empower us for the sake of God’s people but we will need all the help we can get from God’s people to identify the gifts bestowed on us and to use them wisely.

If the first two readings invite us to reflect on God’s gifts and the commitment that comes with them, the reading from John’s Gospel tells of God’s commitment to bestow gifts upon us. As John presents the story of the wedding at Cana, Jesus bestows a lavish gift on an impoverished party (‘they have no wine’) and thereby transforms it (‘you have kept the best wine till now’). On a rough estimate, using the current seven hundred and fifty ml per bottle measure, the amount of water turned into wine like no other is over nine hundred bottles. That’s a lot of wine for any wedding party: as well as being an extravagant gift, it may also be a sign of the enormous trust Jesus places in the guests to handle such a gift responsibly.

But, as any decent commentary on John will tell you, this story is also replete with allusions to the larger purpose of Jesus and becomes the first sign of his commitment to that purpose which is the gift of salvation for all humanity. What looks to be an unfortunate accident or omission on the part of the wedding party becomes an integral part of God’s purpose. In a particularly powerful theological move, John shows that human commitment and divine commitment become one in the unfolding of God’s purpose. Mary demonstrates a mother’s commitment both to the wedding party that runs out of wine and to her son ‘do whatever he tells you’. Jesus demonstrates a son’s commitment both to his mother, even though this is not his ‘hour’, and to his Father, whose glory he has come to reveal fully in that ‘hour’.
There is a wonderful commonality between the first reading from Nehemiah and the Gospel reading from Luke. In both passages, the word of God is addressed to those who are in need, who effectively have nothing. The people to whom Ezra the scribe proclaims the law are the returnees from the Babylonian exile and those who had joined them from the ones left in the land. They had no king, no land to call their own (Judah was a province of Persia), no temple. Yet here they were being ‘given’ the law just as their ancestors had received this great gift at Sinai (Exodus 19 – 24) and upon settlement in the land (Joshua 24). It was as if their lives had been given new meaning; their fragmented lives have been made whole again. This was indeed good news. Likewise the people to whom Jesus has been sent to proclaim the good news have nothing (poor) or are in dire need of help (captives, the blind, the downtrodden). Lives that seem to have so little promise, to be empty and deprived, are to be filled with meaning and purpose. They say that we all seek happiness and no doubt this is true but I think the more foundational thing that we need is meaning and purpose in our lives. If we have these we can put up with much unhappiness and when we are fortunate enough to experience happiness appreciate and enjoy it all the more.

Yet, our Christian Bible teaches that both the law (the Torah in Hebrew which as a term for the Pentateuch means more teaching/instruction than our word law) and Jesus are parts or components of a larger whole. The New Testament claim is that, with the advent of Jesus as Messiah, the Old Testament Torah is now revealed as a key part, a stage in the unfolding of God’s salvific plan for humanity. It points to Jesus as its fulfillment; according to Paul the Gospel convinced him that one of the law’s roles is to show us that we cannot justify ourselves before God through obedience to it; we are all judged as falling short. Hence our utter need of the justifica-
tion that faith in Jesus alone can bring about. This claim was of course a major obstacle for Jews to overcome in Paul's day and remains so.

But Jesus also points beyond himself to the Trinity. He is one member of a community in whose life all are invited to share. The second reading from Paul captures this via the metaphor of the body. As disciples of Jesus we are all vital members of his body, just like the various parts of the human body. Each part is unique and has a unique function but it is only so as a part of the larger whole. In John's Gospel Jesus, using another image, of a vine and branches, says that 'apart from me you can do nothing'. Just as God has created the various parts of the body and the interrelationship between the parts, so God has created the appropriate life or vocation for each member of the community, the body of Christ. And even though vocations of the members of the community are unique, all share the one Spirit. Otherwise they would not be members of the body of Christ.

According to Paul therefore, we can only discover the meaning of our life (our vocation) when we see ourselves as parts of a larger whole. Or, to put this another way, I only become a whole person by becoming a part. This can be quite a challenge for modern western society with its heightened sense of individualism and its mantra (with due apologies to Frank Sinatra) 'I did it my way'. The tendency is to see myself as a centre or whole to which I can then choose (the consumer) to add various accessories that I think will enhance my individuality. Not so says Paul. It is only when I see myself as part of the body of Christ that I will truly become the person God wants me to become and the person I really desire to become. That is, when we make God the centre of our lives, God makes us the centre of divine life, each and every one of us. To return to Paul's thought; the Spirit of God that we all share is completely devoted to our well being as members of Christ's body.
In our second reading Paul says that ‘I am going to show you a way that is better than any of them.’ The way of love Paul describes is the perfect way because it is God’s way: there is no other way for God to be and act. God is love. Hence, when we love in the way Paul outlines in this famous passage, we are truly in the image and likeness of God. A fortiori therefore, this way of love must be the reason for God calling Jeremiah to be a prophet and for Jesus to commence his public ministry, as recounted in Luke’s Gospel. The interesting and challenging thing about both prophetic missions is that they do not bring about sweetness and light but hostility and rejection. Yet both prophets are utterly committed to preaching God’s word as they received it. We are quite a distance here from our romantic understanding of love. Love in biblical terms means loyalty or commitment; it is about an attitude and actions that communicate this attitude in an authentic way; it is not about how you feel.

And so God tells Jeremiah ‘brace yourself for action. Stand up and tell them all that I command you’. God’s message is one of condemnation for disloyalty, of judgement and punishment. This message of the truth about the people will, as reported in both the book of Jeremiah and Luke’s Gospel, reap their rejection and hostility—‘They will fight against you.’ It looks tough but what lies embedded in the preaching of Jeremiah and Jesus are two integral components of divine love or loyalty: God is at once just and merciful. The limitations of our literary forms such as preaching and storytelling often mean that Old Testament and New Testament authors have to focus on one or the other but within the divinity they form a seamless unity with all the other qualities that the Bible attributes to God. It is therefore an authentic manifestation of God’s loyalty to the people (love of the people) that their sins be exposed and condemned (that the truth be spoken about them), otherwise God is not just. One’s theology must portray God as intolerant of evil otherwise the theology of a just God is
bankrupt. Why strive to be just if your God, as portrayed in your faith, is soft on injustice?

The merciful aspect of divinity means that God always seeks what is best for Israel, what will enhance their loyalty and love as disciples—to make God the centre of their lives is the best thing for them and for us. Hence, Old Testament prophetic preaching announces that God will remove the destructive force of evil and chaos from among the people and the land. In a bold and risky move, prophets claimed that invasions by foreign powers were God’s just punishment of the people, designed to eliminate evil and ‘recreate’ people and land as they are meant to be. Hence, in prophetic preaching, invasion was not the irruption of chaos but God’s well-ordered punishment. God will be re-established as the centre of a properly ordered world, ordered in the dynamic sense of being able to function as God intended it—every part operating fully. Punishment will last a certain time (seventy years according to Jeremiah) thereby showing the covenant relationship is still in place. Israel remains the chosen people.

This prophetic take on history is limited and open to criticism and dispute at all sorts of levels: there is plenty of biblical evidence that it caused heated debate and dispute (read Jeremiah 26 – 28). In one sense it is unsatisfactory (unable or unwilling to tackle the horror of war, innocent civilians, etc) but in another sense essential. If God is believed to be Lord of history, just and merciful, then this needs to be proclaimed in some way to help maintain faith and fuel hope in a life beyond the present calamity. The difficulties of post-exilic life, coupled with ongoing disputes about where is God in it all, may have prompted apocalyptic literature to proclaim a final judgement in which God’s lordship of history will be definitively manifested and issues of justice will finally be sorted out. In Matthew 25 Jesus affirms this final judgement. Biblical authors were limited like us by the literary forms and life experiences of their world but there is a fundamental truth in their presentation of God’s response to good and evil in humanity. There is no better response because it is God’s, it is also for our welfare and we’d better believe it.

At the end of the second reading Paul writes that ‘there are three things that last: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love.’ God is love and the lover never imposes on the beloved. Hence we are called to hear the prophetic message of Jeremiah and Jesus, we are invited to listen attentively and challenged to make a decision. Because our interpretation of experiences is limited (we cannot appropriate and assess all of them adequately) we have to make our decisions on a selection of them. That is,
we make an act of faith. The Bible claims that its selection and presentation of experiences is authentic and reveals who we are and what God's relationship to us is or should be. Accepting or making an act of faith in the Bible's selection is also an expression of hope. We believe that God loves us unconditionally, has our best interests at heart despite seemingly contrary experiences, and will bring our lives to fulfilment. Fired by such faith, hope and love, we accept God's judgement of ourselves, knowing that in doing so we are forgiven and empowered to love as God loves.
There is no escaping the dominant theme in the readings for this Sunday—vocation. It is interesting that we favour this term whereas our biblical authors might have described vocation, if asked, as ‘God’s call’. Their emphasis is clearly on the divine initiative. But, there is enough evidence in biblical texts to give our more human oriented, individualistic term—my vocation—some currency. Each vocation is unique to each individual.

The common elements in our readings point to a powerful and enduring theology of vocation in biblical tradition. Each one begins with an encounter with God; for Isaiah it is the vision in the sanctuary; for Paul it is the appearance of the risen Christ; for Peter and his partners it is the extraordinary new teacher Jesus. Each person encountered expresses their unworthiness; for Isaiah it is his confession that he is a man of unclean lips amid a people of unclean lips; Paul says that he hardly deserves to be called an apostle; Peter asks Jesus to leave ‘a sinful man’. Each then experiences the healing/transforming touch of God and is invited or challenged to accept a commission from God: Isaiah’s lips are purifed with a burning coal after which he hears a divine call for a messenger; Paul expresses his deep conviction that it was through God’s grace, not any personal suitability, that he came to be an apostle; Peter experiences an amazing catch of fish and he and his partners are then invited to join an even more amazing fishing expedition. A key factor associated with this last element is that each one has to make a decision to accept the call. As the Bible tells it, the Word of God invites and challenges but never imposes. To do so would be to take away human freedom, something that the creator of our freedom would never do.

Interestingly, these common elements also reveal something of the uniqueness that is in each vocation. God meets each of us as we are: we don’t have to jump through a number of hoops or achieve a certain level of holiness to be employable by God. In the words of Jesus to Peter, ‘do not be
afraid'. Second, we each experience the presence of God in a unique way; something that the Bible seems to take considerable pains to point out, if the variety of ‘vocation’ stories is anything to go by. This does not always mean it is the kind of experience a person would prefer; the aim of the biblical texts is to proclaim that it is something that best suits God’s purpose for the particular person. Thirdly, the commission or task entrusted to each of us is unique. Of course, each vocation is about a conversion that will hopefully entice others to a similar conversion, but because it involves a personal decision, each vocation will be lived out in a particular way. How else could it be otherwise and how else would God want it? The Word of God makes its home in each of us, healing our sinful humanity and enabling us to live and preach the Word of God in a way that reveals who God is and who we are as God’s chosen ones.

While this Sunday’s readings are ‘classic’ vocation texts they need to be kept within the larger context of the Bible with its healthy realism. We can romanticise vocation, pining for a ‘peak’ experience of God such as Isaiah had, or an appearance of the risen Lord such as Paul had. Behind this may be the notion that somehow they had it better than us because they were physically or historically closer to the ‘source’. But Jesus promised to be with us always, to the end of time. He is as close to us now in our everyday ordinary lives as at any time. If anyone is pining to be like Isaiah then read the text of his brief in 6:9–13! And we all know the trials and tribulations that Peter and Paul went through, hardly what one would call peak experiences. Worth considering too are those scribes who painstakingly edited and copied the texts that we read today: they too were called and as inspired in their own way as Isaiah, Peter and Paul. Add to these the generations of faithful men and women who treasured their texts and passed them on to us.
Sixth Sunday of the Year

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

If the preceding Sunday’s readings invited us to think about our vocation, our being called by God, this Sunday’s readings invite reflection on some of the consequences. Take the text from Jeremiah for example. It comes immediately after a passage that condemns Judah for sin that ‘is written with an iron pen; with a diamond point’ (17:1). Jeremiah 17:5–8 provides a theological justification for the accusation and the terrible consequences that will follow by appealing to divine authority: God will see to it that the good are rewarded/blessed and the wicked punished/cursed (suffer the consequences of their actions). One could say the text is ‘reminding’ Judah and readers of the Act–Consequence principle because it permeates much Old Testament thinking and it is something with which they should be familiar (cf Psalm 1). It’s not unique to the Old Testament either; would a person of any faith believe in a God if there was nothing in it for the believer, and who would follow a God who is soft on evil? But, like most matters of faith, it is not a principle that can be demonstrated/proved by observation. In 17:15 Jeremiah’s audience challenges him ‘to bring it on’ and of course he can’t. Being called by God does not mean that one is going to have success and win the arguments; we are called to fulfil God’s mysterious purpose rather than to enjoy personal satisfaction.

If the context of our Jeremiah text shows him in conflict with his audience about God’s word, this Sunday’s passage from Paul reveals a different type of conflict. I have a sneaking sympathy for Paul’s opponents here because it is one thing to believe that the dead body of Jesus rose gloriously from the tomb but it is quite a challenge to believe something similar happening to my mortal remains. Presumably they will eventually be recycled by earth’s organisms and end up as breakfast cereal or whatever. Perhaps this, or probably a much more profound concern, troubled the Corinthians as time went on and more members died and were consigned to the earth. But Paul rightly sees that once the nexus between Christ’s resurrec-
tion and ours is broken, the whole Christian edifice starts to crumble. It is a foundational element of our faith that Christ is for us: he died for our sake and he rose for our sake. We are joint heirs with Christ in the kingdom; if we share in his suffering, we will share in his glory. Christ’s death was a victory over death; hence Christ’s death must lead to his resurrection and our resurrection. We may not be able to imagine how this will happen but for Paul, it is a sine–qua–non of our faith.

The Gospel passage is Luke’s version of the ‘beatitudes’ of Matthew 5 and there are notable differences. Matthew sets the sermon on the mountain whereas Luke has Jesus go up the mountain beforehand to pray and there choose the twelve apostles from among his disciples (6:12–16). They then come down the mountain to ‘a level place’ (might we say ‘down to earth’?) where Jesus addresses his disciples in the midst of a great crowd, all pressing to touch him. The famous ‘antitheses’ of 6:20–26 are stark and challenging and their interpretation much debated. More than one meaning is likely and I can offer only one suggestion here.

They are addressed to all the disciples and each is presumably invited or challenged to think where he ‘stands’—in the ‘blessing’ or the ‘woe’ camp. Presumably, one or more of them is blessed, otherwise why would Jesus bless ‘you who are poor/hungry now’? But who would dare claim to be so? One might fear the woe but this is part of the Good News, and for two reasons at least. One is that Jesus promises a radical reversal that, paradoxically, will enable sinners to join the company of the blessed (the poor, the hungry, the weeping). The other is that the cry ‘woe’ was part of Israel’s funeral lament. As voiced by the prophets, it emphasised the deadly impact of sin but also the conviction that God will not allow such a death to have the final victory. Divine judgement involving a cleaning up of the mess made by human hands is at hand. Just how the reversals from woe to blessing are to take place is not spelt out at this stage, presumably this will unfold in the course of the Gospel.

God does not wait for us to achieve a level of perfection before calling us to be disciples: we are called as we are. Nevertheless, God’s call should make us aware of our unworthiness and need for complete transformation. The Good News in all this is that even the most ‘woeful’ can join the company of the blessed.
As one reads the story of David’s daring infiltration of Saul’s army camp, his reason for doing so is initially not clear. His companion Abishai knows what a warrior normally does to an enemy: ‘let me pin him to the ground’. But David rebukes him, refusing to ‘raise my hand against the Lord’s anointed’ and retires to speak conciliatory rather than hostile words to Saul. David emerges from this episode in their power struggle as the better man. Many commentators argue that there may be more than a dash of self-serving propaganda in this story. Verses 22–24 can be read not only as David’s speech to Saul but as a message to any would-be rebels in David’s kingdom in which this story circulated: honour the Lord’s anointed. Even so, it is a dramatic tale that challenges us to ask how far one should go in crossing boundaries, particularly difficult or dangerous ones, and if so, for what reason. It is worth keeping in mind when reflecting on the passage from Luke’s Gospel.

Last Sunday’s Gospel presented us with the need for radical reversal. This one, which follows directly on it, presents Jesus’ teaching on how it can come about. It is addressed not just to the disciples but also to ‘you who listen’. In biblical terms this of course means more than just ‘hearing’; it means hearing and doing. Jesus’ teaching involves some resolute crossing of ‘boundaries’ that many of us might prefer to remain in place. As long as things remain fairly stable, there is a certain comfort in having ‘enemies’ who hate you and whom you can therefore blame for all kinds of woes. Catholicism has always, and rightly, been concerned about the distinction/boundary between good and evil. But in our desire to identify and name evil, we can succumb to the temptation to see it in the other rather than myself. We divide the world into goodies and baddies and the goodies tend to be like-minded people who add to the sense of our comfort and safety. If we stay long enough in such a ghetto it can be very
difficult to break out of it; the boundaries we have erected may appear too daunting or dangerous to cross.

I can only love my enemies and do good to those who hate me if I see the good that is in them. In order to do this, I need to be able to see them as God does: God who, according to 6:35, ‘is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked’. God hates the sins we commit but is unconditionally and intensely committed to us as sinners. As part of his teaching, Jesus offers a golden rule: ‘Treat others as you would like them to treat you’ (6:31). This helps us to realise that we need others to forgive our evil deeds as much as we do theirs. The extraordinary thing about Jesus’ teaching here is his assurance that such ungodlike people as ourselves can behave in such a godlike way towards each other. Only the grace of a merciful God can enable us to do so.

If the preceding verses urge us to cross or demolish boundaries that we would prefer to leave undisturbed, the following verses 37–38 warn us about crossing boundaries that should not be crossed. Jesus warns his listeners against playing God, especially because to judge and condemn the other is not ‘to play’ God at all. As Paul points out in the reading from 1 Corinthians, Adam (and Eve) in the garden story fell for the temptation to be like God but the ‘new Adam’, Jesus, teaches that the Father is merciful and kind to the wicked (Luke 6:35–36). Hence our condemnation of them is not being in the least godlike. As a point of clarification, the injunction in verse 37 not to judge doesn’t mean we can’t make ‘judgements’ about others. One can’t stop the mind working and indeed, the injunction ‘to forgive’ presumes that one has made a judgement or formed an opinion about another. It is an integral part of distinguishing between good and bad. What is condemned here is not the normal workings of the human mind but the temptation to use our judgements to exercise power over others: we classify them and then keep them imprisoned in our classification. Jesus came to free people from such prisons and to enable all to become ‘children of the Most High’.
Eighth Sunday of the Year


The context for this Sunday’s Gospel is Jesus’ sermon on the plain (not the mountain as in Matthew) addressed to his disciples. Jesus has just completed a teaching on the importance of love and forgiveness and now he provides a series of parables that provide instruction about the relationship between teacher and disciples. His disciples will in due course be commissioned to be the bearers of Jesus’ teaching.

The first point is that there is no point becoming a disciple of someone who does not know what a teacher should know and who cannot instruct. This is like the blind leading the blind. The implied question here is: where can one find a teacher who really knows the score? The implied answer is obvious enough (it is a faith claim by the Gospel). The second is that Jesus will always remain the teacher and they (and we) the disciples. We will always need to learn more and there will always be so much more to learn; such is the life–long adventure that is discipleship of Jesus. The third is the need for personal conversion. Again, there is no point telling other people what is wrong with their lives (the splinter in their eyes) unless one first accepts judgement about one’s own life. This judgement is given by the one who knows us better than we know ourselves and it is always just and merciful. The need to tackle our selves first is underscored by the extreme contrast in the imagery that Jesus uses (splinter and plank).

As a good and wise teacher, Jesus’ fourth and final point ends the instruction on an encouraging note: if the disciple takes on board the teacher’s curriculum, he or she will bear good fruit. This will not only be evident in what one says or does but in one’s whole life. The reading from Ecclesiasticus puts this another way by claiming that our words reveal who we really are, despite our efforts at times to conceal ourselves behind them. The author of Ecclesiasticus claims that deceptive words will eventually be exposed (revealed) for what they really are and this will in turn show who we really are. It is only by becoming a faithful disciple of Jesus that...
one can learn to be true and honest and thereby become a faithful teacher of his life and message. The reading from Paul assures us in its turn that our life and work as disciples/teachers will not be in vain, despite setbacks, apparent failures and disappointments. Whatever we say and do and live for in the name of Jesus is an integral part of our transformation from ‘this perishable nature into imperishability’.

There is plenty of food for thought here in relation to our modern world and its enormous trade in words. What is striking about ancient authors, particularly those of the Bible, is that they seem so self-effacing. Luke is the only evangelist who introduces himself at the beginning of his Gospel but this is principally to assure his readers that he is giving them a faithful account of Jesus and his ministry. Similarly for Paul. We don’t know who most of the authors of Old Testament books were but modern scholars are convinced that the books of the Pentateuch, for example, were authored centuries after their time and the great figures that appear in them, such as Moses. One has the impression that ancient authors felt the greatest thing they could do was to faithfully transmit the tradition they received and to attribute their own work to the great figures of their tradition. It was not only a way of honouring them, it was an honour to be able to so honour them. Hence the Pentateuch is attributed to Moses, the psalms to David, Wisdom to Solomon and so on. As far as I know no one in the world of ancient Israel seems to have sued for breach of copyright and God has never launched legal action against people for unauthorised or inaccurate use of what is after all God’s book.

In contrast our modern western world is almost obsessed with authorship and copyright. There is a good side to this and it is authenticity, accepting responsibility for one’s own work. But the downside may be that too many of us see ourselves as teachers, as authorities, rather than disciples who always need to learn. Modern scholarship, including the literary kind, prides itself on being critical. Well and good but the Gospel warns that the first step in applying our critical faculties is the more difficult one of applying it to ourselves. We also tend to think that we must always come up with something new (like this reflection!), to be creative. Again, there is a good side to this as long as our creativity is directed to incarnating the Gospel message as authentically and as faithfully as we can in our age. But this must flow from within, which means from a personal conversion that can only come about through the healing power of our teacher.
All three readings today are in a way about ourselves, because we are the Gentiles. The reading from 1 Kings is selected from Solomon's long prayer of dedication for the newly completed temple in Jerusalem. After petitioning God to hear the prayers that Israelites will make, either in or towards the temple depending where they are, in our reading he makes much the same plea for the foreigner. An interesting feature of Solomon's prayer is that he does not pray for foreigners to become Israelites in order that they may thereby become acceptable to God. The focus of the prayer is on God and God's name. The hope of the author of this prayer (commonly attributed by modern exegesis to a deuteronomic theologian of the late monarchy or even later) is that God's name will become known through all the earth and that all the earth will acknowledge this. It is only when God becomes the centre of human life that all the elements of human life can find their proper place and function, and this includes the mission of Israel. Its vocation as the chosen people is to be a sign of the presence of God in our world, which it has, with God's help, managed to do over many centuries and despite many difficulties.

The Gospel passage can be read as the fulfilment of Solomon's prayer and hope in a unique way. The centurion is the foreigner who hears of the words and deeds of one who bears the name of Jesus. A crucial difference between this foreigner and the ones envisaged in Solomon's prayer is that he represents the ruling power. It is not the custom of the ruling class to ask favours of the ones over whom they rule; rather, they give orders and are obeyed. The arrival of the centurion's delegation, a group of Jewish elders, would seem to indicate that this encounter is going to proceed in the customary way. Presumably they have been sent with an order. But instead of an order there is a prayer (a request) and Jesus always answers prayer for it is a sign of faith. On the way he receives a message from the centurion that constitutes a confession of faith. Faith is a commitment
to someone or something, the formation of a relationship based on limited knowledge. The centurion addresses Jesus as Lord, an identity that reverses the relationship between ruler and ruled. The centurion is a man who knows about these things but he willingly accepts that in comparison to Jesus he is merely an unworthy servant. He also knows the power of a command but acknowledges that the power of his words as commander is nothing compared to the power of Jesus’ words. And Jesus’ words are not about keeping people in a situation of subjection but about liberation from whatever enslaves them.

If the centurion knows and acknowledges Jesus in this way, Jesus knows the centurion perfectly because he knows what it is that motivates him—his faith. As Jesus says, ‘not even in Israel have I found faith like this.’ Even though the two never actually meet in the story the gift of faith has united them in a relationship that is stronger and more intimate than any physical proximity. Jesus, as the temple of God, is able to be the presence of God to all those of faith, wherever they are.

It is surely significant that the centurion’s manifestation of faith is located almost immediately after Jesus has finished instructing the disciples about how to learn from their teacher. The juxtaposition of the texts indicates that faith in Jesus is as important an ingredient as the teaching of Jesus that the disciples and those ‘on the plain’ have just received. One might say that it is even more important and foundational because without it, there can be no true discipleship and so no recognition of the teacher or his teaching. Nor, one may add, can there be any miracles, because a miracle by definition presumes faith. Otherwise it is not perceived as a work of God but rather as an unexplained phenomenon.

But while we can celebrate the faith of our ancestral foreigner in the figure of the centurion, the reading from Galatians shows that his faith is as much in need of sound teaching as the faith of Jesus’ Jewish disciples. It is generally accepted that the Galatian addressees in Paul’s letter were mainly Gentiles. Paul is appalled at how easily they have been led astray in their Gospel thinking and moves quickly and firmly to try and correct it. One might excuse this group of Gentiles to some extent by saying that it was a new and therefore rather naïve community. After two thousand years we, the current generation of Gentiles, should know the score well. Do we, and are we willing to be judged about it by those we think are ‘outsiders’?
One might expect the Bible to tell us everything because it is the Word of God, but it doesn’t. In many ways it is a collection of bits and pieces. Even extended narratives about figures such as David and Jesus are highly selective. When you think about it no author, even an inspired one, is able to record a full account of anyone’s life or treat every angle on an issue. There is just too much to absorb; we are limited creatures and have to make selections. In this sense the Bible is simply reflecting the fact that, though inspired, it is a human artefact. Nevertheless, it makes a bold faith claim, namely that its selections and the at times peculiar way it presents them reveal something of God and of God’s whole purpose for humanity. There is an integral relationship between the particular and the universal. As the light of the whole illuminates a particular life, one comes to see that it itself is a whole, a unique life that will never be repeated again for all eternity. In this way the particular and time-bound reveals something of the universal and eternal.

Our first reading illustrates the point well. It recounts one episode in the story of Elijah who has taken refuge from the drought with an unnamed widow in Zarephath, a Sidonian town outside Israel where the people worship Baal. As the story unfolds it seems to drive deeper and deeper into the particular, the detail. There is the report of the child’s illness and death that leads to woman in desperation to shout at the prophet. He orders her to give him her son and he takes it from her bosom. Given her attitude to him voiced in her outburst, one can imagine that he virtually had to wrench the dead body from her grasp and take it to the privacy of his room. Next there is the immediacy of the body–to–body contact between Elijah and the dead child (three times) and his shouting to God as the woman shouted at him. From this intense and very human drama emerges a universal teaching or torah for Israel and any reader. Accepted boundaries of faith are broken down. God’s life–giving power is revealed as available to foreigners as to Israel, the woman’s transformation
testifies that foreigners are able to be as committed believers as the people of Israel; perhaps even more committed given the story of the contest on Mt Carmel that follows and its unfavourable portrayal of Israel.

The Gospel reading lacks the intense drama of the Elijah story; it has its own particularity but it is just as powerful and just as universal. It is the sadness and poignancy of the particular scene that touches Jesus’ compassion and moves him to enter into it fully. There is the word of comfort to the sorrowing mother, the gesture of touch that ignores issues of clean and unclean in relation to corpses, and the words that address the young man directly. There must have been any number of funerals in villages through which Jesus passed on his tours. Why this one and not all the others? Perhaps the point is that what looks to be an isolated event is revealed as an integral part of the whole and is thereby able to reach all who have faith. We hear nothing more of the woman and her son yet their story becomes, through its presence in the Gospel, a sign that ‘God has looked favourably on his people’ (all of them).

It’s different again in the second reading where we encounter Paul providing an intensely personal account of his conversion to a small church in a place called Galatia that has now disappeared from the face of history. Yet this occasional letter has become an integral part of the New Testament corpus and in a number of ways it encapsulates so much of Paul’s theology.

There is a deep need in human beings to try and make sense of life, to see where we belong. Perhaps the need is greater since science dislodged us from the centre of creation and banished our tiny planet to a remote spot in a vast galaxy. It seems to me there are two ways in which contemporary society attempts to do so. One is the individualistic option, the encouragement to see our selves as wholes rather than as parts of a whole. In this option other people and things are seen as parts that we can select and utilise to enhance our sense of wholeness. The other option is where an individual or group is meant to stand for or represent the whole of society or humanity in some way. The current fad is for the celebrity to assume this role of the demi–god. Through a combination of public need and perhaps media greed, a celebrity is cast as the epitome of beauty, an oracle on all manner of things, the perfect mate, and eternally young. The actual individual is often lost beneath these superimposed layers.

Each option grasps something about humanity but in a very distorted way. The Bible’s claim is to offer the true and undistorted view. We are unique whole beings, each one of us, but the paradox is that each one can only discover this by accepting that he or she is part of a larger whole that is God and God’s purpose for humanity. Jesus says in John’s Gospel, ‘I am the vine, you are the branches,’ and the Father carefully prunes each branch so that it can yield abundant fruit.
Eleventh Sunday of the Year


We all know the Gospel injunction ‘do not judge and you will not be judged yourselves’. Yet we can’t help but make judgements; our minds are geared to distinguish between what we think is good and bad. What the Gospel injunction presumably is targeting is the misuse of our faculty of judgement. Our readings for this Sunday provide some timely warnings about how we can judge in the wrong way. The first two readings focus on the way we judge ourselves. We can for example, lose all sense of right or wrong about our actions because of a variety of factors—passion, indulgence, hatred.

This is how David is portrayed in the first reading. Because he is king, he thinks that he can satisfy his lust for Bathsheba and get away with arranging her husband’s murder on the battlefield. After all, he is the supreme authority and Uriah is only a foreigner—a Hittite. When condemned by the prophet Nathan for his crimes of rape and murder, he confesses his sins and receives forgiveness. Many biblical stories are told not to record history but to offer a catechesis or teaching. This one portrays God as both just and merciful. David is forgiven but, in the text that follows our reading, he is told that the son Bathsheba has born him will die. If a storyteller did not portray God as the just judge who confronts the evildoer and punishes him then who would trust God as good? But if God is not portrayed as merciful then where is our hope—we are all David in some way or another? The question that arises in our modern minds of course is why does God punish David via the death of his innocent infant son? One answer is that the story is an attempt to explain the apparent untimely death of the child. It was believed that evil acts have evil consequences and so the child is seen as another consequence of David’s evil actions. The aim is to emphasise the wickedness of what David, the privileged, anointed and chosen one, has done.
The second reading from Galatians explores the other extreme of self-assessment, when it becomes too harsh. Before his conversion, Paul strove to justify himself according to the law and it caused him great anxiety, what we might call scruples. There are people who suffer from scruples about their moral worth and think that God can never forgive them. Others worry continually about whether their work is worthwhile or whether they have satisfied all its requirements. The danger with these extremes is that we cannot trust anyone, not even ourselves. We become trapped in a world of demands that we cannot fulfil—we are only human after all. But Paul found freedom in the conviction that he was loved and welcomed by Jesus. As long as he believed Jesus was his saviour and Lord, he realised that he did not have to clear this or that hurdle to be accepted. We too are loved and welcomed by Jesus who accepts us as we are and invites us to become disciples.

In Luke's Gospel, Simon the Pharisee reflects the second major way in which our faculty of judging can go awfully wrong—in the way we judge others. We all have a tendency to play God the wrong way and judge our fellow men and women. Simon has definite ideas about how a prophet should speak and act and Jesus does not live up to them. A true prophet is gifted with insight and Jesus’ reaction or lack of it shows that he has no idea who ‘this woman’ is. In effect, Simon appoints himself judge not only of Jesus but the woman as well. We tend to measure people according to how well or badly they ‘fit’ our ideas or expectations of them and, like Simon, we condemn those who do not fit. It’s a highly contagious virus that can infect whole societies: there is something in us that enjoys playing what they now call 'the blame game.' In our story, Jesus sets out gently but firmly to correct Simon’s perception of himself and the woman, not through playing Simon's game of judge and putting him in the dock but by inviting him to see things from a different angle and, in the light of that, to revise his earlier judgement.

Notice that Jesus does not set out to defend his own actions but to vindicate those of the accused woman. In Simon's eyes (and those of the other guests?), for a woman of her reputation to act in this way is a disgrace. But Jesus challenges Simon to see it in the context of how he, as a loving host, should welcome his guests. And how could any guest of Simon refuse such a welcome? A fortiori therefore, Jesus could not reject the loving gestures of this woman. Luke does not give us Simon’s reply to this telling comparison and perhaps this is deliberate: the gap allows us to compare ourselves with him and make our own replies. There is no condemnation from Je-
just the opportunity to view the actions of the woman from another angle and make a better judgement. A potentially powerful implication in this exchange between Simon and Jesus is that if he can see the actions of the woman in their true light then he will have a better understanding not only of Jesus but of himself as well. The actions of the woman ‘reveal’ the identity of Jesus as the true prophet, the messenger of God’s forgiveness and peace. In this role she invites us to consider how our words and actions can be powerful mediators of the Gospel or damaging impediments. But she also stands for Simon himself, revealing to him how he should act in the presence of Jesus. Although he thought himself a generous host, Jesus’ comments show that, even though a sinner, she is the generous host.

A puzzling element in this Gospel is Jesus’ statement that ‘it is the one who is forgiven little who shows little love’. Does this mean that in order to become a great lover in the Gospel sense, one needs to have been forgiven ‘great’ sin—hence to have committed such sin? Presumably not. Two thoughts as to the meaning of the statement come to mind. One is that it may serve as a warning to readers who, like Simon, think they are minor offenders, not like that woman. If this is the case they are thoroughly trapped in self love and cannot love others much. Another is that Jesus has in mind sinners who know how deeply trapped in sin they are and how completely dependent they are on God’s mercy. These are the ones who love much because they know how much love has been shown them by the one who forgives.
As they say, it all depends on how we see things and this makes it difficult for us to agree on what we see. Many think that awareness of what we call ‘the subjective factor’ is a contribution of modern philosophical thought. This may well be true but it seems to me that our readings for this Sunday are also dealing with this problem and they do so by claiming that, with God’s help, our perspective on things can change and different people can agree about what they see. In short, the Bible claims to offer God’s perspective on things and that this is the right one. A key difference between its claim and some of the more radical modern ones is that there is a right and wrong way of seeing things. According to some contemporary thinkers there are really no right and wrong views, just different ones and some of them become accepted for a time and in time are replaced by others. Fashions change.

The first two readings for the day tackle two areas of right and wrong, areas where we human beings tend to be united to a surprising and disturbing degree. The passage from Zechariah tackles the attitude of the many against the one, particularly the one who is an innocent outsider. This is an evil that plagues most societies at times; when things go wrong we need to find someone to blame and the lone outsider or foreigner, or a small group of the same, is an easy target. There is something of the scapegoat syndrome here. According to Zechariah the only cure for it is ‘a spirit of kindness and prayer’ that God will pour out on people. It will transform them so that they will see the ‘one they have pierced’ in a different light and repent and mourn for the evil they have done. John 19:37 applies this prophecy to Jesus at a strategic point in the Passion Narrative. Even a mob baying for revenge can be transformed through the spirit of kindness and prayer.

The reading from Galatians tackles another attitude that we tend to slip into with disturbing ease, despite our protestations of being open minded
and welcoming—our attitude toward people of a different race or nationality and toward the opposite sex (we might transpose slave and free into the modern idiom of employee and employer). One can sense the initial stirrings of racial and national intolerance as soon as one of those boats full of foreigners looms on the horizon. And despite some genuine advances, the gender card is still played and when this occurs it is mainly to the disadvantage of women. According to Paul, membership of the Christian community removes all such barriers. This of course does not mean that one ceases to be a Jew or Greek, a man or a woman. Paul's point is that in Christ we are given a new vantage point from which to view ourselves and others and it should lead us to rejoice in our differences rather than fear them because they all go to make up the one body of Christ. They are no longer seen as barriers that divide but bonds that unite. With Christ there are no favourites or, to put it the other way round, everyone is his favourite.

With Paul's emphasis on Christ as the centre and life of the Christian community, it is crucial that believers know who Jesus is and this is the thrust of the Gospel reading. The text emphasises it by drawing a distinction between what the crowds say about Jesus and what the disciples say. They form the foundational community of Jesus and it is crucial that they know who he is because they are to be the ones who will carry on his mission to the crowds. We may take it that Peter speaks for disciples as well as himself when he identifies Jesus as 'the Messiah of God'.

There are two important things that follow Peter's profession. The first is that Jesus immediately applies another title to himself, 'Son of Man', and speaks of his coming passion, death and resurrection. Even though 'Messiah of God' gives Peter and the disciples a real purchase on who Jesus is, some access to his identity, it is not adequate. No single title can be, whether applied to Jesus or any human being for that matter. The identity of Jesus is something that continues to unfold throughout the Gospel and beyond. The second is that Jesus then goes on to outline what is required of those who desire to be his disciples. One cannot come to know Jesus without also coming to know the truth about oneself. This too is one of the gifts that Jesus bestows on his disciples. Hence his teaching about what constitutes the identity of a disciple. It is significant that he does not use a title, rather he defines—if we may use this term—who a disciple is by what he or she does and says.
Discipleship appears to be the leading theme of this Sunday’s readings. I detect three elements of discipleship here: there are no doubt more but hopefully these three may provide some food for thought. One element is the impact that the call to discipleship has on our perception of ourselves. The second is the impact it has on our idea of God—and we all operate with an idea or ideas of God. The third is the impact it has on our existing relationships.

Paul warns his Galatian community to be careful about exercising the freedom that comes with faith in Jesus. To be chosen by Jesus, to be liberated from sin, to be given a role in the salvation of humanity can be heady stuff and has its dangers. The self-indulgence that Paul warns about could refer to a number of things, but his rebuke of those who go ‘snapping at each other and tearing each other to pieces’ suggests that at least one problem area is good old human hubris: I am on a mission from God and you had better listen to me! As remedies for this malaise, Paul recommends loving service of the other rather than seeking to dominate the other, and complete dependence on the guidance of the Spirit, rather than acting like an independent spirit.

The second element can be seen in the first part of the reading from Luke. A favoured interpretation of Luke’s Gospel is that 9:51 marks an important stage in the unfolding of Jesus’ mission. He now ‘resolutely took the road for Jerusalem’. His disciples follow him and, rather like some modern war hawks, want to bomb into oblivion any who stand in his way or do not receive him. ‘Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven and burn them up?’ This is a rather tough text from Luke: not only does he portray the disciples getting their idea of Jesus (and God) completely wrong but they seem to think that access to divine power rests with them rather than him! A more positive turn is taken with the man who proclaims that he will follow Jesus wherever he goes. It is a genuine expression
of discipleship because Jesus does not reject it. What he does however is warn the man that such discipleship will not bring security or prestige or acceptance. Perhaps herein lies a clue to his ideas of Jesus and his relationship to God. Within the context of Luke’s Gospel, those who become disciples of Jesus must now also follow him resolutely to Jerusalem and all that this entails.

The third element is the impact discipleship has on our existing relationships and one can see this in the passage about the call of Elisha in 1 Kings and in Jesus’ encounter with two other people ‘on the way’. In each text, the key existing relationship is that of family, central to one’s life in those days. One could say that the story of Elijah and Elisha provides the background for Jesus’ challenge to those who want to follow him: there is a distinct echo of the scene in Kings in Jesus’ reference to the plough. When Elijah casts his mantle over Elisha, the latter initially requests permission to farewell his parents. Elijah gives permission but Elisha does not act on it. Instead, as a sign of a complete break with his past, he slaughters his yoke of oxen to provide for his workers and follows Elijah. He has demonstrated what it takes to be Elijah’s successor, giving priority to the prophetic call.

There are two particularly distinctive features about Jesus’ reply to those who desire to follow him. One is that each uses the term ‘first’ in reference to family. But, if one wants to be a disciple of Jesus, one’s relationship with him must come first; only then can other relationships find their proper place. If our relationship with Jesus is treated as ancillary then it is likely to decline in importance and eventually disappear. The second is Jesus’ intriguing reply to the one who wants to bury his father ‘first’. The reply may sound harsh to modern ears but, when one thinks about it, preaching the Good News of the kingdom of God is surely what the dead father, who is now with God, would want his son to do above all else.
In this Sunday’s Gospel, Jesus sends seventy two (some versions have seventy) on the mission. A word to note in the text is ‘others’. This group is different to the twelve who are sent out in similar fashion at the beginning of chapter 9. Luke is the only Evangelist who recounts this second mission and one may presume it is for significant reasons. It is worth looking briefly at the fortunes of the twelve before comparing them with the seventy two. According to 9:6 they preached the Good News and cured diseases everywhere. On their return, Jesus begins to teach them about his passion and the nature of discipleship. This is followed in turn by the transfiguration, witnessed by the trio of Peter, James and John. In the wake of this peak experience, things start to come unstuck. The disciples fail to drive out an unclean spirit, they are unable to take on board the prophecy of the passion, and squabble among themselves about who is the greatest. John tries to stop someone who ‘is not one of us’ and, as we saw in last week’s Gospel, things really come to a head as Jesus sets out for Jerusalem. The Samaritans reject his messengers and James and John want to blow the lot up, a proposal that receives a sharp rebuke from Jesus.

Enter the new group of seventy two ‘others’. Why does Luke have Jesus choose another, much larger group of disciples? There is no sense that the ones already chosen have been rejected, despite their failures. This is not the way Jesus works. Two reasons spring to mind. One is implied by the number seventy two/seventy; a number that probably symbolises the universal reach of Jesus’ mission. The setback in Samaria does not cause Jesus to withdraw or take a less hostile route: instead it becomes the occasion for a mission to every town and place. Just when one might think, from a human perspective, that things are looking grim Jesus proclaims that the harvest is great, so great that as many labourers as possible are needed to reap it (God’s perspective transforms our own and turns our expectations upside down). A second reason emerges from the portrait of this second, larger group of disciples. The instructions that Jesus gives them
echo those to the twelve, with some extra items that reflect the experience of the twelve and would seem, in the context of the Gospel, to be for their benefit and for the benefit of readers who have been following the fortunes of the twelve through the Gospel thus far.

One item is Jesus’ instruction that the new disciples pray to God for labourers for the harvest; rather than try to take charge of God’s work as the twelve tried to do the new group is reminded that the initiative lies with God and God, not they, knows who can be a worthy labourer. Another is that Jesus now prefaces the instructions given to the twelve for their missionary journey with the warning that he is sending them out like lambs among wolves. This sounds pretty dangerous: what protection does Jesus offer the disciples? Two things: a word of peace and a power to heal from sickness and deliver from oppression. This might not look like the right ammunition with which to enter the territory of wolves but the disciples’ mission is to transform them into lambs and you can’t do this by behaving like a wolf yourself. This only exacerbates things as we know too well from contemporary experience. What looks even more risky, the disciples are to take none of the standard back-up items such as spare tunic, haversack and sandals. Readers might like to supply modern equivalents. In short they are meant to ask the wolves for whatever they need, presumably as an expression of their trust in the wolves and their willingness to be dependent on them—quite a challenge. Jesus also instructs them not to move from house to house and to be content with the food provided. This can be compared with our modern consumer world where personal choice is paramount. Our pastoral outreach these days often involves drawing up a detailed plan of action beforehand, right down to accommodation and meals, including dietary preferences.

Jesus adds a further important element that the twelve seems to have lost sight of: the kingdom of God is something greater than a disciple’s mission, greater than the mission of any number of disciples. One may reject the messengers but the ‘kingdom of God is very near to you’.

The seventy two are successful and return from their mission rejoicing in the power of Jesus’ name over demons. But there is always more to learn as a disciple and Jesus teaches them that the key thing to rejoice in is not their victory over the demons but their personal salvation—again the emphasis on the divine initiative on their behalf. Appropriately, Jesus follows this reminder with a prayer of thanksgiving to God for ‘hiding these things from the learned and clever and revealing them to little children’. If one understands ‘these things’ as a reference to true discipleship, this section of Luke can be read as an extended lesson for the twelve and a caution against thinking that God’s election somehow sets one apart from the mob.
According to the book of Deuteronomy, the word of God comes from God to Moses on the mountain, symbolising the meeting point between God and creature, between heaven and earth, then from Moses to the people who hear his words, and then into their mouths and hearts—as expressed in our reading from Deuteronomy. It is what we might call a very incarnational theology of the revealed Word of God: it enters into the core of our being to transform the way we think, speak and act but without impinging on our freedom. Indeed, according to Old Testament theology, the word of God is what enables Israel and the human being to be free. It provides the context within which human freedom, which is limited because we are creatures, can function fully and authentically. If we step outside this context—violate the boundaries—we inevitably end up enslaving our selves and others.

In our Gospel reading, we have the word of God incarnate in the person of Jesus. As Paul says in the letter to the Colossians, ‘Christ Jesus is the image of the unseen God’ and ‘the Church is his body, he is its head’. Luke portrays Jesus, our head, the incarnate word of God, as the new Moses, teaching the lawyer—a man of the law or Torah. Appropriately, the text that the lawyer quotes in response to Jesus’ question comes from the book of Deuteronomy. In continuity with its theology of the word, Jesus’ words now teach the lawyer about how to fulfil the command to ‘love your neighbour’.

We are so familiar with the parable of the good Samaritan that we can tend to miss how challenging and subversive a word it would have been in the lawyer’s day. If we pay attention to this, we can recapture something of its enduring challenge for our world. The unfavourable portrayal of the priest and Levite provides the first challenge for the lawyer and us, because from a legal point of view, they were doing the right thing. For a priest or Levite to touch a bleeding, bashed, human being would render
them unclean and therefore unable to lead the liturgy. They would need to go through the prescribed ritual cleansing. One can see the sense in this because the liturgy—the worship of God—is primary and must go on. But, the lawyer has summed up the law as love of God and love of neighbour and the two commands cannot really be separated: one shows love of God by loving one’s neighbour. The implication of Jesus’ portrayal of priest and Levite is that if they really loved God, they would have cared for their afflicted neighbour. This would be the Godlike action; their adherence to the law of clean and unclean has not made them more human, more in the image and likeness of God. The parable invites us to reflect on how we can obey the laws of the church or land but be quite unaffected by them. I can hate my brother or sister in my heart but never be accused of breaking a law about them—spreading false accusations, lying, robbing, etc. One can keep the letter of the law without being touched by its spirit or, to put this another way, adhering to the law does not automatically make one virtuous. Becoming virtuous is quite another matter and involves the fulfilment of the law’s purpose.

The unfavourable comparison of the priest and Levite with a layman would be bad enough in the lawyer’s world but what would have been really challenging is the implied comparison of Jewish laypeople with the Samaritan. In the lawyer’s world, the Samaritan was the heretic, the descendants of the rebellious, breakaway northern kingdom and its capital, Samaria. The parallel when I was growing up would have been a Protestant or a communist. For Protestants it may have been a Catholic. Nowadays, it would be a bit like saying that your friend when in need is more likely to be an atheist, a secularist, or a Moslem rather than a Catholic or a Christian. Our instinctive response to the parable is to see ourselves or other Christians as the good Samaritan. But the challenge of the parable is to think outside the loop. The ones that we think we know as the least likely are the ones that may turn out the most likely to help, even to help us when we are down and out like the man lying half dead on the road.

The conclusion of the parable provides a nice touch. The good Samaritan not only looks after the injured man but assures the innkeeper that he will pick up the tab on his way back. This invites us to think of ourselves like the injured man; more often than not we find ourselves in a mess or causing a mess through our sinful way of living. We can run up some mighty debts—the hurts we cause others—and we are quite incapable of paying for them. Our parable suggests that our good Samaritan Jesus will pick up this kind of tab, as long as we place ourselves in his care.
The story of Abraham’s encounter with the three men at the oak of Mamre celebrates that hospitality for which the Middle East is famous, but with a delightful twist to it. Abraham and Sarah act as the generous hosts to three strangers, giving them the best they have to offer. But, as the story unfolds, one of the strangers turns into a very special kind of host with a unique gift, a child for the aged husband and his barren wife. Even though this passage forms a key part of the theme of the promise of an heir in the larger story of Abraham and Sarah, it contains an important torah or instruction in two forms. The first is that being hospitable to others and treating them as valued guests is a Godlike act. This is revealed in the way God, who in the story acts as the perfect host, turns Abraham and Sarah into privileged guests, bestowing on them the most surprising and unexpected gift. The second is that the way God behaves as a guest at Abraham and Sarah’s table indicates how we should behave when we are invited to God’s table, to the divine presence. In the story, when Abraham outlines what he would like to do for his guests, they reply ‘Do as you say’. They are happy to accept Abraham’s hospitality as offered: they make no complaints and no demands. It is a nice little touch and, as often happens in biblical stories that function as torah or catechesis/instruction, it presents a challenge or an invitation—in this case in an indirect way. Are we willing to behave in like (Godlike) manner in our relationships with God?

The same kind of teaching or instruction, but with its own peculiar twist or turn, can be seen in the story of Jesus at the house of Martha and Mary. Martha, a generous host like Abraham, welcomes Jesus and busies herself with preparing the best that she can offer. As is well known, her complaint about her sister Mary and Jesus’ reply provided theologians and religious orders in particular with ammunition for a lively exchange about the virtues of the active life (Martha) in comparison to the contemplative life (Mary). However, if one keeps in mind the Genesis text, a somewhat
different reading emerges. Jesus’ reply can be taken as a gentle prompt to Martha to see that her hospitality has been richly rewarded because her guest has now become her host and invites her to join Mary and receive the perfect gift that this perfect host offers, the teaching about the Good News and the Good News is ultimately about the gift of himself. This is the one thing that really matters; in light of it everything else, Martha’s busyness etc, can find its proper place.

It is also worth noting that our Gospel passage comes immediately after the parable of the good Samaritan. Is Luke portraying Martha as the ‘type’ of the genuine disciple who wants to do good to others, in short to be like the good Samaritan? In order to do so, one needs to learn from the good Samaritan himself—Jesus. Mary understands this and sits at the master’s feet: Martha is invited to join her. All that we do as Christian disciples is modelled on and draws its inspiration and strength from Jesus. It is said that it is better to give than receive and indeed it is. But in order to give we need first of all to receive that which we can then pass on to others.

The reading from the letter to the Colossians adds another dimension to these reflections. To be fully in the image and likeness of Jesus, that is, to be truly a disciple, one needs to accept that suffering and rejection is an important ingredient. This does not mean that one should seek out occasions of suffering; to do so is to take the initiative on one’s own terms. Rather, as the author of Colossians—whether Paul or a disciple—recognises, the suffering that one endures for the sake of the Gospel is a sign of the ‘mystery of Christ among you’. Jesus, our good Samaritan, our ever solicitous host, is there caring for us and enabling us to bear the pain that is part of his healing of our world. With this assurance, one can rejoice even in the midst of suffering.
A significant difference between the two versions of the Lord’s Prayer or Our Father in Luke and Matthew is the way they are introduced. In the Matthean version (6:7–13), Jesus recommends the disciples to ‘pray in this way’ or ‘like this’. The prayer that follows therefore is an instruction about how to pray. In the Lucan version, Jesus tells to disciples to ‘say’ the Lord’s prayer. Hence, the Lord’s Prayer is both a prayer and an instruction or catechesis about how one should pray. What is also significant about the Lord’s Prayer is that, as an instruction, it reveals its Old Testament heritage in the Psalms.

According to form critical analysis, the Psalms may be divided into the following major forms or types: the psalms of praise in which God is praised principally because God is God; the psalms of thanksgiving which praise God because God saves those in need; the Psalms of petition for the things we need; and the Psalms of lament that appeal for deliverance from an undeserved, inexplicable evil. There are too the so-called ‘penitential psalms’, but there are few of these in the Psalter compared to the numerous Psalms of lament. The structure of the Lord’s Prayer reflects the structure of Old Testament prayer: it begins with praise of God (‘hallowed be your name’) and then moves to the theme of salvation (‘your kingdom come’). These initial two elements are also an acknowledgement that the primary thing in our relationship with God is that God’s will be done. The remaining elements of the Lord’s Prayer follow on and depend on this. Thus the next element is the prayer of petition (‘give us this day our daily bread’), then a prayer for forgiveness (‘forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us’), and finally a prayer that echoes the situation of lament (‘deliver us from evil’).

In his teaching on prayer, Jesus has summed up and expressed in a new and concise way the great Old Testament tradition of prayer. The one element that we could say is emphasised in comparison to the Psalms is the
forgiveness of sins. Within the New Testament context of prayer, sin and forgiveness assume a heightened importance because, as the letter to the Colossians reminds its readers; ‘when you were dead in trespasses, and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him when he forgave us all our trespasses’. The Lord’s Prayer gives an added edge to the prayer for God’s forgiveness by making it dependent on the measure of forgiveness shown by those who pray. This is clear in the teaching that follows the Matthean version (6:14). If we show no forgiveness of those who offend us then our prayer for God’s forgiveness is a sham. Moreover, why should we expect them to forgive us?

Luke follows his version of the Lord’s Prayer with an instruction that focuses on the theme of petition. Jesus’ words are designed to provide an assurance that one’s petitions will be heard, provided that one does not give up asking. The emphasis shows that this was an issue for Luke’s readers: nothing new in this of course since it was something that preoccupied Old Testament authors. The reading from Genesis portrays God answering Abraham’s repeated petitions for clemency for the sinners in Sodom and Gomorrah. In contrast, Psalm 88 reveals the agony of prayers that one believes are not answered; ‘But I, O Lord, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. O Lord, why do you cast me off?’ Compare this with Psalm 34 where the psalmist states ‘I sought the Lord and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears’.

There is no way one can prove that God answers prayers; people believe it or don’t believe it and petitioners will decide whether or not their prayers have been answered. One cannot step out of the realm of faith in which we see ‘as in a glass darkly’ into the clear light of certainty. In his first letter to the Corinthians (13:13), Paul says that there are three key values or virtues, faith, hope and love. He was expounding on the Christian life but it is fair to say that all human beings live by faith, hope and love. When any one of these collapses the others and the whole fabric of human life is in strife. Hence it is important that these central yet fragile human values be supported. The assurances in Luke’s Gospel are designed to bolster a key element of faith: that we are in God’s good care.
One could say that the author of the book we call Ecclesiastes and which the Hebrew tradition calls Qoheleth (the preacher) is the first sociologist in the biblical period. The book is generally thought to be a late work and probably reflects the impact of Greek thinking. Whatever the case, our author functions rather like a modern scientist, outlining the various experiments he undertook, the results he collated, and the conclusions he drew. Like most of us, he wanted to measure the vagaries of life and gain some knowledge of things so as to plan life. His scientific conclusion is expressed in this Sunday’s reading. The translation ‘vanity of vanities’ is now regarded as somewhat inaccurate; the Hebrew word hebel has the same consonants as the name Abel in the Cain and Abel story (Genesis 4). Like Abel, whose life was cut off before its time, frustrated and unfinished, it may be better to translate the preacher’s verdict as ‘it’s very frustrating’. The doubling of the word signals, as in a number of languages, the superlative. Despite his best efforts to measure life, it escapes his categories, particularly the measures of justice and fairness. One cannot be sure or secure that one’s best efforts (the investment) will realise an appropriate outcome (the interest). There is something there but the frustrating thing is that one cannot control or measure it. The reading and the larger book provide a suitable setting for reflecting on the Gospel reading and the reading from Paul’s letter to the Colossians.

Human beings have tended to go for two main responses to the uncertainty of life. One is outlined in the Gospel reading; it is the attempt to ‘create’ a world of certainty and security and exclude the insecurity and uncertainty. It is a favoured option in our modern materialistic world. We are encouraged to plan our career right through to retirement (the investment that will bear measurable interest); you can even prepay your funeral! Some kind of planning is sensible of course but we can become obsessed with it; the ironic thing is that the more we try to secure our life,
the more we are admitting that it is insecure. What do I need so many assurances, so many signs of security? Is all this worry enhancing my life or diminishing it? What should my priorities be? Jesus’ parable of the rich man makes this point and points in its turn to where we can make investments that are really secure—our relation to Jesus and our attention to the kind of things he wants us to do rather than what we want to do.

The second option is to plan as best one can to get out of this unsure, insecure world into another really secure one. Do not invest in this world; invest rather in the next or other world and you are guaranteed of a high return. This is or can be the option of religion, particularly the great Semitic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. They all proclaim belief in another life beyond this one. But we can confuse lives with worlds and if we pay attention to what Paul says we can see how this happens. Paul urges his audience to keep their eyes on the things of heaven where Christ is sitting at God’s right hand, and not on the things that are on the earth. If we take this literally we can come to think that God inhabits another world that we call heaven. But God doesn’t inhabit a world or a creation because that would make God a creature in some way. Heaven is not a place where people wander about and sit down. Paul is using what we call metaphors and these are a way of saying something about realities that cannot be described directly. We use them all the time: ‘poor Bill, he’s blown a gasket’. Heaven is simply another way of affirming the presence of God to creation, like Matthew’s favoured term ‘the kingdom of heaven.’ God is present to everything without being part of anything so heaven is right here or right there. God delights in creation because, according to Gen 1:31, God looked on it and ‘saw that it was very good.’ The human being is a creature that is in the image and likeness of God.

When Paul exhorts his audience, and us, to reject ‘what belongs to earthly life’ he has specific things in mind: fornication, impurity, guilty passion, evil desires and greed. These things corrupt us and our good creation. This is the wrong investment to make in this world; the right one is the one Jesus made, giving himself completely for the sake of others. In this way we will become what we are meant to be: the creature who is the image and likeness of God. Being a creature also means that we never leave creation, even in the next life. If we did we would no longer be created. We will enjoy the resurrection and be like Jesus who became a creature like one of us in all things but sin. Being in creation does not mean that we will miss out on something of the presence of God. Rather, we will
‘see’ the presence of God among us in a way that is perfectly attuned to our status as creatures, part of God’s creation.

The Jewish Talmud tells a story of a certain Rabbi who hid from the Romans for twelve years in a cave. On emerging he was shocked to see people going about their daily affairs: ‘They forsake the life of eternity and busy themselves with the life that is transitory!’ God’s reply: ‘Have you left your cave to destroy my world? Go back to it!’
These readings share the theme of faith/trust but, as St Paul saw in 1 Corinthians, faith, hope and love go together. You can't have one without the others and while Christianity claims a special kind of faith, hope and love that we call the theological virtues, these are built on values that are common to all humanity. One can see the presence of hope in the reference to ‘the expectation of your people’ in the reading from Wisdom, in the ‘real/better homeland’ in the reading from Hebrews, and the combination of hope and love in Jesus’ statement that ‘where your treasure is, there will your heart be also’.

Without faith, hope and love human life quickly becomes meaningless. The person I love is the person I believe in most deeply and the love and trust that I place in that person engenders hope for a meaningful future. I can only hope in someone or something that I believe in, and the person or thing that I put my faith in will be the person or thing that I love. Even an atheist is a believer: it would be more accurate for an atheist to say ‘I believe there is no god’ than to say ‘I do not believe there is a god’. An atheist can no more prove the non-existence of God than I can prove God’s existence. We share faith, with a different content. This is evident in Richard Dawkin's book *The God Delusion*; it has dismayed some other atheists because he is clearly on a crusade to win converts to his faith stance.

Some see a steep decline in faith in modern western society. There may be a decline in Christian faith but I don’t see any decline in the basic need to believe in someone or something. The need to believe, to hope and to love has been with humanity since its beginnings and it is as strong as ever. The question for our age is not ‘whether faith’ but rather ‘what kind of faith’?

The fascinating thing about these three core values or virtues is that they can be so powerful yet, almost at the same time, so fragile. Some people stick with the same footy team right through life no matter how
disappointing its performances, others lose faith after one defeat. Marriages break up at an alarming rate but this only seems to intensify the need to love, to forge a meaningful relationship. They say many of those who commit suicide do so because they have no hope in life anymore: this terrible situation emphasises how deep and desperate their need for hope is, above all in our modern world.

According to our readings, the path to true and enduring faith, hope and love lies in the removal of fear. Jesus says in the passage from Luke: ‘There is no need to be afraid, little flock’. The reason? Jesus proclaims a God who is completely generous; for God to give ‘the kingdom’ means that God gives himself, completely and unconditionally. One does not have to jump through a set of hoops or run a gauntlet in order to be trusted, loved and promised ‘the kingdom’ where the Master will become the servant (‘put on an apron’) and wait upon his servants as honoured guests. One can come before God without fear of rejection even though one may be lacking in faith, hope and love. God will make up whatever we lack. According to both the Old and New Testaments, it is this divine guarantee of being trusted, loved and promised a share in God’s life that should encourage us to place all our faith, hope and love in God. God will in turn empower us to be steadfast in faith, hope and love towards one another. As the book of Wisdom puts it ‘you made us glorious by calling us to you’. Without God’s grace our faith, hope and love in God and our neighbour can become dangerously distorted. To make the point, Jesus outlines a scenario in which one’s distorted view of God (‘my master is taking his time’) leads to selfish indulgence and gross treatment of others. This is the antithesis of the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love.
Twentieth Sunday of the Year

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

In Luke 2:14 the angels proclaim ‘peace on earth’ at the birth of Jesus. The contrast with this Sunday’s Gospel could not be sharper: ‘Do you suppose I am here to bring peace on earth? No I tell you, but rather division.’ How to relate them? Luke does not tell us explicitly how to do so but the way his Gospel unfolds presumably supplies some clues. Our passage falls within the section of the Gospel that begins (according to a widespread opinion) with 9:51 where Jesus ‘set his face to go to Jerusalem’, a journey that is marked by increasing hostility and rejection. His outburst about fire and division is no doubt a reaction to this and at the same time a comment on it. The preaching of the Good News is designed to set us free but this implies of course that we are not yet free. In order to be set free we need to know (and accept) the truth about ourselves. Most of us will accept this as a fine idea but when the crunch comes and we are actually confronted with the truth about ourselves, accepting it can be difficult; a decision for or against has to be made.

An instinctive reaction is to ‘play the man not the ball’, to sidestep the message and target the messenger. But a true prophet like Jesus, like Jeremiah, must be faithful to the message with which they have been entrusted. Without it there can be no true knowledge, no true freedom, no true peace. One may also say that without it there can be no true victory over the things that enslave us. Jesus’ fidelity to his message led to his death; the letter to the Hebrews exhorts Jesus’ disciples to be loyal followers of their Master, even ‘to the point of death’ because this will lead them to share in the victory that he has won.

Such is the basic outline of discipleship in our readings, but the ‘incarnation’ of it in each of our lives will be unique and require difficult decisions. For example, is an experience of rejection (even suffering) a sign that I am on the right track and the others are wrong? Or is the rejection the result of my own arrogance or insensitivity? Is success and growth in
numbers always a sign of authentic Gospel preaching and living (the grace of God at work); is failure or indifference a sign of inauthentic preaching and living? A friend of mine once remarked that it is better for the Church to be hated than ignored, at least it remains the centre of attention.

Examples from the Bible and church tradition can help at times but these hardly offer a blueprint for each person’s life that is unique and I do not believe they are meant to. This would be to compromise human freedom and Jesus came to set us free to make responsible decisions not to impose on us. Let’s face it, one can’t avoid the challenge of making decisions; to say ‘I won’t decide’ or ‘I will leave it up to so–and–so’ is still a decision. God wants us to make honest decisions and act on them. We will blunder at times but that is life, and such occasions will provide valuable opportunities to grow in faith, hope and love. As the Book of Revelation says ‘would that you were hot or cold but because you are lukewarm I am about to spit you out of my mouth’.

There is a measure of uncertainty about living the Christian life—or perhaps some would prefer to use the term ‘mystery’. In an age where so many things are quantifiable and measurable, it can be a struggle to preach and live mystery and uncertainty. But not knowing the full story is an essential component of the decision making process. We make our decisions in faith, hope and love and thereby grow in faith, hope and love. As they say about mystery: it is always unfolding more of its meaning.
Our readings from Isaiah and Luke’s Gospel challenge us to think about our notions of insider and outsider, who is fit for the kingdom of God and who isn’t. The passage from Isaiah, or what many scholars now think is part of a subsequent addition to the book (that is, chapters 56–66), portrays God summoning people of every language and commissioning them to ‘proclaim my glory to the nations.’ This could have proved quite a challenge for an Israelite audience, particularly those schooled in the theology of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that effectively ban marriages with foreigners in order to preserve Israel’s unique status (I remember the same requirement for Catholics when I was growing up). As well as this, the passage seems to contradict Isaiah 49:1–6 where God’s chosen servant is Israel, not foreigners. Our passage even claims that God will appoint some of these foreigners as priests and Levites! If one takes these claims on board, they would require a major rethink about how one thinks of the kingdom of God. If this passage was throwing out a challenge to the Ezra camp then, in terms of policy in post–exilic Judah, it lost the battle. Nevertheless, it got into the biblical canon and so its challenge lives on, and not just for Jews.

In the Gospel reading, ‘someone’ asks Jesus whether only a few will be saved. The context of his reply suggests that this kind of person sees himself/herself as an insider. Within the context of Jesus’ preaching this is presumably a Jew; within the context of Luke’s audience, it is also a Christian. Each thinks that he/she is the insider and that the ‘few’ saved will be Jews/Christians. For us Christians today, who are the ones whom we would consider outsiders?

In reply Jesus ‘relocates’ these kinds of questioners and places them among all those to whom the Gospel challenge is directed. All are called and no one should presume he or she is ‘inside’. Like anyone else, Christians need to seek the door of the kingdom and like anyone else (whoever
reads this Gospel) Jesus tells them/us to keep in mind that the ‘door’ to the kingdom may not be the most obvious one to the human observer. It could well be the unlikely door, the narrow one that looks as though it cannot accommodate a multitude of people thronging into the kingdom. But this is God’s business and what looks impossible to human beings is eminently possible for God.

In our modern world in particular, we think that timing is crucial for making the right moves in life. Politicians worry about when to ‘call’ an election, people worry about the right time to sell or buy a property, parents worry about the right time to enrol their children in a particular school. No doubt we have to consider these things in the hurly-burly of modern life, but Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom proclaims a more basic and more important time that all need to take into account, the time for seeking the kingdom. Any time and every time—the moment of the encounter between Jesus and his questioner—is the right time for seeking the kingdom because God is present to all time and God accepts our decision for the kingdom, whenever we make it. This doesn’t mean of course that we have to be making or renewing our decision about the kingdom every moment of our life: this would be to turn God into a tyrant. Rather, it is a question of attitude and priorities: do we make love of God and neighbour the centre of our life or a useful accessory?

The reading from the letter to the Hebrew provides some help here. The marvellous thing about devoted parents is that they are there for their children 24/7. Whether it is encouraging them and providing for them, or correcting and even punishing them, they are doing it for their children’s welfare. So it is with God, the writer of this letter claims. God is the perfect parent and always acts for our good; whether this is via reprimand or encouragement, God is there for us (it is left up to us to discern which experiences might be the ‘reprimand’, which the ‘encouragement’). If God is so completely devoted to us, who makes us the centre of divine life, then we should try and make God the centre of our lives. This does not remove us from the detail of human life, rather the Gospel claim is that it enables us to enter and live human life more fully.

The danger for all called to the kingdom is to think that they have plenty of time or that the right time is not now (I have to sort this or that out first). But, Jesus warns, our time here is limited and if we do not seize the moment, we may find the door has shut—our time has run out. The picture that Jesus paints of all those whom the questioner would think of as outsiders (from every corner of the world) enjoying the blessings of the kingdom suggests that this danger is greatest for those who think they are the insiders, the chosen ones.
Our Gospel reading shows again how vitally interested Jesus is in our self-interest. We are called to love our neighbour as we love ourselves and this presumably means that if we don’t love ourselves then it is going to be pretty difficult to love our neighbour, and of course vice-versa. The trick is getting self-love or self-interest right by not letting it slide into selfishness. Each person needs to discover and acknowledge his or her true self and love that, because God certainly does. Denying the false or sinful self is a vital step on the way to true self-love; we should be just as vitally interested in this as Jesus is.

As one might guess, an important path towards true self-love is taking on board the judgement of our neighbours, and this is the thrust of Jesus’ parable about being a guest at a wedding feast. Love of self and love of neighbour go together. The question for the guest who takes the place of honour is—are you prepared to trust your neighbour to give you the honour and respect that you truly deserve (and in that sense love your neighbour)? Or does fear or arrogance tempt you to take control. In modern terms, this is a bit like being prepared to ‘float the currency’ in the market and to trust the market to assign its real value. There is another side to this relationship of course and it is implied in Jesus’ parable. If one accepts an invitation like this, presumably it is because of respect and esteem for the host. Otherwise, to attend would be an insult. It is an added insult then to effectively instruct the host about the seating arrangements. If a host does not honour me as expected, this can be an important moment for self-reflection and growth in self-knowledge and love of oneself.

At this point, we might invoke the teaching of Ecclesiasticus about humility. We can feign humility, but this is just another form of pride. We can also, in misguided sincerity, set out our own programme for becoming humble, but this is really just another way of taking control. No doubt the author of Ecclesiasticus was well aware of these traps. That is why he
advises that ‘the greater you are, the more you should behave humbly’ and goes on to note that the truly humble person will have ‘an attentive ear’. Humble people are willing to let others tell them what they honestly think and take it on board. Ecclesiasticus implies that the greater we are, or perhaps the greater we think we are, the more we need to develop this attentive ear. Of course, it needs to be or become a wise and discerning ear. A person can be unfortunate enough to cop continuously negative ‘feedback’, unfortunate because this fails to acknowledge the inherent goodness of every human being. God hates sin but loves sinners, completely and unconditionally.

After the parable about being a guest, Jesus goes on to offer some advice on how to be a loving and generous host. In a way, it presents an even more challenging scenario than the parable. When you are a host, you don’t have to try and take control of the situation, you are in control. You get to draw up the guest list. And it’s easy to invite some poor, crippled, blind and lame to a party to parade your generosity before other guests. But what if you invite only the crippled, the poor, the blind and the lame? The only genuine (Christian) reason for doing so is because you love them or desire to learn to love them. Jesus’ assurance of repayment in the life to come presumes this, surely. Given this environment, both love of neighbour and love of self are big winners because loving people whom you never loved before and who cannot repay you in kind invites both parties to discover themselves and the other in new and transforming ways.

One could say that in most of our relationships we are either playing the role of guest or host: we spend our lives either receiving from others or giving to others. In relation to this it is worth keeping in mind that, according to the letter to the Hebrews, we are all, even now, participants in the heavenly festival in which everyone is a ‘first-born son’ and a citizen of heaven. We should therefore do unto others as it has been done to us. When we are a host, we should strive to treat guests with the same honour and dignity that we enjoy as citizens of heaven. When we are guests we should be as grateful to our host as we are to our divine host for making us ‘first-born sons and daughters’. 
One might summarise this Sunday’s Gospel under the heading ‘the cost of discipleship’, but then again, no summary is entirely adequate. From a somewhat different perspective, one could also say it is about ‘the nature of discipleship’. I would suggest that this is the more fundamental thrust of the passage: once one becomes aware of the true nature of Christian discipleship, we also become aware that we are quite unable to pay the membership fee: the ‘cost’ in human terms is beyond us.

What is the nature of Christian discipleship according to this reading? It has two sides. First, it necessitates a complete detachment from existing relationships, the ones that humans hold dear, especially the family, so highly valued in the society of Jesus’ time. Scholars say that Jesus’ use of the verb ‘hate’ is a characteristic Semitic technique for evoking its opposite—love. One could exegete the word play in this way: unless one ‘hates’ all those human relationships that we treasure and see as the signs of love in our lives, and make love of Jesus the centre, we will not bring true Christian love to these relationships. One can’t fit the love of Jesus into our world as ‘another’ relationship. If we try to do this, we will never know what the love of Jesus means (both Jesus’ love of us and our love of Jesus). This is the second side of Christian discipleship; complete commitment to Jesus. Once we make our relationship to Jesus the centre of our life, then all other relationships will find their proper place. What looks in this text to be a call to utterly abandon family and friends paradoxically enables us to discover our relationship with family and friends in a new way. Within this new context, such relationships become an extension of our relationship to Jesus rather than our relationship with Jesus an extension of them. Far from being diminished, our relationships with our neighbours are enhanced as a result.

If the call to detachment from existing relationships is radical, so too is the nature of the commitment to the new relationship: we are to take up
our cross and follow Jesus. This may have come as quite a shock to Jewish
crowds of the day, particularly if the notion that Jesus was the Messiah was
gathering momentum. As readers of Luke’s Gospel, we know that disciple-
ship unto death is signalled here.

If we really think about the nature of Christian discipleship as Jesus
outlines it, it is quite beyond our capabilities and this, I think, is the thrust
of the examples that follow; that of building a tower and of a king going to
war. Discipleship is a call, a challenge, not an imposition, and Jesus wants
us to be sure about what we are getting ourselves into. The implication is
that if we think about it, then any sensible person would do as the king
does in the example—surrender. But, with our admission that we can-
not be faithful and committed disciples of Jesus comes the grace of Jesus
that enables us to do so. The disciples in the Gospel provide the assurance
in faith that this is so. They failed to be loyal disciples of Jesus, to carry
their cross, but through the gift of the Holy Spirit they were empowered
to become the kind of disciples that, humanly speaking, was quite beyond
them.

The reading from Wisdom explores this contrast between human limi-
tations and divine grace via the image of Lady Wisdom. In Old Testament
theology, she is a divine attribute (like justice, mercy, faithfulness) that is
personified and ‘enters’ our world in order to remake us in the image and
likeness of God. But the ‘pupil’ must be completely devoted to her, like a
husband to his wife in a marriage (cf the passage on the perfect wife in
Proverbs 31:10–31). One can’t acquire wisdom like a degree in science and
add it to one’s CV.

The power of the Holy Spirit enables us to become part of the new
family of Jesus, an extraordinary family as Paul’s letter to Philemon shows.
This brief epistle is an early and precious record of the family of Jesus in
operation. From a human perspective, it is made up of the most unlikely
trio. There is Paul, an itinerant preacher who is now in prison as a crimi-
nal. There is a slave called Onesimus, and his slaver owner Philemon. Yet
Paul’s letter testifies that the grace of Christ has enabled him to become
the spiritual father of a new son, Onesimus. Far from hanging on to him
as a ‘possession’, Paul sends him back to his slave owner, but now as ‘a dear
brother’ in Christ. Paul does not even demand that Philemon release On-
esimus. He leaves these brothers to develop their new relationship. Prison,
physical separation, and the separation between slave and owner are no
longer barriers to the formation of the new family of Jesus, in which all are
his brothers and sisters and sons and daughters of God.
When one thinks about it, the exchange between God and Moses in the reading from Exodus is quite extraordinary. Moses is portrayed arguing successfully with God to reconsider; and not just once for it happens again in Numbers 14. Other Old Testament texts, such as 1 Samuel 15:29, claim that God does not reconsider and change, ‘because he is not a mortal’. This, I would think, sits more comfortably with our notion of God. However, the Old Testament did not have modern conventions in mind and if, for the sake of the theological point being made, the story needs God’s thinking on a matter to change then so be it.

What is the point or points being made in this story? On the one hand the story needs God to pronounce a just judgement on Israel’s apostasy: the most serious sin merits the most serious punishment. On the other hand it provides the storyteller with an opportunity to develop an important aspect of God’s chosen leader, Moses. God offers him the opportunity of becoming the founder of a new and ‘great nation’ once the rebellious, fractious mob that he brought out of Egypt has been removed. But Moses knows where true priorities lie: not with his own self-aggrandisement (career) but with God and God’s wayward people. Given that God, in the story, listens to such a trustworthy figure, Israel should itself trust Moses, in particular the Torah or law that he communicates to them in the Pentateuch. He faithfully passes on what God speaks to him. The Gospels make a similar point about Jesus as an utterly trustworthy messenger of God’s Good News.

Our Gospel reading also explores the question of where our true priorities should lie via a series of three parables. The Bible likes doing things in threes. We can read the first two parables in two ways. If you focus on the role of the shepherd searching for his lost sheep or the woman her lost drachma, then both parables emphasise the depth of God’s care for the lone lost soul. As well, the shepherd and the woman are ‘like’ God, a nice
thought. But, a significant feature of the two parables is that Jesus uses the example of two prized possessions in his world rather than a human being, for instance the lost member of a family. This comes in the third parable and suggests to me that one can read these parables at more than one level.

Viewed from this angle the first two parables issue a sharp challenge. Human beings will go to enormous lengths to find valuable items of property that they have lost. But, will they do the same for their fellow human beings? Amidst all the throwaway material that festoons our streets it is significant that you rarely come across money. If I did, I know it would be hard to resist the temptation to pocket it. But I have often walked calmly past beggars and down–and–outs on our streets, merging with the crowd that is doing the same. Perhaps a somewhat hidden message in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost drachma is; put your neglected, needy brother or sister in place of those things on which you expend so much care and energy—that prize sheep, that precious coin—and you will really be acting like God. In this reading, the images of the shepherd and the woman serve to heighten just how much more of a caring shepherd and diligent housekeeper God is! At times a parable’s punch line can operate at more than one level.

This second reading, as noted, gains support from the famous parable of the prodigal son that follows. Notice the focus on property in this tale. The younger son squanders much of his father’s property in luxurious living and returns home expecting that he must now do service to pay back what he had lost (treat me as one of your paid servants). Does the father care about his lost property? Not a whit, his focus is on the son who was lost and is now found. In contrast, the other son can only see his brother in terms of the things that he evidently values (he has swallowed up ‘your property’) despite his father’s pleas. This is a story that resonates with our modern world that measures so much of human life in economic or ‘property’ terms. We need God’s grace to place our obsessions with possessions in proper perspective so that we can see our fellow human beings clearly.

Paul’s letter to Timothy adds a further dimension to this theology of God’s love of the lost and the sinful. Paul ranks himself among the greatest of sinners but to his astonishment, Jesus ‘called me into his service’. God doesn’t just forgive and welcome the sinner, as the father did his prodigal son; God places complete trust in us and invites us to join in the work of salvation. Witness the way Jesus entrusted the preaching of the Good News to his disciples even though they failed him at the time of his passion and death. Again, this is so unlike our modern world where, if you fail, you are more often than not sidelined, sacked or demoted, never to be trusted with that job again.
The Bible always surprises me with its ability to surprise. You think you know the text and its meaning; you look at it again, perhaps in another situation and from another angle, in the light of someone’s remark, and it takes on a new meaning. Take the parable of the dodgy steward in today’s Gospel reading for example. Jesus follows the parable with a couple of questions: if you (that includes us) cannot be trusted with money who will trust you with genuine riches; if you cannot be trusted with what is not yours, who will give you what is your very own? The expected answer of course is: ‘no one Lord.’ But when I read this parable within the larger context of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus (and God) seems to say the exact opposite: ‘I will’ and ‘in fact I do it time and time again.’ After all, the disciples whom Jesus personally chose and trusted proved as unreliable and deceitful as the steward in the parable. When challenged by the authorities at the time of Jesus’ passion, they bolted for safety and Peter denied ever knowing him. Yet, after the resurrection, Jesus sought them out, forgave them, re-instated them and put them in charge of preaching the Good News. Not the kind of thing organisations, including churches, are likely to do now. These days it tends to be ‘one strike and you’re out’. But God is that trusting, that forgiving.

Take a couple of other parables. To my mind as a farmer’s son, the famous parable of the sower seems to portray God as a pretty reckless farmer. What a waste of good seed, tossing it on rocks and pathways and among thorns. But an important point of the parable is that God will go to what we would think are reckless and wasteful lengths in the hope of getting one strike or finding one little patch of good soil. Think how Jesus, the incarnate Word, sought the company of prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners, the kind that those around him would have certainly identified as the thorns, hardened rocks, and good-for-nothing soil of the parable.
Another example is the parable of the vintner who employs the unemployed near the end of the day and pays them a full day’s wage. Any of us who ran a business like this would be broke in no time. But God’s business is something else and God will gladly do whatever it takes to help those in need.

We find a nice expression of God’s generosity and good will towards human beings in our second reading from Paul’s Letter to Timothy. In what we may regard as a surprise move, the letter urges prayers to be offered for everyone, especially for kings and those in positions of authority. Paul offers two reasons for this. The first is that God wants all to be saved and so our prayers for rulers, however inadequate they may be, are in accord with the will of God who desires one family of humanity. The second arises from Paul’s reflections about the trust that God placed in him, despite his earlier hostility to the faith. If God is so willing to forgive and trust Paul, then a fortiori, everyone as well.

Our first reading from Amos adds a crucial component to this portrait of an all forgiving and trusting God: I can only be forgiven and be healed if I first accept God’s diagnosis of my sinful situation. God does this in a just (God’s judgement is true) and compassionate way (so that we may be healed). According to the introduction to the book, Amos preached in the 8th century BCE before the Assyrian conquest, when the northern kingdom (Israel) was prosperous and its capital, Samaria, much larger than its rival Jerusalem (capital of the kingdom of Judah). If, as God’s messenger, Amos did not challenge the people about their abuses, he would have been disloyal to God and in fact preaching a false notion of God. How could one believe in a just and merciful God who lets you get away with blue murder? But God is too concerned for our welfare to let this happen and so the Bible challenges Israel and the disciples of Jesus to acknowledge when they have done wrong, and through the texts they have bequeathed to us we are challenged to do the same.

When we go to our doctor we almost always accept the diagnosis in good faith and take the required medicine, however unpalatable it may appear. Doctors exercise enormous authority in our society because we believe they are acting for our good and we desperately need their help to regain our health. Jesus portrays himself as a doctor in Matthew 9:12 when he says ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick’ and that he has come to make the sick well. We believe that his diagnosis of our situation is a trustworthy one and that he will offer us the right remedy. Despite this we all too often think that we have no need of his diagnosis or his remedy.
As with last Sunday’s reading from Amos the prophet, this one targets the gross social injustice of his day in the capitals of the two rival kingdoms, Samaria of Israel and Jerusalem of Judah. But there is an added element in today’s reading that we can apply to our other readings as well—the ones living the life of luxury do not care about ‘the ruin of Joseph’. They are so absorbed in their luxurious world that the plight of their society does not even register a blip on their radar. Jesus’ parable takes this failing a step further: not only does the rich man not care about Lazarus, the parable does not state that he even noticed his existence. He lay at the rich man’s gate, out of sight, out of mind.

What is running in these two texts is a major biblical theme that we may call the distorted perception of reality. It begins with the story of Adam and Eve who, once seduced by the temptation that they can transcend their human condition (be like God), start to see things the wrong way round (most unlike God). They hide from each other behind fig leaves and they hide from God. Same humans, same God, but fear and alienation have now replaced trust and intimacy. In a nice ironic touch, the story implies that their ‘opened eyes’ are anything but open to reality. The theme crops up again and again; in the story of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt (Genesis 12:10–20), in the stories about Israel’s murmuring in the wilderness (for example, Numbers 11), and in prophetic speeches such as the one in today’s reading from Amos. The impression seems to be that, left to our own devices, our distorted perception of things becomes worse and worse. In the Gospels, people witness a healing by Jesus; some pronounce it as the work of a great prophet, other as the work of the devil.

Only a complete upending of our perception of the world can change things, and the parable of the rich man portrays this in a very graphic way. Whereas Lazarus was at the bottom of the pile, longing to eat scraps that fell from the rich man’s table, the rich man is now at the bottom, in Ha-
des, and Lazarus enjoys the position of honour. The rich man starts to see things differently and expresses concern for his remaining brothers (the first interest he has taken in another person). But while he may see some things clearly now, his hopes about his brothers (our world) are distorted when compared to the true perspective that Abraham (with God) enjoys. Our father in faith provides a rather damning assessment of us and our world. If we do not heed the message of the law and the prophets (for example, the reading from Amos) then, says Abraham, the resurrection will not have any effect on us either.

Bleak though Abraham's assessment may be, there is nevertheless a powerful positive thrust to it. On the one hand it affirms the enduring value of the law and the prophets in righting social injustice; it also implies that the law and the prophets point to Jesus as the one, who by his death and resurrection, empowers human beings to remove the kind of injustices that Amos condemned. A third point is a question that emerges from Abraham's words, to which we are invited to supply an answer. If our perception of things in this world is so skewed and resistant to change, why did Jesus go through all that he went through? The answer must be because in God's eyes we are worth it. So, God will keep working away at our blindness and resistance. It is this conviction of the abiding presence of God at work in us that lies behind the instructions to Timothy 'to be saintly and religious' and to fight the good fight until the 'Appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.' One has the impression from the letter that it was not all plain sailing for Timothy. But, armed like him with the conviction of God's presence, we can ultimately remove that plank from our own eyes and finally see others clearly.
The Gospel passage from Luke comes directly after Jesus’ instruction on how Christians are to forgive others who repent and seek forgiveness. They are to be forgiving ‘seven times a day’ which is a perfect biblical number—in effect it means always. The disciples, clearly shocked by this demand, ask for an increase in faith. Even more challenging is the instruction that follows for them and for us. We should not think that, because we manage to forgive others ‘seven times a day’, this is a sign of personal greatness and that we are thereby elevated to an elite position and can expect special rewards and privileges. No: such conduct should be the mark of all Christians who are servants of the Master, who have been invited to be stewards of the new creation, the new community, that he has come to establish.

There are two key components of Jesus’ instruction: one is acknowledgement by the one repenting that he or she has done wrong; the second is the forgiveness that must be granted to the repentant. These reflect two key attributes of God as proclaimed by the Bible. God is unswervingly committed to rooting out evil in humanity because this is the greatest threat to its welfare. Who would be committed to a God who was soft on evil and injustice? The second is that anyone who accepts God’s judgement (repents) is forgiven. God is merciful. The stewards of God’s new creation, the community created by Jesus, are meant to do no less—to be Godlike. After all, they are only members of the new community of Jesus, his privileged servants, because they have themselves been forgiven the sins they commit—and acknowledge. They should do unto others as God has done unto them.

It is well to remember that the society of Jesus’ day was based largely on families, clans and tribes and the relationships and loyalties between them. They were very sensitive to the evils that threatened the welfare of this society but, like all human beings, they tended to be selective. Take our modern society for example; we are sensitive to evils commit-
ted against children and rightly so, but are we as sensitive to the evils of abortion? We are sensitive to abuses of our own environment but what about the environment of other societies from whom we obtain cheap fuel and cheap goods. Do we preserve our nice environment at the expense of theirs? Jesus’ teaching allows no exceptions; all evils need to confronted and acknowledged, particularly the ones the servants of the new community of Jesus commit.

The intense loyalty among families and tribes of ancient societies could also foster intense rivalries and sensitivities between them. Shame and honour were important measures of status and well-being and it could prove difficult to forgive someone or some family that had offended the honour of another one. Some offences could be forgiven but the tendency would be to square the ledger for certain offences against family honour—in other words, selections were made.

Again, Jesus allows no exceptions—a shock to the disciples. But is our modern western society any better? Forgiveness is about reconciliation and the restoration of right relationships. We claim to operate by the rule of law but these days it tends to become litigation. The opposing parties engage top lawyers to win the case, the winner goes out one door with the money, the other out another door with the bill, or a spell in prison. Is there any reconciliation, any forgiveness? Without a commitment to identifying evil and rooting it out, society fragments. Who would trust a police force that allows people to get away with blatant crimes? Similarly, without a commitment to forgiveness there is no true society; it fragments into individuals or groups who are fearful of each another and hostile to each another.

How are we to go about confronting the evil that we and others do, and fostering forgiveness and reconciliation? The reading from Paul’s letter to Timothy provides some timely help. Paul tells Timothy that the Spirit he received was not a spirit of timidity (one does not flee from difficult situations), but a spirit of power (we seek to empower ourselves and others by proclaiming the empowering grace of Jesus) and love (we seek to restore right relationships) and of self-control (we are not there for our own self advancement but for the good of the other and the community).

The reading from Habakkuk adds another timely element. The prophet laments that he does not see signs of God’s justice in his world, only contention and discord. How long must he wait? The answer he receives is that he must remain committed to faithfulness/righteousness. We might translate this into modern terms by saying that our words and actions should be motivated by what we believe is the right thing to do, not because we want the satisfaction of certain outcomes or results.
The Hebrew word translated as leprosy in the first reading and in the Gospel referred not just to leprosy as we now think of it but to a wide range of skin complaints and even such things as mould on buildings. What linked them together was the sense of an alien intrusion that disfigures. People of ancient times no doubt pitied lepers but they had to be set apart for hygienic reasons: leprosy as then understood was regarded as a highly contagious condition about which little could be done. Hence, to be a leper was rather like being in prison; cut off from normal human contact. Like most of the animal world, human beings exhibit two reactions to situations that threaten freedom and instil fear—fight or flight.

The leper Naaman in the reading from 2 Kings 5 is a high ranking general in the Syrian army who is sent by his king to the king of Israel to seek a cure. An Israelite slave girl in Naaman’s household has told him about the prophet in Israel who has curative powers. As the story unfolds, Naaman is exposed as a classic aristocratic chauvinist who is deeply offended when a mere servant of a foreign prophet tells him to take a bath in the Jordan rather than the waters of Damascus. Like comparing the Murray with the Mississippi. Naaman is portrayed as a fighter, trying to get out of his leprous ‘prison’ but, ironically, his reaction to Elisha’s instructions shows that he is entrapped in the even worse prisons of race, class and religion.

Thankfully, his servants prove smarter than him and convince him to take the waters, and he is cured in more ways than one. The selection which is our Sunday reading tells how Naaman is freed not only from leprosy but the other more crippling barriers as well: he now refers to himself as Elisha’s ‘servant’, honours the land of Israel by taking a load of its soil back home, and professes faith in the God of Israel. And lest one think this story is about bringing foreign aristocrats down to earth, read the last section on Gehazi, Elisha’s servant. In order to gain an advantage for himself
he abuses not only his relationship with his master Elisha, but also the relationship that has been established between Elisha and Naaman. Above all of course he abuses his own relationship with God.

In the Gospel reading, the group of ten lepers have reacted to their affliction by flight rather than fight: they huddle together in close physical proximity for the only protection they know. Jesus heals them of their physical affliction so that they are able to leave this ‘prison’ and enjoy the freedom of being fully human again. But an important point of this little story is the challenge posed by the freedom that Jesus brings. It involves making decisions; the Samaritan leper makes a responsible one, the other nine an irresponsible one. The story implies, that although they have been cured of leprosy, they are unable to ‘see’ the work of God that has been wrought in them and so remain trapped. In contrast, the Samaritan’s faith frees him from the stigma associated with his race and enables him to join a new ‘race’, the community of Jesus, a community that is based on faith and not physical proximity. Jesus tells him ‘go on your way; your faith has made you well’. The freedom of faith does not require him to follow Jesus around like a lapdog.

The power of faith in Christ to free us from whatever prisons we may be forced into or which we may construct for ourselves is captured superbly in the passage from the second letter to Timothy. In a telling reversal of the above imagery, it is Paul’s very imprisonment that makes him all the more aware and appreciative of the freedom that he has received from Jesus. Despite being ‘chained like a criminal’ he is still the bearer of the ‘Good News’ that cannot be chained up. It is this faith that God is with him, no matter how bad the situation appears from a human point of view, which makes Paul an even more effective witness of the freedom that Christ brings.
The fascinating thing about this Sunday’s readings is that the passage from Second Timothy provides great material for a reflection on the purpose of Scripture, but the other two readings are not the kind I would instinctively select to illustrate that purpose. Blessed be liturgists whose reasons for choosing texts are often quite mysterious but who nevertheless provide some interesting challenges.

The Scriptures that Second Timothy refers to are of course the Old Testament, most likely in its Greek or Septuagint version; in Timothy’s days there was no New Testament. But a major challenge for the early Church as a new movement was the need to present and explain itself in relation to the established religion (Judaism of the time) and its Scriptures. If the Timothy of these Pauline letters is the same character as in Acts 16, then he was the son of a Jewish mother and a Greek father. He was presumably brought up in the Jewish faith. An initial nice thing about the passage from Second Timothy is that his Jewish background is viewed positively; it gave him a sound grounding in the Scriptures.

The letter then goes on to outline two key purposes of Scripture. First, and most importantly from the Christian point of view, is the claim that the Scriptures—when read correctly—point to the salvation that comes through faith in Christ. Second, Scripture has not only a prophetic (in relation to the coming of Christ) but also a teaching role. Notice how the text says that it ‘can profitably be used’ and presumably by anyone. This means that God has entrusted the word to human beings for their wise use and that it does not, nor is it meant to, cover everything. It provides a useful guide for people who have to make decisions about their lives. One could say that Scripture is not the imposition of thought but an invitation or challenge to think and make honest decisions. To think of Scripture as the imposition of thought and behaviour is to impugn the notion of God and God’s purpose in providing Scripture, to enable us to become fully
human. This must mean the freedom to make decisions, however risky and uncertain these may be at times.

At first glance, the little story of Israel’s war with the Amalekites would not seem to offer much that is profitable for teaching and guiding people’s lives. The changing fortunes of the battle, depending on whether Moses has his arms raised or not, looks a bit like magic. But, if we look at it a little more closely, perhaps the point of the story is to counter a magical view. The picture of an exhausted man having to have his arms propped up is a telling sign of human weakness and limitation rather than magical power. But God has that quirky streak of preferring to display divine power through our human weakness. Is it a way of showing us just how powerful we can be if we rely on God?

The Gospel passage is not without its challenges either. It’s heartening to read a parable in which that butt of traditional jokes, the nagging woman, is given a big tick. Sometimes it is right and proper to go to such lengths as she does, even though one may be described as a nasty nagger or whinger. It’s also heartening to be taught by Jesus that God is most unlike the unjust judge. The trouble is, as long experience and the Bible itself in many of the lament psalms testifies, one cannot validate from experience the claim that God speedily answers prayer. So how does one preach about it? Perhaps one way is to realise that if we could prove to our complete satisfaction that God always answers prayers then one would no longer need to believe it. Yet all human relationships are built on faith/trust, all the more so our relationship with God. So faith is the key because it is by it that we live our relationship with God and this enables us to see our personal experience from a different angle and assess its role in this relationship. The Gospel passage ends with Jesus’ question about faith: ‘when the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on earth?’ My understanding of his question is that it is about faith in him. The issue is not so much whether there will be any faith on earth (all humans believe in something or someone) but what kind of faith?
If you compare the reading from Second Timothy with the parable in Luke's Gospel passage, the similarities between Paul's personal assessment and that of the Pharisee are striking. Both seem to be blowing their own trumpet with considerable gusto, but no one would say that Paul is like the Pharisee. Why is this so? Presumably because we instinctively place the Pauline proclamation within the larger context of what we know about Paul's career and his frank admission that he was a persecutor of the Church, the worst of sinners and quite unworthy to be called an apostle. It is on the basis of his awareness of how bad he was and how merciful God's judgement towards him has been that he can make the claims he makes. It is faith in Jesus as saviour that provides Paul with his 'sure and certain hope of salvation' as the traditional saying expresses it. Moreover, Paul’s conviction about the saving grace of Christ applies not only to his initial conversion but throughout his life: as he says ‘the Lord stood by me and gave me power, so that through me the whole message might be proclaimed for all the pagans to hear’.

We could apply Jesus’ words about the humble to Paul and say that, as presented in the letter to Timothy, he is a model of the humble Christian. A truly humble person is not a ‘shrinking violet’ who denies any good that is said about them but someone who has an honest perception of him or herself. He or she willing to say what this is and to accept criticism where it is due in order to gain better self–knowledge. The humble person does not fear the judgement of God who, as the reading from Ecclesiasticus claims, is the supremely just and merciful judge. ‘He shows no respect of personages to the detriment of a poor man’. With God as the ultimate judge of the worth of one’s life, we have no need to fear the judgement of others however flawed or hostile it may be.

One could also say that Paul is keen to sound the trumpet here because it is a celebration, a thanksgiving for what God has worked in him and
the works of God should be made manifest (don’t hide your light under a bushel but on a stand so that it can give light to the whole house). Paul, forgiven and graced, becomes a revelation of the saving presence of God, and this happens too for each one of us as forgiven and graced. That is why the sacrament of reconciliation is performed as a public ritual with an emphasis on community.

In contrast the Pharisee, as he is presented in the parable, is certain that he has no need of God’s forgiveness: rather he thanks God that ‘I am not like this tax collector here’. In effect he has set himself up as his own judge and the judge of others as well; the irony of the parable is that when we do this we unwittingly set ourselves up as our own executioner. Like the Pharisee, we can think we are certain about our selves and others, and just as certainly wrong about both.

But we can also be certain when we are right and the parable provides the necessary guidelines. The tax collector is certain that he is a sinner, prays to God for forgiveness and, in the words of Jesus, goes home ‘at rights with God’. If Paul could step into this parable he would show the publican the next step in the Christian journey: the certainty that he has been put ‘at rights with God’ and that this should be proclaimed and celebrated. All that we do should be for the glory of God and it is surely to the glory of God that we proclaim ourselves as sinners who have been forgiven by God and been made righteous.
This delightful Gospel passage from Luke resonates so well with our modern world and its fascination with celebrities. They enter our lives like visitors from another planet, draw a huge crowd, create a sensation and then disappear as they came. People will swear on a stack of Bibles that the celebrity’s visit is the greatest experience they have ever had and that it has changed their lives forever. Another celebrity jets in a week or so later, draws a huge crowd, creates a sensation and leaves people gushing just as enthusiastically as about the first one. We think it is a peculiarly modern phenomenon but this Gospel suggests otherwise.

Zacchaeus looks very much like a typical modern person, well heeled and on the look out for some entertainment. What better form of entertainment than to see, from his perspective, the latest celebrity, the man everyone is talking about. Zacchaeus can enjoy the spectacle as an anonymous member of the crowd, the visitor will pass, he can enthuse about it to his friends later and life will go on as comfortably as before.

The difference with this visitor is that he has not come to boost his ratings—he doesn’t need to after all—nor is he just a passing phantom. Jesus comes to find the one who needs him most and, in this case, Zacchaeus is the one who thinks he needs Jesus least. The scene at the sycamore tree is a deft piece of storytelling with a nice touch of irony. Zacchaeus is caught out on a limb in more ways than one. Jesus looks up to him with a request that, on the face of it, casts Zacchaeus as a most worthy host. From Zacchaeus’s point of view, it is nice to be singled out in such a positive way by the celebrity. It would be fair to say that we all like to be paid attention by celebrities (the ones we admire); it enhances our sense of personal worth in relation to others. But then comes the crunch: Jesus’ singling out of Zacchaeus draws the attention of the crowd to him, and in a very hostile way. A minute before, Zacchaeus could think he was being elevated above the crowd by Jesus: now the crowd have cast him down from his perch.
with a vengeance. Worse still, they imply that it would be very bad form for the celebrity, Jesus, to dine with such a fellow. As we know, celebrities must obey the demands of their admirers; otherwise, no admirers and end of celebrity status.

Jesus does not defend his action and does not intrude on Zacchaeus’s turf: the decision about what to do in this critical moment is up to Zacchaeus. He could have rejected Jesus for putting him in such an embarrassing situation; he could have cursed the crowd and gone off, determined to punish them with even harsher taxes. Thankfully for him and our selves as readers of the Gospel, he rises to the challenge, acknowledges that the crowd is right and promises to redress any wrongs he has done. To make this conversion, he must have recognised something more than the passing celebrity in Jesus; he must have been open to the grace of Christ and received it. This is what Paul prays for continually in the reading from his second letter to the Thessalonians: ‘that our God will make you worthy of his call, and by his power fulfil all your desires for goodness’.

Jesus’ response to Zacchaeus is as much for the crowd as for him. Their grievance or case against Zacchaeus has led them to condemn him, to ostracise him and to try and get Jesus to join in. Jesus has much the same case against Zacchaeus (as a sinner) but this leads him to seek Zacchaeus out and offer him reconciliation rather than rejection (as the crowd wants). In the words of the reading from the book of Wisdom, ‘you are merciful to all because you can do all things and overlook men’s sins so that they can repent’. Or in the words of Paul ‘in this way the name of our Lord Jesus Christ will be glorified in you and you in him’.

An interesting coda to this Gospel passage is the scholarly view that an important theme in Luke–Acts is the transformation of the ‘crowds’ that follow Jesus, and to whom the disciples minister, into ‘the people of God’, a community like the embryonic church community described in Acts 4:32–37. Rather than condemn and exclude the outsider such as Zacchaeus, the disciples seek to bring all ‘inside’, to become part of the people of God.
There are three main themes that this Sunday’s readings bring to mind; they are all related in some way because they are about how the ‘eye of faith’ shapes our perception of things. Within Catholicism, most of us probably take the doctrine of the resurrection for granted to the extent that we give it little thought—until the day draws near. It is good therefore to have readings from 2 Maccabees and Luke’s Gospel that remind us how mind blowing the notion must initially have been, and how it generated strong reactions for and against. Second Maccabees is a very late book in the post–exilic period and the intensity of its story about the martyrdom of the seven sons suggests that faith in resurrection is being proclaimed here as a powerful new conviction, something that transcends existing horizons and reshapes faith in a way that enables believers to endure cruel oppression.

The Sadducees in Luke’s Gospel belong to a group who resisted this new doctrine and we should presume they did it out of commitment to the tradition that had been handed down to them. Jesus’ response shows that he respects their loyalty; he does not condemn or ridicule but invites them to look at Scripture from another angle in the hope that this will enable them to see that resurrection does not mean the rupture or rejection of their beliefs but their fulfilment. We can become so focused on something in our understanding of the faith—and do so in all good faith—that it prevents us from seeing the larger picture and the dynamism that is the life of faith. Question: can or does our focus on building a community of justice, peace and well–being in this life weaken our convictions about the next one?

A second theme emerges from the attempt to force the young men in 2 Maccabees to eat pig flesh. A powerful, but at times dangerous, side of the life of faith is the conviction that we can express, or compress as it were, the essence of the faith into one simple gesture or word. There is
something of the incarnational nature of faith in this. For a Jew living in the Greek or Roman diaspora, not to eat pork, to wear particular clothes, to pray in a certain manner, were vital ways of bearing witness to one’s faith. All the more so when surrounded by symbols and signs of the faith of ruling and sometimes hostile powers. To live in such a way could be risky, particularly when those in power might see a gesture or word as a criticism of their faith/ideology. They could test your convictions and if you failed one test (eat pork) you failed all, both in your eyes and theirs.

We might like to think that we have got over this kind of ‘fixation’ with a word or gesture in our world where we have a plethora of them and trade them with great abandon, but we haven’t really. If anything we have become more fixated: the wrong word or gesture in so many areas of life now can unleash a torrent of litigation. Despite the fact that we trash texts on our computers the way millionaires throw away $100 bills, words (and gestures) still matter a lot. We need to give time and consideration to them, not only our own but perhaps even more importantly those of others. Jesus’ attitude to the Sadducees challenges us to be more considerate and respectful in making comments or judgements about the beliefs and practices of others. If we listen carefully to a word, pay attention to a gesture, we may see the faith/conviction that it expresses and this may help us understand our neighbour better. It is another way of loving our neighbour.

The third theme is in the reading from 2 Thessalonians that invites us to reflect on the extraordinary riches to which faith in Christ opens the door. Paul prays that Jesus may ‘comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word’. At times the words and deeds of Christians, past and present, may look to us as somewhat odd, quaint or simply insignificant. But if we look again we will hopefully see that they are signs of the riches of the life of grace. From a Christian point of view, they are worth being in touch with much more than some of the words and gestures that we might think are important.
As we near the end of the liturgical year, a selection of readings from apocalyptic literature or readings with apocalyptic themes are offered. This Greek term means ‘to uncover’ or reveal, with the emphasis being on the uncovering or revealing of the final stage or stages of God’s saving plan. A common view is that apocalyptic writing emerged as a response to times of crisis, when faith was sorely tested by evil or uncertainty. In the midst of all signs to the contrary it proclaims (uncovers) the ultimate triumph of the purpose of God and thereby encourages one to maintain faith in the present time of trial.

We may think apocalyptic literature is esoteric and rather strange but it simply offers another and important angle on something that has always engaged and troubled humanity—the battle between good and evil and its final outcome. It was a common theme of ancient stories about the gods, of national legends and sagas (eg, the hero or heroine who slays the monster) and continues to absorb us in our modern forms of storytelling—novels, movies and computer games. What apocalyptic literature proclaims via its highly imaginative portraits of heavenly battles, etc, is the conviction that God (the good) triumphs over evil (whether human or demonic) no matter how bad things may appear from the point of view of human experience.

The principle driving this kind of literature can be summed up in the phrase from one of its most famous examples, the book of Revelation—‘I am the alpha and the Omega’ (Revelation 1:8). The one who began the good work on our behalf is, logically, the one and the only one who will bring it to a successful conclusion. If one does not believe that God is guiding humanity and creation from their beginning to their fulfilment then there seems little point in believing that God is with me in my life at this moment and guiding it, however mysteriously. An important element of biblical teaching is that my story/my life is an integral part of
the larger story/life of humanity and creation. Hence, each person’s faith
and response to God’s invitation and challenge have a vital role to play
within the larger whole (you are the salt of the earth/you are the light of
the world).

So, apocalyptic literature is designed to fuel hope for the future or bet-
ter, the fulfilment of all that we hope in. There are two things about this
solace in the midst of trial that are particularly instructive. The first is that
it is so vague about the time of this final triumph of good over evil. We
can see this in the reading from the prophet Malachi. The prophet an-
nounces that ‘The day is coming’ but no further details are provided. This
reluctance to name the day is a feature of Old Testament prophecy and no
doubt reflects something of the pressure to which prophets were at times
subjected by those wanting to know ‘the details’.

There are some Old Testament texts that reflect a hostile or dismissive
attitude towards prophets. In 2 Kings 9:11, Jehu and his generals describe
Elisha’s disciple as a ‘nutcase’ who is full of ‘babble’. Isaiah 28:22 warns
people not to scoff ‘or your bonds will be made stronger’. Nevertheless, an
important message emerges from this prophetic reluctance to name the
day for their audience and it is this: the future is in God’s hands and one
should not worry about the details. In fact, to try and know these reveals a
desire to take control of the future. Notice how in the Gospel Jesus warns
his disciples not to heed people who think they know when the time ‘is
near at hand’. What God wants of us, via the prophets’ seemingly inad-
quate words, is to live our own time and be committed to that. Knowing
in faith that the future is in God’s hands should give one the confi-
dence and the courage to face everyday trials and tribulations. God is as present
now as he will be at the end of time or in the final victory over evil.

This theology is indicated quite clearly in Jesus’ instructions to his dis-
ciples about how to respond to whatever trial or tribulation they may find
themselves in. ‘You are not to prepare your defence, because I myself will
give you an eloquence and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be
able to resist or contradict’. The warning not to prepare one’s defence in
advance may be intended to alert us to the temptation to put self–preser-
vation to the fore, a sign of fear: in contrast, one should believe that what
looks to be a hopeless situation is instead a God–given opportunity to
bear witness fearlessly to the Gospel truth.

The reading from Thessalonians may be tackling another temptation
in this area with its censure of idle (or ‘disorderly’) Christians. Some early
Christians were so convinced that the second coming would occur in their
own lifetime that they could see no point in maintaining the daily round any more. If we take the ‘idle’ reading, their attitude was presumably to just sit around and ‘wait for Jesus’. If we take the ‘disorderly’ reading, they may have suffered from ‘end of time’ enthusiasms. The first part of chapter 2 of the letter takes considerable care to hose down speculation about the details of the second coming.
Feast of Christ the King

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

According to ancient Near Eastern thought, for example the Sumerian king list, kingship ‘was lowered from heaven’ and so was part of the very structure of creation. Hence it could not be tampered with (cf the notion of the divine right of kings in European tradition). The Old Testament takes a different line or, one should probably say more accurately, lines. It contains texts that portray monarchy arising as a result of the demand of the people and God’s reluctant permission (1 Samuel 8). The same chapter even has a verse that claims an Israelite king is a rejection of God as king! In contrast, 1 Samuel 9 has Saul anointed king by the prophet Samuel to deliver Israel from Philistine oppression. Deuteronomy 17:14–20 allows Israel to have a king if it so desires, but forbids him to behave in any way ‘like the nations’. Here monarchy is seen as an option. The Old Testament describes other forms of leadership as well: the judge, the prophet, the priest, the elders of a town. What is striking about all of these, including monarchy, is that the Bible never condemns the particular institution as institution or claims that one guarantees a better form of leadership or government than another. What it does however is praise or condemn judges, prophets, priests, kings and of course the people. The message seems to be ‘the problem lies not in your systems but in yourselves’. There is no magic system that will work willy-nilly. It all depends on the people involved.

In our first reading for the feast we have the negotiations between David and the tribes of Israel to become king after he had reigned for a time over Judah. The people acknowledge God’s choice of David and, for a time, David delivered the goods. According to the text—and this is about all we have—he forged a united kingdom, gained victory over enemies, established peace and prosperity. But 2 Samuel also exposes the other side of David: rapist, murderer, bad father, a ‘man of blood’ according to Shimei in 2 Samuel 16:5–8. The famous saying that ‘power corrupts’ etc seems to
fit the latter part of David’s life and that of his son Solomon pretty well. According to 1 Kings 9 and 11, Solomon’s sins commenced Israel’s long, downward slide to the exile, slowed temporarily by a few reforming kings. Kingship in Israel came to look more and more like its neighbours. No wonder prophets began looking for an anointed one (messiah) who would in God’s good time bring justice and peace to Israel. They believed that the answer does not lie in a new system of government but in a person.

We believe that Jesus is that person, the hoped for Messiah. In keeping with Old Testament categories of expression, the New Testament speaks of Jesus as a king but it then goes on to turn the tables on the customary understanding of monarchy. Jesus does not come to establish a system of government or a dynasty, but a community in which justice, love and peace rule. All are welcome in this community and access to the king is immediate. There are no security checks and if you fail you are forgiven 70 times 7. His chief deputy Peter who betrayed him three times is made a leader of the community. This is not the way we operate with our ‘three strikes and you’re out’ principle, one that looks like its moving to ‘one strike and you’re out’. He gives himself into our hands and hearts time after time in the Eucharist.

Jesus transforms what must have been the ugliest, most unlikely ‘royal court’ on earth—his trial and crucifixion—into something beautiful, noble and desirable. And so we venerate the crucifix, the ‘heraldic’ emblem of our king (in modern jargon, perhaps our ‘logo’). He ‘rules’ from a tree as a convicted criminal and, from this ‘throne’, invites others to share fully in his kingdom (‘this day you will be with me in paradise’). Kings are more often that not engaged in violent conquest or obliged to counter violence with violence. It is as if a society becomes enslaved to violence. Jesus brings peace to a violent world and frees it from enslavement to violence by forgiving the violent and loving them even unto death. In relation to this portrait of Jesus as king, it is instructive to note the movement of thought in the reading from Colossians. Paul proclaims that God ‘has taken us out of the power of darkness and created for us a place in the kingdom of the son that the loves’. But his description of the relationship between king and subjects in this kingdom again rewrites the customary notions of monarchy. According to the Colossians hymn, Christ is the head and the church community is his body: hard to find a more intimate and powerful expression of personal union than this.
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