2012
February

GOSPEL COMMENTARIES

1 February
Mk 6:1-6
He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offence at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching.

"They took offence at him." What was his offence? His background was the same as theirs; he was just like them: "Is not this the carpenter?" But he had not remained in the role the village had assigned to him. Villages can be intensely conservative places. The word 'conservative' is in itself a good word: to conserve is to keep intact, to guard. But everything depends on what one is trying to conserve: the best or the worst. Because of the human capacity for self-deceit, we can use a fine word to make something mean look good. In the reaction of the villagers to Jesus we see a resentful village mentality.

The smaller the society, the more controlling this narrow spirit. "Beneath the charm of the rural town or village, there often lurks a lethal intolerance." Nazareth was such a place. People who have known you all your life see you as the child you were, even when you are a middle-aged man or woman. They see where you came from and they remember all your youthful mistakes. They also want to make sure you are not getting above yourself; "who does he think he is?" This is a sort of envy, or perhaps something more primitive: a tribal spirit. It tries to destroy you, or at least to discredit you, if you are not just like everyone else.

So we are safe if we don't live in villages? Unfortunately no. A whole section of society, or even a whole society, can lock itself into a village mentality. Listen for the worst accents of the village in some television programmes; look for them in the gossipy printed media. There we can see, for better and for worse alike, the global village.

The terrible fact is that it works. It tied Jesus's hands: "he could work no miracles there" (v.5). It is a frightful thought that we have the ability to prevent miracles. The villagers wanted to keep him within his limitations: he was a carpenter and the son of a carpenter. But elsewhere the gospel says "he broke through their midst and went his way" (Lk 4:30). We have to break through the midst of many things in order to become adult Christians. Many people, even in the Church, will try to keep us in a pre-adult state. Yes, Jesus said we must be like children: we must have their qualities of simplicity, honesty, freshness…. "Like children," he said. We must be adults who are like children, not children who are like adults.

2 February [Presentation of the Lord]
Lk 2:22-40

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant
in peace, according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

"The child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him." This shows that they had no hindsight; they thought of themselves in every way as normal people. This is their connection with us. Had they thought themselves special from birth, they would be as distant from us as a royal family. But we see them following the ordinary custom of presenting the child in the Temple, and their offering is the offering of the poor.

When something is actually happening we have no hindsight on it. Of course we see things more clearly with hindsight; hindsight is always 20/20, as someone said. But in a way it can be a false and garish light. It judges people in the light of events that they could not have known about; it allows them no future, no development, because we see their future already present in everything they do and say. It flattens out their life like a sheet of paper on which everything is visible simultaneously.

It was the hindsight of the Resurrection, of course, that enabled the disciples to see the life of Jesus in a new light. But this new light of faith did not and was never meant to nullify his earthly life. The early heresies of Docetism and Monophysitism fell into this very trap. Trace elements of these early heresies lived on in mainline theology, and many theologians of the past would have held that Jesus knew all human languages and every event in future history. If that were the case he could hardly be said to be like us in all things but sin: "We do not have a high priest who is unable to

sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15). This tendency can be seen in some popular devotions, and we have to be careful lest while stressing the divinity of Christ we diminish his humanity and turn the events of his life into a melodrama. The teaching of the Church is that he is fully divine and fully human.

It is our family that makes and keeps us human. We were welded into it before we were born; it is our anchor in human history. Scholars believe that the gospel accounts (in Matthew and Luke) of Jesus' childhood were not in the original form of the gospels but were added on at an early stage because they were needed to keep the story of Jesus anchored in this life.

In the West we now tend to think of the family as the 'nuclear family': father, mother and child. Then we project this onto the family of Jesus. But an Eastern family, even to this day, comprises a hundred people or more (this is how Jesus managed to get lost in the Temple). In today's first reading, Abram complained to God of having no children. Then "God brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them…. So shall your descendants be.'" Nothing nuclear.

Jesus too was part of an extended family. But that physical family was tiny compared to the spiritual family of disciples through the ages and through the whole world. We all have our part in extending it. Every time we extend a hand to a neighbour or a stranger we are extending that great family. With legitimate hindsight we can see his spiritual family continuing to extend till it includes the whole world.

3 February
Mk 6:14-29

Some were saying, 'John the baptiser has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.' And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.' She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.' Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.' The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

'Herod the Great', five times married, and father of the Herod of this story, had the dubious distinction of having killed everyone he ever loved; there was a saying, "It is safer to be Herod's pig than to be his son." Still, this son survived somehow, and continued the family tradition of lust and cruelty. Innocent people die at the hands of such people: the Holy Innocents at the hand of the father, John the Baptist at the hands of the son.

Josephus, the 1st-century Romano-Jewish historian gave an account of the incident in today's reading, filling in further details. Herod's wife, whom he repudiated in favour of his own brother's wife, was the daughter of Aretas, king of Petra. Aretas took a dim view of this and waged war on Herod, and destroyed his entire army. Eusebius (c. 260-340) wrote: "He suffered this calamity on account of his crime against John." Today we would be more conscious of what all those soldiers suffered for Herod's drunken bravado.

"I had John beheaded, yet he has risen from the dead!" Don't be surprised; he has inevitably risen. If you want the truth to sprout, cut off its head. It will grow twenty heads. This was Herod's experience. However, because of his misdeed and his guilty conscience it was not a pleasant one for him. John was his bad conscience. John rose up again before him like a ghost, not like a resurrected being. He cannot be beheaded again; it is impossible to behead a ghost. That phantom pain will be with Herod for the rest of his life. But wasn't there forgiveness for him? Yes, but he was a tyrant and didn't know that word.

What's in this reading for people who are not tyrants? What could we possibly have in common with Herod? Read what St John Chrysostom said about that. "Do not make this cold reply: 'What does it matter to me? I have nothing in common with him.' With the devil alone we have nothing in common, but with all humanity we have many things in common. All partake of the same nature with us. They inhabit the same

earth. They are nourished with the same food. They have the same God….. Let us not say then that we have nothing in common with them." We have to stand in the shoes of every character mentioned in the New Testament.

4 February
Mk 6:30-34
The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognised them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things

The Twelve were returning from their mission and were obviously the worse for wear. He told them they needed to rest: to rest and to be silent.

He himself knew that same need. Scattered here and there through the gospels are verses that tell us volumes about Jesus by their very silence. "When daylight came he left the house and made his way to a lonely place" (Lk 4:42). Another is Mk 1:35, "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." See also Luke 5:16, "He would always go off to some place where he could be alone and pray." And Luke 6:12, "He went out into the hills to pray, and he spent the whole night in prayer to God."

“The apostles had no time even to eat.” That sounds more like today. There are things that never change, despite all the change we see in our world. We need rest and silence. Have you noticed that watching TV doesn't really relax you? At the end you usually feel just empty and wasted. Rest, the art that the animals practise to perfection, is one that we have to learn all over again.

The nature of the mind is to postpone. When that doesn’t get us anywhere we say, ”I mustn’t be going fast enough.” So we go faster. This could be the origin of the fascination with speed. We are running away from ourselves. Self-knowledge is almost impossible in this atmosphere. In the time of Jesus a bullock-cart was the fastest means of transport. What would they think of the speed with which we live?

5 February [5th Sunday in Ordinary time]
Mk 1:29-39
As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

The rushed and crowded atmosphere of Mark's gospel is very evident here. There are people everywhere, not only the ones mentioned by name, but "all who were sick or possessed by demons," and, as if that were not enough, "the whole city was gathered around the door." Clearly he was exhausted by it, so next morning "while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." But even then they came "hunting for him." "Everyone is searching for you," they said.

Still, in that push of the crowd he saw individual people, not a crowd. He had time for Peter's mother-in-law. I have seen great figures in public, shaking hands with rows of people, but never looking at the person whose hand they are shaking; always looking at the next person. It is as if only the abstract crowd existed, not individuals. There was a debate some years ago between two cardinals about the relationship of the universal Church to local Churches. One held that the essence of the Church is found properly in the universal, while local Churches are limited manifestations of it. The other wanted to give a far greater significance to local Churches. It reminded me of a remark by the German philosopher Hegel, "Would anyone who wished for fruit reject cherries, pears, and grapes, on the grounds that they were only cherries, pears, or grapes, and not fruit?" Abstract ideas can run away with us and make us downplay concrete reality. This is not how Jesus thought and acted.

The great 19th-century preacher, C.H. Spurgeon, wrote: "Very interesting is this little peep into the house of the Fisherman. We see at once…the Lord's gracious work upon one's own flesh and blood….Peter's house was probably a poor fisherman's hut, but the Lord of Glory entered it, lodged in it, and wrought a miracle in it….God is oftener in little huts than in rich palaces. Jesus is looking around your room now, and is waiting to be gracious to you."

Jesus went "proclaiming the message and casting out demons." In the early chapters of Mark's gospel the emphasis is less on the content of his preaching than on its effects. For example, the leper who was cleansed went away and "spread the word," but of course the word was word of his healing (1:45). We sometimes speak of the Christian 'message' as if it could be written on a piece of paper. But it is a healing, life-giving and liberating word.

6 February
Mk 6:53-56
When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognised him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Today's reading stands in strong contrast to tomorrow's. Today Jesus is among his own people, the Galileans; they recognise him and flock to him. But tomorrow a delegation from Jerusalem, the Judaean capital, will arrive, and from there the hostility of the religious leaders will begin. It will lead to his death.

A preacher known to me was inclined to boast after he got a standing ovation for one of his sermons. It really went to his head. But a friend of his helped him back to reality. He said, "There's something odd here, isn't there? Jesus preached and they crucified him; you preached and they gave you a standing ovation!"

Popularity is a fickle goddess: the crowd that cheered "Hosanna!" to Jesus was crying "Crucify him!" a few days later. Jesus went through both; the rest of us, with few exceptions, would settle for just Hosanna! Popularity looks like glory, and it is a kind of glory: someone called it "glory's small change." There is the personality type described as 'the pleaser'. Such a person will never challenge you; they rely too much on your good opinion of them. But it backfires; most people would prefer that you said what you thought. "He more had pleased us had he pleased us less."

7 February
Mk 7:1-13
Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?' He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines." You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.' Then he said to them, 'You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, "Honour your father and your mother"; and, "Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die." But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, "Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban" (that is, an offering to God)— then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.'

Here they are: the scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem. They are not bringing their sick, like the Galileans in yesterday's reading. So they are not vulnerable, they don't have to bother about love. That clarifies their minds so that they can think about the law. Immediately they find fault and go into the attack. "Shallow," Jesus called them: more concerned with external regulations than with the inner reality; more concerned with law than with the heart (in the Scriptures the heart is a symbol of the whole inner life of a person).

The word 'corban' in the last paragraph means 'gift'. Anything brought to the Temple treasury was said to be 'corban' and could never again be put to secular use. Now, a rebellious son might say to his parents, "Any benefit or enjoyment you might have by me, I now declare 'corban'!" It meant that he was no longer bound to help or support them in any way. "You set aside God's commandment (to help and honour your parents)," Jesus said, "in order to implant your own tradition (corban)." For all their talk about God, religious lawyers can't cope well with God. God seems too concerned with individuals, and is therefore unpredictable. Love just muddies the field for lawyers.

8 February
Mk 7:14-23
Jesus called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.' When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, 'Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?' (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, 'It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

All life, not only spiritual life, is transformation: plants and animals transform elements of the earth into themselves; through them, these elements become leaves and branches, or skin, tissue and bone. Even our brains are transformations of the earth. Likewise a spiritual life that was not a constant process of transformation would not be a life at all. Spirituality is not something that one *has*, like a nice garden at the back of the house, a place to go for a break from the nastiness of life. Instead it is the process of our whole life taking place, involving equally the nice and the nasty. And so it can never remain static. Strange, then, that people sometimes think of it as standing above all change.

"The intellect is darkened, the will is weakened, and the passions incline us to evil…." At the age of ten I knew those words by heart. They were the catechism account of the effects of original sin. No hope for passions there – no hope for anyone with a whole stock of them. The only thing to do with passions, then, was to suppress them; and if you couldn't do that, to hide them. But this was not the traditional teaching of the Church. Thomas Aquinas wrote that virtue is the *transformation* of instinct or passion. Courage and hope, for example, are transformations of what he called the 'irascible' or aggressive instinct; love is the transformation of the 'concupiscible appetite' – sensuous desire. These virtues are the flowering of passion, not the suppression of it.

The Pharisees (and their much later successors) made thousands of rules to determine every detail of daily life. What they lacked in spectacular fashion was any power or skill to transform it. Instead their effort was to separate themselves from it; the very name 'Pharisee' means 'separate'. The mind of Jesus was just the opposite of this. What matters, he said, is not what goes into a person from the outside (a reference to their maze of dietary rules) but what comes out from the inside; in other words, how we transform the stuff of our life. Religion is not about things and the regulation of things, it is about *us*. It is about the kind of response we make to the world, to others, and to God. It is about whether that wonderful 'chemistry' of the Gospel is happening in us: the kind of 'chemistry' that can turn bad stuff into good, curses into blessings, suffering into prayer.

9 February
Mk 7:24-30
Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Here we see Jesus away from his own country and culture; he is in the land of the Phoenicians, an ancient and gifted people whose greatest contributions to civilisation were the alphabet and navigation by the stars; their industries (textiles, dyes, metalwork, glassmaking, etc.) were famous in the ancient world. Phoenician sailors had travelled throughout the Mediterranean and even into the Atlantic; other nations competed to employ Phoenician ships and crews in their navies. They were an outward-looking people. The Jews on the other hand were not an ocean-going people, nor at that time particularly outward-looking: they hugged the coast in their small boats and even misnamed their lakes as 'seas'; and they referred to people of other nations and cities as "foreign dogs."

When Jesus arrives in this foreign place he seems reclusive; "he entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there." When a woman asked him to heal her daughter he said it was "not right to take the children's bread (i.e., his service to his own people) and give it to "foreign dogs." He used the diminutive, "pups" (if the adults are dogs, the daughter must be a pup). But he did heal the daughter, and dismissed the mother, "You may go your way." He did this healing at a distance, as in the case of another foreigner (Mt 8:5-13).

What does all this mean? Don't we always expect Jesus to do the noblest, bravest, most loving thing? Don't we expect him to leap over all boundaries of race and even religion? Yes, that's the trouble: we expect him always to match our idea of him. Let's ponder this one and refuse any easy answers; we will meet the text another time.

10 February
Mk 7:31-37
Jesus returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.' And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'

Regional boundaries were not clearly drawn as they are today, but in this reading Jesus is in another piece of foreign territory, the Decapolis. Unlike yesterday's, today's is a 'hands-on' healing. They asked for just that: they asked Jesus "to lay his hands on him." He did more than that; in fact he seemed to go to the opposite extreme. "Gestures and the use of a foreign word were commonplace among contemporary healers, and even suggest a sort of magical ritual," writes a scholar. We might add the use of spittle to that list. But what is missing is even more surprising: there is no mention of faith, nor of casting out a demon.

Again, what are we to make of this? Jesus appears to be measuring himself and searching for his style. Does it upset one's image of him? That might be a good thing. But it need not upset one's faith. If in his youth he had to "grow in wisdom and in stature and in divine and human favour" (Lk 2:52), why should he not have to continue to grow throughout his life?

In the past, anyone who was deaf would also be unable to speak, never having heard speech. One problem became two problems. Then, people associate speech very closely with intelligence (despite all the stupid talk in the world), so a person who could not speak was in danger of being considered stupid ("dumb"). Two problems became three problems. Very soon a deaf person was not engaged at all in any communication and became a permanent 'third person singular'. Somebody in that situation wrote a book about his life, with the title, "Does he take sugar?"

Notice in today's gospel passage how Jesus treated a deaf man. First, he took him aside from the crowd, from the people who were used to seeing him only as a third person singular. This was the reverse of what he normally did: see for example Luke 6:8, "Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the withered hand, 'Get up and stand in front of everyone.'" One senses great sensitivity towards this deaf man. Another thing: he didn't shout at the man, making him feel his deafness even more. He acted everything out. He put his fingers in the man's ears, and touched his tongue, he raised his eyes to heaven, indicating to the man that it was from God that healing was to come…. He treated him as a second person singular.

A comment from Gregory the Great (c. 540 – 604): "The Spirit is called the finger of God. When the Lord put his fingers into the ears of the deaf mute, he was opening the soul of man to faith through the gifts of the Holy Spirit."

11 February
Mk 8:1-10
In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way--and some of them have come from a great distance." His disciples replied, "How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?" He asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven." Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

This is the second feeding of the multitudes in Mark's gospel; the earlier one is just a few pages before. Since the early centuries, commentators have suggested that the first was for Jews, the second for Gentiles. The second is certainly more 'gentile' (Greek) in its language and idiom. One example: in verse 7, Jesus "blessed the fish" (not all translators render this in a literal way); Jews never blessed objects, they blessed ('gave thanks to') God for the object. This and many other details suggest at least that this passage had a non-Jewish origin.

What are we to take from this? It is very interesting for us (Gentiles!) to know that this earliest of the four gospels already has us in view. Though Jesus left his own country once or twice, his teaching, from the earliest times, was for the whole world.

12 February [6th Sunday in Ordinary time]
Mk 1:40-45
A leper came to Jesus begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

Jesus speaks and it is done. It is like the word of God at the beginning of creation: "Let there be light, and there was light." His words are words of power, not commentaries and admonitions.

The ancient world was terrified of leprosy. By Jewish law the sufferer was isolated totally from society: “The leper...shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, ‘Unclean, unclean’. He shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp” (Leviticus 13:45f). The law specified further than a leper had to keep a distance of two metres from other people, and if the other person was downwind from the leper the distance had to be fifty metres. No leper would ever have approached an orthodox rabbi, but the leper in this story approached Jesus confidently for help. This was exceptional, but even more exceptional was what followed: “Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him....” That touch healed him: healed his disease, yes, but healed also his feeling that he not only had a disease but was a disease; it healed his isolation, his loneliness, his despair, his belief that he was cursed by God.... This is the God revealed by Jesus, a “Father of Mercies.”

By touching the leper, Jesus was defiled in the eyes of Levitical law. The leper broke the Law in approaching Jesus, and Jesus in turn broke through the Law to reach and touch the afflicted man. "For our sake," wrote St Paul, "God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). In the minds of many people, somehow, the bad news replaced the good news. The bad news is that we would have to be good before we could approach the Lord. This is not the Gospel; it is approximately the religion of the Pharisees. The good news is that we can approach the Lord no matter what our condition or circumstances. Our Faith is more than a system of morality or a set of admonitions on how we should be; it is Good News, for that is what the word 'Gospel' means. It is a revelation of God, "the Father of Mercies." Jesus came to demonstrate what the Father is like. He could have behaved as a severe moral judge, condemning the sinful; in fact that was what was expected of a prophet. Instead he reached out in mercy to failures and outcasts. He could have invented any kind of parable to say what the Father was like; he invented the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15). Jesus reaches out and welcomes sinners while they are still in their sin. He reaches out to the afflicted and heals them. Our prayer can therefore be very simple: "Lord, help me!" (Mt 15:25).

13 February
Mk 8:11-13
The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation." And he left them, and getting into the boat again, he went across to the other side.

I used to have regular visits from a person who always had highly dramatic stories of signs from God and visions, and messages from Our Lady. The delivery was so fluent that it would almost pull you into its mad swirl. I always took care to express my scepticism about those experiences. But she was so deaf to the outer world that it took her months to realise I was not a supporter. She would appear deeply religious, but in reality she was hardly religious at all – just hysterical, I think. As the world becomes more dangerous every day, many join her in her flight into a magic world. That world wants to claim the credentials of the Christian faith, but we should insist, like Jesus, “No sign will be given to this generation.”

To a royal official Jesus complained, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe" (Jn 4:48). He was not for satisfying people’s demands for signs and proofs. Likewise in the story he told about the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man asked Abraham in paradise to send a sign to his brothers to warn them; but Abraham answered, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them” (Lk 16:29).

The demand for signs is not a religious impulse at all; it is rather the opposite: a search for some kind of verification that doesn't depend on faith. But didn’t Jesus work signs and miracles? Yes, but not for ulterior motives. Many people who want signs are seeking them for some purpose that has nothing to do with faith. In the case of the Pharisees their motive was “to test him.” I could seek signs in order to feel special, or to mask my deep loneliness, or my lack of real faith. What is always evident is a profound ignorance of the Scriptures.

Everything speaks of God; isn’t that enough? “The heavens proclaim the glory of God / And the firmament shows forth the work of God’s hands” (Psalm 18). On the road you need signs only if you don't know which way to go. But we know the way we have to go. “I am the way,” (John 14:6). It would be strange if one were to develop a fixation on signs – admiring their shapes, colours, lettering, etc. – and never realise that they are all pointing somewhere else.

14 February
Mk 8:14-21
Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out--beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod." They said to one another, "It is because we have no bread." And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" They said to him, "Twelve." "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" And they said to him, "Seven." Then he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?"

The apostles' lack of understanding is a favourite theme of Mark's (6:52; 7:18; 8:17-18; 9:10, 32; etc.). Jesus sounds like an impatient teacher today: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?" He uses the same language that he uses when battling with the Pharisees.

Mark uses the expression "the yeast (or leaven) of the Pharisees." In the parallel passage Luke interprets this as hypocrisy (12:1). The word 'hypocrisy' comes from Greek and means 'acting a part on the stage'. Then it came to mean pretence, especially pretence to virtue. It is strange that so useful a substance as yeast should come to have such negative connotations. But leaven has a positive meaning as well. Jesus even likened the Kingdom of heaven to leaven in a batch of dough (Mt 13:33). How can we hold these opposite meanings together?

Every person has a capacity for good and evil; everything we use we can use for good or evil purposes. Consequently every object we touch takes on associations of human goodness or evil, and even comes to symbolise them. Leaven symbolises rapid growth but it also symbolises corruption. Life experiences illustrate the truth of this every day.

Jesus could say repeatedly "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" (Mt 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29) and then sit down to table with them and even became friends with some of them. He held open the door of hope.

15 February
Mk 8:22-26
They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Can you see anything?" And the man looked up and said, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Then he sent him away to his home, saying, "Do not even go into the village."

In Italian they call it 'campanilismo'. A 'campanile' is a church bell-tower – in the context, a village church bell-tower. 'Campanilismo' is the attitude of people who think their own place is the only real place in the world. It applies to bigger villages too: a New Yorker said with humour, "New York is real; the rest is done with mirrors!"

Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village; then when he had healed him he said, "Do not return to the village."

A village identifies you in too great detail. It locks you into a narrow identity. (And you do the same to the others; village is something we do to one another.) You are not free to see things differently from the other villagers – unless you are willing to accept the still narrower identity of village idiot. Leaving your village is like leaving the womb: it is a setting out into a new life.

Spiritually the village may symbolise the ego. One's ego is seldom the independent thing it claims to be: it is supported (even imprisoned) by a rather small group of like-thinking people. When that ego is really isolated it is the village idiot. 'Idiot' comes from the Greek word 'idios', which means 'peculiar, private'. We may have to become a village idiot for a time. It's a long hard road to humanity.

16 February
Mk 8:27-33
Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

Caesarea Philippi (not to be confused with the other Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast) is in the north-east part of Israel called the Golan Heights, in the foothills of Mount Hermon, near the site of the ancient city of Dan. Caesarea Philippi was built on a massive wall of rock, more than 100 feet high and about 500 feet wide. The inhabitants were mostly non-Jewish, and the area was scattered with temples of the ancient Syrian worship of Baal. Nearby was the reputed birthplace of the god Pan, the god of nature. (It would be called Panias, after Pan, but today it is called Banias, because the letter 'p' is absent from Arabic.) The English word 'panic' comes from Pan, who was reputed to be expert at causing it. There was also in Caesarea Philippi a newer variety of paganism: a temple in white marble to the godhead of Caesar.

It was against this pagan background that Jesus asks the question, "Who do people say I am?" And then the much more difficult question, "Who do *you* say I am?" That was Peter's moment. His profession of faith echoes down the centuries, all the more loudly for the pagan background of its first utterance, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." But compared to the massive rock on which Caesarea Philippi was built, Peter, 'the Rock', was very fragile. One moment he was walking on air after Jesus praised his insight (but that was in another gospel account – Mt 16:17). And next moment he was dashed to the ground: "Get behind me, Satan!" Peter was like anything but a rock. But what's a rock? It's a large stone. A disciple has no business being like a stone. I suspect that Peter's nickname 'Rock' was a joke on Jesus' part. I knew a man of vast bulk whose nickname was 'Tiny'. Peter was shaky, anything but rock-like. It's easier to relate to such a person than to a rock. And Jesus had no problem with him: he remained his chief disciple.

Why did Jesus ask, "Who do people say I am? Who do you say I am?" Was he unsure of his own identity? It would appear that what he really wanted to know was why they were with him. People had projected false identities onto him from the beginning, attempting to squeeze him into the roles of village boy, or king, or a predictable kind of messiah.... He wanted to know if they were following him or just their own idea of him.

No doubt it's a question for us too. If we project anything whatsoever onto Jesus we don't know him; he becomes a screen for our projections, and we see only ourselves. Our own self-made identities fit us because they are made to fit; our lies are never against us, always for us. Each individual, each group, each country, each religion, has its own lies; and these fit us like a glove. But we needn't expect the truth to fit us. Our lies are comfortable, but we should expect the truth to be very uncomfortable. Perhaps that's why he spoke immediately about suffering and rejection.

17 February
Mk 8:34—9:1
Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."

In yesterday's gospel passage Jesus introduced the scandalous theme of suffering. He was trying to draw the disciples into a deeper understanding of his identity. It was his hardest lesson, and it has to be learnt over and over again. In today's reading the lesson continues. It is not only about him, it is also about us. "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

The Christian faith is seldom allowed to challenge the ego; instead it is used to extend it to infinity. But saints are people who have received the challenge and lived by it. They assure us that there is no such thing as a painless life, and so running from pain cannot be the answer: we only run into the arms of greater pain. Yes, they tell us, exclude all foolish self-imposed pain. Work with what is left – the inevitable pain of life. Rest at peace with this pain: it is your best teacher and friend; it opens the gate to life. It questions your understanding of who and what you are. It takes away your cushions so that you can feel reality. This is not horrible; it is a promise of life – because only reality can save us. If things go against you don't take it as a personal insult; it is God trusting you. The dream of endless comfort is an insult, not this. God loves you enough to take you out of yourself.

Hear it from a saintly man. "Self-love is proud of its spiritual accomplishments. You must lose everything to find God for God's sake alone. You won't begin to let go of yourself until you have been thrown off a cliff. God takes away in order to give back in a better way." (François Fénelon, 1651 -1715)

> *We would rather be ruined than changed,*
> *We would rather die in our dread*
> *Than climb the cross of the moment*
> *And let our illusions die.* (W.H. Auden)

18 February
Mk 9:2-13
Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean. Then they asked him, "Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" He said to them, "Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him."

Mark's source for his gospel was Peter's experience, and indeed there's a hint of that in today's reading. Mark writes, "He didn't know what to say." That has an autobiographical ring to it.

Do we know what to say? How are we to understand this or any account of the Transfiguration? As an historical event? As a symbolic story? Or as a spiritual experience?

Even in the face of less mysterious things our mental categories are limiting and provisional. How hard it is sometimes to describe some event in one's own life. "Did it really happen, or did I only imagine it, or was it something I remember dimly from childhood, or saw on television, or heard my parents talk about…?" In real life, fact and symbol and inner experience all come together. How could anyone know what category to put the Transfiguration in?

The easiest thing to say about today's reading is that it comes directly in Mark's gospel, without a break, after yesterday's and the previous day's. Those readings were questions about the identity of Jesus. Today's reading then is the answer. He is "the Father's Son, the Beloved." We can say that as easily as we say our own name, but what does it mean? We could answer from the catechism, but again what do the words mean? We are in the presence of the profoundest mystery, and our words sound painfully inadequate. Like Peter, we don't know what to say. There is a "don't know" that means "don't care", but that was not Peter's. We can be clear and eloquent about shallow matters, but we are faced with ultimate things we have to fall silent. If we could rest in that "don't know" we would be Christian contemplatives.

Thomas Merton wrote, "In silence the world which our words have attempted to classify, to control and even to despise (because they could not contain it) comes close to us, for silence teaches us to know reality by respecting it where words have defiled it."

19 February [7th Sunday in Ordinary time]
Mk 2:1-12

When Jesus returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralysed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" – he said to the paralytic – "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

The crowding in Mark's gospel reaches its extreme in this reading (see 5th Sun. in Ord. time). Someone reading this passage remarked that an awful lot of dust and debris must have fallen down when they made a hole in the roof; had they no respect! But an earnest Victorian remarked, "Where the case is very urgent we must not mind running some risks and shocking some proprieties." I think God made dust so that there would be no one without something to worry about.

Yes, this reading is about weightier matters than proprieties. It is about physical paralysis, and it is about the spiritual paralysis that is sin. When we don't want to think about these we think about proprieties, which are a kind of moral dust.

What shocked the scribes this time was that Jesus told the man his sins were forgiven. It did not seem to be done through the proper channels. He replied, "The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sin." On earth. We no longer have to look up at a cold sky, paralysed as we often are with remorse for what we have done and allowed to happen, longing for some assurance of forgiveness, and hearing only silence. Jesus focuses the mercy of God for us. As Leo the Great said, "He is the hand of God's mercy stretched out to us."

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lacked any thing.

(George Herbert, 1633)

20 February
Mk 9:14-29
When the whole crowd saw Jesus, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?' Someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.' He answered them, 'You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.' And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.' Jesus said to him, 'If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!' After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, 'He is dead.' But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?' He said to them, 'This kind can come out only through prayer.'

"If you are able," the man said. Once we allow the word 'if' a place in religion, all is lost. It is like allowing a hole in the bottom of a bucket; no matter how small the hole, everything leaks out. "Why do you say, 'If you can'?" said Jesus. What are you doing – hedging your bets?

What happens when there is no 'if'? "All things are possible for one who believes." 'Belief' isn't a matter of calculating the odds and finding them to be satisfactory. The word 'trust' would translate it better. The great tragedy of misunderstanding at the Reformation, people now see, was that this was missed. *Fiducia*, trust, was an essential part of faith for Martin Luther. For Catholics, *fiducia* was bracketed under the virtue of hope rather than under faith. What Luther meant by faith included what Catholics meant by hope. We wonder now why they thought it important to fight about packaging. Faith, hope and love are inseparable; it would make sense to put them all in one word: faithhopelove.

"I do believe, help my unbelief," said the man in today's reading. Is that a contradiction? Perhaps yes if you were to take belief as isolated from *fiducia*, trust. There's a yes or no quality about pure belief, but there are many degrees of trust; in fact trust is all about degrees. By trusting you learn how to trust, and by trusting again you learn to trust more. Belief (or faith as we prefer to call it) doesn't just lie changeless in the mind; it grows out of itself by degrees. That's how every living thing grows.

21 February
Mk 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

When we are in the presence of death everything looks different. At family funerals we say to our cousins, "We shouldn't wait for a funeral to bring us together; we should meet more often!" But then we go our ways and we don't meet till the next funeral – or wedding. There's a solemnity about death that puts everything in a different perspective; many of our ordinary excitements and disappointments look a lot smaller than they used to. And as for our ambitions…!

Jesus had just spoken about his imminent death. Then he asked the disciples, "What were you discussing?" The gospel says, "They did not answer because they had been arguing about who was the greatest."

It's the ego that has to stake a claim to being the greatest. The ego is a false identity, so everything can threaten it; therefore it's always on high alert. Our true being makes no such claim; quite the opposite. Jesus sat down with them and patiently explained. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (Other translations say, He must *make himself* last of all.) To illustrate what he said, he put a little child before them. Our true being looks out at the world with wonder instead of criticism and competition, and it looks up at God with wordless trust.

22 February [Ash Wednesday]
Mt 6:1-6, 16-18
'Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 'So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 'And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

You could arrange that short passage in two columns; at the head of one, you could write IN SECRET, and at the head of the other TO BE SEEN. Read the passage again and see this for yourself. One is left in no doubt that a deep truthful interiority is essential to a Christian life. A tree has to sink its roots deep into the ground, otherwise it comes down in the first storm (or perhaps it doesn't, because it has never been able to raise itself up). If you project your imagination down into the ground where the roots are, you find a strange world of darkness, silence and stillness. This is the opposite of the world above ground; there you have light, noise, movement. We are like trees in that respect. If we identify our life with the public part, the part 'above ground', we will not be able to withstand the storms of life, and we will have no profound resources for growth. Our actions, our lives, like trees, emerge from a rich darkness, silence and stillness.

The inner is not an escape from the outer. Thomas Merton was convinced that many people in monasteries are not really contemplatives at all but only introspective people, or people in flight from the pain and complexity of ordinary life. Real contemplatives know the urgency not only of going in but also of going out. Meister Eckhart said, "Not that one should give up or neglect or reject one's inner life, but in it and with it and from it one should learn to act in such a way as to let the inward break into activity and draw the activity into inwardness, and thereby train oneself to act in freedom. For one should turn one's eyes to this inner work and act therefrom, whether it be in reading, praying or outward work. But if the outward work tends to destroy the inward, one should follow the inward. But if both can be as one, that is best, then one is co-operating with God."

23 February
Lk 9:22-25
'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.' Then he said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?

Ever since I read Johann Tauler's comment (14th century) I always remember it when I read this text. He said, "Jesus did not say, 'Take up my cross,' but 'Take up *your* cross.'"

Let me quote Joko Beck, a Zen master, on this subject, "I notice that people who have been practising [meditation] for some time begin to have a sense of humour about their burden. After all, the thought that life is a burden is only a concept. We're simply doing what we're doing, second by second by second. The measure of fruitful practice is that we feel life less as a burden and more as a joy. That does not mean there is no sadness, but the experience of sadness is exactly the joy. If we don't find such a shift happening over time, then we haven't yet understood what practice is; the shift is a reliable barometer."

The best example of this 'shift' is in John's gospel: John loved to play on the paradox of 'raised up': Jesus would be lifted up in shame on the cross, but that lifting up in shame is also a lifting up in glory.

24 February
Mt 9:14-15
Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?' And Jesus said to them, 'The wedding-guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.'

Happiness can be manufactured to some extent, and usually only for short periods; but joy is a stroke from beyond. Joyless religion may be the profoundest denial of God. If there is no joy in it, it's all your own work, so what need have you of God? If the Resurrection is not visible in you, then you are preaching death without resurrection. One of the fruits of the Spirit is joy, and it is mentioned next after love in St Paul's list, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:22). If you had no love in you, you could hardly claim to be a Christian; likewise joy (and all the others). These fruits are the fingerprints of the Holy Spirit.

Joy does not come from avoiding pain and sorrow; on the contrary it is possible only when we have gone into the heart of our pain and sorrow. We have to go into the heart of it and experience a certain transformation, the characteristic shift that is the sign that the 'chemistry' of the Gospel is working (see February 8). If we avoid the process nothing happens; we would have to continue all our lives to avoid it. That way there is no joy, only endless desperate flight.

25 February
Lk 5:27-32
Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up, left everything, and followed him. Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance."

"The Word leaped down from heaven into the womb of the Virgin; he leaped from his mother's womb onto the wood [of the cross]; and he leaped from the wood of the cross into the underworld, Sheol," said Hippolytus of Rome (+ ca 235). It would be strange if the Word became flesh, but stopped short of mingling with the common people, all of us, "the great unwashed." Jesus mixed with everyone, even with the most despised people in society. In the account there was not just one tax collector but "many".

It was inevitable that the Pharisees would arrive on the scene. They *needed* those tax collectors. The name 'Pharisee' means 'Separated': their special righteousness separated them from the common people. Naturally they needed those others to be different: otherwise they themselves could not be 'Separated'. It was essential for the Pharisees that there should be lots of tax collectors and sinners; it is essential for some 'good' people that there should be great numbers of 'bad' people. But how disconcerting it always is to find Jesus among the bad!

26 February [1st Sunday of Lent]
Mk 1:12-15
The Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Like John the Baptist, Jesus preached repentance, in other words, revolution. The Greek word translated by 'repentance' is 'metanoia', which means literally 'a mental revolution', a change of mind and heart. The world has seen many revolutions, practically all of them violent. All violent revolutionaries become dictators on the day after the revolution, claiming to be safeguarding the revolution. Bitter experience shows us that the revolution serves the dictatorship, not the other way around. The seizing of power becomes an end in itself, rather than a means. Jesus' revolution was of a different order. He refused the way of power: "put down your sword," he told Peter.

Jesus was first in the desert, where he confronted the wild beasts and the demons. It was an example to all revolutionaries. They should first go into the desert of themselves and face their demons there; otherwise they will project them onto other people and try to destroy them by destroying people. Revolutions, like charity, should begin at home. Reformers should first reform themselves. The axe is laid to the root of the tree, said John the Baptist - my tree, not someone else's; my ego, not other people's.

Revolutions are nearly always *against* something or someone. That way, they draw on the energy of hatred, which is more easily accessible than the energy of love. But we do not become good by fighting evil - we would soon find ourselves using the same means as the enemy - we become good by doing good. Jesus did not say, Repent and destroy the class of people who are bad news. He said, "Repent, and believe the good news."

A revolution of love appears soft and ineffectual beside the other kind. But love is stronger than death. St Paul could write, "We are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered…. In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:36-39).

27 February
Mt 25:31-46
"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Some people have a recurring nightmare in which they are being judged and found totally wanting. Today's reading sounds just like such a nightmare. Earlier generations of Christians thought about “that day” (*dies illa*) more than people want to do now. For centuries they sang that austere sequence *Dies irae* (Day of wrath), meditating on that ultimate scene of judgement.

It’s impossible to evade the question of ultimate judgment, however you think of it. In the sight of God what will my life amount to in the end? In the face of that ultimate question we all feel naked and uncertain. Human beings have imagined a scenario where they can start all over again: reincarnation. But the same question would just arise again and again. This is not how the Judeo-Christian tradition sees it. In the words of Qoheleth, “Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it lie” (11:3). There is no coming back, as the rich man in Jesus’ parable discovered (Lk 16:19-31).

But the point of this reading is not to divide the world into good and bad people (does anyone fit squarely in either of those categories?), but to make the point that in serving one another we are serving God. Our ultimate destiny, the thing that seems farthest away, actually hangs on the things nearest to hand, the most proximate: on how we treat the Lord in “the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned.”

28 February
Mt 6:7-15
"When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. "Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

It's a pity that many Christians for so long have identified prayer with 'saying prayers'. We do this despite what Jesus said: "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words." The fact that the disciples had to ask Jesus to teach them to pray indicates that he hadn't given them any set prayers or formulations. But when asked, he gave them the Our Father.

Has it ever struck you that in the Our Father, "the pattern of all Christian prayer," there is no mention of Jesus, his life, death or resurrection, nor mention of any of the Christian mysteries? This absence indicates to me that it was his own prayer. In prayer he was seized by one single awareness: the Father; he was not thinking about himself. When we pray the Our Father we are not praying *to* him, but *with* him; we are praying his prayer. We are so close to him that we do not see him. We are (so to speak) inside his head looking out through his eyes and seeing, like him, only the Father and the world. We are praying *in* him. All Christian prayer and worship is "in Christ." At the end of the Eucharistic Prayer we say, addressing the Father, "Through him [Jesus], with him, in him...." And every prayer ends with the words, "through Christ our Lord."

Through, with, in: these words express our relationship with Jesus as we pray. They are words of intimacy, even identification. They fit well with St Paul's teaching on the Body of Christ: "Christ is the head of the body, the Church" (Col 1:18; see also Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:13). As Pius XII expressed it in 1943, "The unbroken tradition of the Fathers from the earliest times teaches that the Divine Redeemer and the Church which is His Body form but one mystical person, that is to say, the whole Christ." When we pray the Our Father we are not outsiders and spectators, we are praying from *within* the whole Christ. We are looking out through the eyes of Christ. We are living from his mind and heart: "We have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 3:16); we are larger than ourselves.

29 February
Lk 11:29-32
When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, 'This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation. The queen of the South will rise at the judgement with the people of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here! The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!

The Book of Jonah is a delightful and amusing book – and short: only a few pages. The introduction to it in the Jerusalem Bible calls it "a droll adventure…and its doctrine is one of the peaks of the Old Testament…. Broadminded, it rejects a too rigid interpretation of prophecy…. It rejects, too, a narrow racialism….All the characters of this story are likeable, the pagan sailors, the king, the populace, even the animals of Niniveh…. We are on the threshold of the Gospel."

It's easy to imagine Jesus as a young man hearing it and laughing at the antics of Jonah, and the animals doing penance, and Jonah arguing heatedly with God (*God:* "Are you right to be angry?" *Jonah:* "I have every right to be angry!")

In today's passage, Jesus uses Jonah as a headline for his own preaching. That's how close we are to the Gospel. Don't go to bed tonight without reading it!