

January
2019

GOSPEL COMMENTARIES

1 January 1 [Mary, Mother of God]

Lk 2:16-21

The shepherds went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

A new year is like a new baby: it has to be given a name, and yes, today's readings are about naming. The first reading says, "They shall put my name on the people" (verse 27), and in the Gospel the child is named Jesus (verse 21). We begin the year in God's name, and in the name of God's Son. Who are we? We are the people who have been given the right, because of Jesus, to call God "Abba, Father" (2nd reading, verse 6). In the hymn, God addresses you: "I have called you by your name, you are mine."

Mary's presence marks the beginning of the year. It is appropriate to have a mother to accompany our first steps. January 1st is always her feast. Her title, 'Mother of God, affirms equally the humanity and the divinity of Christ. The Nestorians – followers of Nestorius, the 5th-century archbishop of Constantinople – said that Christ was two persons: the man Jesus and the divine Son of God. This view was rejected at the Council of Ephesus (431 AD), which insisted that he was one person with two natures, divine and human. The most emphatic way they could say this was to affirm that Mary was not just the mother of the man Jesus, but that she was the mother of God. This was their way of saying that Christ was one person, not two. The word used of Mary was 'Theotokos' (Greek for 'God-bearer'). The Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) continued the use of this term, and it has become orthodox Christian teaching. Note that it is more a statement about Christ than about Mary – or rather, equally so. Icons of the 'Theotokos' are common now in the West.

In a sense, when a child is born a mother is born. When a child is born, its mother begins to be a mother. Even if she was already mother to other children this new child makes her a new mother; a new chapter in her mothering begins. In the birth of the Son of God, Mary begins to be the Mother of God. When a Child is born, a Mother is born.

2 January
Jn 1:19-28

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the Lord," as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, 'Why then are you baptising if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' John answered them, 'I baptise with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptising.

John the Baptist had an extensive ministry of his own, apart from his witness to Jesus (Mt 3; Lk 3), but in the fourth gospel all of this is passed over; the Baptist's whole meaning is his pointing to Jesus. When quizzed about his identity he answers all their questions in the negative, and then he identifies himself only as "a voice." Later, Jesus would refer to him as "a lamp": "He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light" (John 5:35).

A voice. A lamp. They don't call attention to themselves but to something else. The world says you have to call attention to yourself and become famous – a celebrity if possible. But in the spiritual life the ideal is to become invisible. The images that Jesus used tell the same story: salt, yeast, grain, light.... He has had countless un-famous disciples, beginning even with some of the apostles: Simon and Jude, for example, and Andrew.

Some lines from the Welsh poet R.S. Thomas:

*As I had always known,
he would come unannounced,
remarkable merely for the absence
of clamour. So truth must appear
to the thinker; so, at a stage
of the experiment, the answer
must quietly emerge. I looked
at him, not with the eye
only, but with the whole
of my being, overflowing with
him as a chalice would
with the sea.*

If the Master works in the invisible, so should the disciple, like John the Baptist. And every disciple.

he murdered his wife, three of his sons, his brother-in-law, an uncle, and his mother-in-law. He had been appointed "King of the Jews" by the Roman Senate in 40 BC and he had already reigned for over thirty years. He was in no mind to hear of a new king, especially one who was no son of his. "He was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." He was frightened to hear of a rival, and the people were frightened because they knew what he was capable

3 January

Jn 1:29-34

John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but I came baptising with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptise with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

Every morning and evening of life a lamb was ritually killed in the Temple as a sacrifice to God. The priest cut its throat and it bled to death. The blood (which to Jews was the life of the animal) was then thrown on the base of the altar, a gift to God, and the meat was burnt. There were scores of other regular occasions for these sacrifices. The one for Christians to think about is the Passover feast.

The oldest Jewish memory of lamb-sacrifice was the strange story of the Passover lamb in the Book of Exodus. The Passover was (and is) an important Jewish festival commemorating their escape from slavery in Egypt and their safe flight across the desert and the Red Sea. To protect themselves from the plagues of Egypt, they were told to mark their dwellings with lamb's blood. Every year thereafter each family would sacrifice a lamb in memory of that deliverance. It was just at the time of the Passover feast that Jesus was put to death in Jerusalem, so it was natural for Christians later on to see him as the Passover Lamb, the Lamb of God.

But when John the Baptist called him the 'Lamb of God', it may have been an echo of a remarkable passage from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah lived about 700 years before Christ, and he wrote about a mysterious "Suffering Servant" who would save his people. But "he was despised and rejected by people, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.... Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.... He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities...by his wounds we are healed.... He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.... He poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors..." (ch. 53).

At the Eucharist when we see the raised host and hear the words, "This is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world," these ancient echoes can dwell in our minds, as they have dwelt in the minds of Christians throughout the ages.

In the book of Revelation Jesus is referred to 28 times as a lamb; and he referred to his disciples as lambs; he said to Peter, "Feed my lambs" (Jn 21:15). I may have a recognisable identity, such as lawyer, banker, even prize fighter; but my deeper identity is that I am a lamb and a dove!

4 January

Jn 1:35-42

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

In John's gospel Jesus makes his first appearance as someone walking past in silence. The whole scene is characterised by great silence: there is no voice from heaven identifying Jesus (unlike Mt 3:17 and Lk 3:22). In fact, as you look you notice that many things are absent from John's gospel that are to the fore in the others. There is no reference to the temptations in the desert, no preaching of the kingdom of God, no teaching in synagogues and healing, no call for disciples. Jesus is a mysterious silent presence; and when he does speak, he does not speak in parables but in an elevated mystical tone.

In the present scene, when he sees the two following him he asks, "What are you looking for?" Particularly coming from a silent person, it was a profound question. They made no answer, probably because they didn't have an answer. Instead they asked, "Where are you staying?" He said, "Come and see." He did not say "Listen!" but "See!" It was the answer of a silent man. They remained with him that day. This is in keeping with the repeated "abide in me" or "make your home in me" much later in the gospel.

It can seem a little strange, this emphasis on silence, in a gospel whose first words are, "In the beginning was the *Word*." But this Word is not like the weightless things we fill the air with; it is a Word in which to make our home. He spoke of "*keeping* my word" (8:51; 14:23), and of "my words abiding in you" (15:7).

There is such an emphasis today on communication that we want to pass everything on within seconds of receiving it. Abiding, making our home in him who is the Word: this is a helpful headline for us. This alone can transform us, as it transformed Peter and Andrew and all the others. "If you are to hear the words of Jesus," wrote Ignatius of Antioch (1st century), "you must also hear his silence."

5 January

Jn 1:43-51

Jesus found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."

Bethsaida, Cana, Nazareth: all were small country towns, little more than villages, and no doubt they had all the petty rivalries experienced in such places. "Nazareth?" said Nathanael (himself a Cana man), "can anything good come from Nazareth?" Nazareth was never mentioned in the Old Testament; how could the Messiah come from such a place? Still, he let himself be persuaded to go and meet this stranger.

The moment Nathanael met Jesus his prejudice vanished. This is normal. Prejudice thrives on ignorance and anonymity. In 'A Prayer for my Daughter' W.B. Yeats imagined the future years and what they might bring to his new-born child - and, more ominously, what they might take from her. He wrote of his fear that she might "lose natural kindness and maybe / The heart-revealing intimacy...." The mechanism of such loss is hatred and prejudice. "An intellectual hatred is the worst, / So let her think opinions are accursed...."

Nathanael let his prejudice be overcome. This made him different from the many who seek only to have their prejudices confirmed. Jesus had seen him in the distance, under the fig tree, and perceived that he was a man "without deceit." For Nathanael it may have been one of those non-moments when everything is clear because it is not squeezed into language. Such moments were beautifully described by Yeats (to quote him again). Whether we are among the powerful of the earth or the powerless, it is in such moments that the shape of our life is determined.

*Our master Caesar is in the tent
Where the maps are spread,
His eyes fixed upon nothing,
A hand under his head.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.*

Today we might call it meditation. To sit under one's fig tree seems to have been a symbol of peace. "During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel lived in safety...all of them under their vines and fig trees" (1 Kings 4:25). Our houses now are so packed with electronic devices that it is hard to find any modern equivalent in them of the fig tree. It is a challenge to construct a place (or a time) in one's own home where we can be entirely undisturbed.

6 January [Epiphany]

Mt 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'*

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." ' Then Herod secretly called for the wise men* and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.*

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Ours is not the first age to look east for wisdom; the East has always had a reputation for it. The word 'magi' is translated here as "wise men." 'Magus' meant different things: a magus was a member of the Persian priestly caste; or one who possessed occult knowledge and power (this is the origin of our word 'magic'). If people had the careless habit of throwing around the term 'New Age' in those times as many do now, the Magi would certainly have been called New Agers.

Herod was one of history's great tyrants: he spared no one, not even his own family; to keep his grip on power he murdered his wife, three of his sons, his brother-in-law, an uncle, and his mother-in-law. He had been appointed "King of the Jews" by the Senate in 40 BC and he had already reigned for over thirty years. He was in no mind to hear of a new king, especially one who was no son of his. "He was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." He was frightened to hear of a rival, and the people were frightened because they knew what he was capable of. But the chief priests and the scribes – the religious authorities of the day – were able to give him directions in locating this rival. They knew in detail about the expected arrival of "the anointed one." They had studied the Scriptures, they knew the prophecies, they knew where to look. And they used all that knowledge to direct a killer to him. Nor was it just a momentary lapse of judgment: Herod would fail to kill him, but later on they would succeed.

The Magi were foreigners, pagans, astrologers: everything that was most base in the eyes of the religious authorities. Though they had not the benefit of the prophecies the Magi came and did the Child homage. Tradition calls them "kings" – judging, probably, by the wealth of the gifts they brought. At any rate they came looking for a king. Where do you look for a king? In a palace. Who else is likely to be there? A royal family. But the Magi came to a cave or a stable where they found a poor family, with animals and perhaps a few shepherds. All the appearances would have told them they had made a ridiculous mistake, yet "falling to their knees, they did him homage."

We can look at the significance of this from many angles. Preparation is no guarantee that you will be ready; it may actually blind you, because you prepare according to your own idea. There is no substitute for an open heart; learning sometimes has the effect of closing the heart, and in some cases even the mind. Religious authority is the most perilous of all: the claims are absolute, the deepest things are at stake, and with the years comes the habit of listening

to no one. The most chilling feature of this story is the collusion of the religious leaders with Herod.

Later on, when simple people were shouting out their enthusiasm for John, the Pharisees said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out" (John 19:40-41). We are not to be surprised at where praise of God can spring up. It is not recorded that any of the authorities went with to Magi to search for the Child; it was the pagan astrologers who sought and found him.

7 January

Mt 4:12-17, 23-25

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.' From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

Today's reading records the moment when Jesus left his home town, never to live there again. In Luke's gospel it is clearer that this decision was due to his experience of rejection at Nazareth (Lk 4:30, 31). His townspeople tried, you remember, to throw him over a cliff because he said things they didn't like to hear. It is clear, however, that he was not embittered by this. Bitter people like to proclaim bad news, or when they proclaim good news there is some bitter echo in it. But he "went around all Galilee... proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom." It was their loss. Nathanael was surprised when he heard that Jesus was from Nazareth, "From Nazareth?" he said, "Can anything good come from that place?" (Jn 1:46). There is no bitterness like small-town bitterness. It is small and intimate, it penetrates to the roots. But those townspeople could not infect him with their bitterness; it was they who remained bitter.

Yet they were able to rob him of some of his power. "He could work no miracle there" (Mk 6:5). Not only Nazarenes but all of us have the power to poison the well of life and to stop miracles from happening. And we do it best in our own place – perhaps even in our family.

8 January
Mk 6:34-44

As Jesus 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. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

When someone is complaining, a friend of mine always says things like, "Why don't you fix it yourself?" The effect is like that of turning off a tap: it stops all complaints instantly! But that isn't why he says it. He is a hands-on person by instinct, so his words have great power to challenge – much more than if he were only being provocative. His kind of language is real and practical, "Do it, and we'll talk about it later!" "Go and see the place yourself!" "Talk to him!" "Let's do it ourselves!" Very invigorating! He once asked another friend of mine a direct question about something, and she replied evasively, "I'll have to think about that." "I'll wait." he said. And he waited right there.

"You yourselves give them something to eat!" Jesus said. And when they began to do it, they found that it worked. Another time he said to a man who had been lying there for thirty-eight years, "Get up!" And when he went to get up he found he could. There are probably miracles everywhere just ready to pop, if only we would do the thing instead of talking about it.

9 January
Mk 6:45-52

Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray. When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

All the details are so realistic, so workaday. He makes arrangements, he tells them to go on ahead; you can almost see his gestures. Later he sees them from a distance and notices that they are straining at the oars because the wind is against them. He has the practised eye of a man used to boats and fishermen.

Then suddenly the realism is shattered: he comes to them walking on the water – a strange irruption into the life of common sense. It is night-time; they think it is a ghost. That at least is some sort of explanation. But it is no ghost. St Augustine wondered why he “intended to pass them by.” He made to pass them by, he said, so that his help would come at their request. (There is a lesson here about prayer of petition.)

In this mysterious incident the crust of normal awareness is broken for a moment and Jesus appears like God dividing the Red Sea in Genesis 14. There is another symbolic meaning lost to us. The Jews at that time feared the sea, and there was a popular belief that at the bottom of it lurked Leviathan, the mythological monster of chaos. The significance of Jesus’ walking on the water then is that he has conquered evil.

Then just as quickly he is saying to them, “Courage! It is I, don’t be afraid.” They and we can take mystery only in small doses.

10 January

Lk 4:14-22

Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'

Most books are about other books. If they are not referring directly to them they have them at the edge of their vision and they are quoting or half-quoting from them, agreeing or disagreeing. That's the way we are. We are a community, even when we are doing one of the loneliest things one can do: writing a book.

Jesus stood up in the synagogue and read from the book of Isaiah. The rabbis and scribes loved to quote commentary after commentary, but here there is silence as Jesus finishes. "The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him." Into that dramatic moment he spoke the words, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Not sometime in the future, not in eternity, but today. It is awkward when a book spills over into reality – into the present moment. It is as if a picture on the wall were to expand beyond its frame, and its figures were to come down the wall and speak to you.

A Zen Master had spoken for an hour on the power of the present moment, the Now. At the end, someone said, "I like your concept of the Now!" The Zen Master reacted almost as if he had been struck. "It is *not a concept!*" he roared. 'Now' is reality, 'Today' is reality. Good news to the poor is to be a reality, freedom to the oppressed is to be a reality. This is real community, unlike the fictional community of books.

11 January

Lk 5:12-16

Once, when Jesus was in one of the cities, there was a man covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." Then Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I do choose. Be made clean." Immediately the leprosy left him. And he ordered him to tell no one. "Go," he said, "show yourself to the priest, and, as Moses commanded, make an offering for your cleansing, for a testimony to them." But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.

There is a small but significant difference in this healing story. Jesus' other miracles occurred through the mere speaking of a word, but here he touched the leper, thereby making himself ritually unclean according to Jewish law (Lev 13:42-46). The compassion is evident – and was badly needed, given the isolation that was forced on lepers.

Naturally, the word began to spread. And why not? we might ask. Every word spreads: that's the nature of words. And Jesus is the Word. So why the secrecy? He must have seen that he was in danger of becoming a celebrity. Celebrities, by definition, are famous. I doubt that Jesus would ever agree to appear on television, were he walking the earth today. But you get the uneasy feeling that many of the 'apparitions' of Jesus and Mary today are based only on somebody's lifelong habit of watching television; our visionaries are televisionaries.

Fame is very superficial, as Jesus had every reason to know. I saw a famous actor being interviewed on television, and I was astounded to see that he appeared to have no real life of his own: he seemed to exist only in the characters he portrayed on screen and stage; he seemed to be empty himself. Perhaps this is an advantage to an actor, but it is a terrible price to pay. Jesus has not faded into history, because he was substantial, he was not an actor. What does it say about our age that so many of our great heroes are actors and entertainers?

But Jesus was substance, not appearance. He touched the leper – something he could not have done through television. And then he sent him away, telling him to say nothing, while he himself "would withdraw to deserted places and pray."

More than the other gospel writers, Luke shows Jesus frequently at prayer. One translation says "He would always go off to some place where he could be alone and pray." Others say often. It is clear that it was his custom, not an occasional thing. This became all the more necessary as his fame increased.

He also needed to get away just to rest. Our world puts a very high value on busyness, sometimes making it seem the ultimate value. But how could it be that? Some of the greatest ruffians in history have also been the busiest. "The most cruel men," wrote Tolstoy, "your Neros and Peter the Greats, were constantly occupied." If it was necessary for Jesus to seek solitude in first-century Palestine, how much more for us who live with the bustle of the twenty-first century!

12 January
Jn 3:22-30

After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptised. John also was baptising at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptised – John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison. Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptising, and all are going to him." John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease."

When fifteen of us presented ourselves for entry into the Dominican order many years ago, naturally we were asked during the interview why we wanted to take such a step. One of my companions, only slightly more naïve than the rest of us, replied that he didn't want to be a preacher. He had never heard any but diocesan priests at it. He hadn't realised then that OP stands for Order of Preachers! The humour and the humanity of it is that they only smiled and told him he was welcome. (They are far more cautious today.) I remembered it when I read today's gospel passage. "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven." Our own agendas are mostly maps for a low horizon, for who can know the future? God has more in store for us than we dare imagine - more and different, and more hazardous, and more wonderful. Our Faith does not tell us that we will get only what we bargain for, or what we deserve; it tells us that everything is gift.

"No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven." In another translation it says: "One can lay claim only to what is given by God." This is something you could spend days thinking about – or perhaps a lifetime. We usually lay claim only to things we believe we have achieved by my own effort, or to what we deserve for some reason. Everything else we call luck, or chance...or 'providence'. But this reading suggests that the things most distinctively our own are the purest gift of God; the more they are ours the more they are God's, the more they are God's the more they are ours.

This is not a kind of alienation, because God is really our own, "more ours," said Tauler, "than anything else we call our own." Raymond Blakney (1941) translated a passage from Meister Eckhart as follows (with the exclusive language of the day): "If it is true that God became man, it is also true that man became God... and so... you haven't got to borrow from God, for he is your own and therefore whatever you get, you get from yourself. Before God, work that does not come from your [inmost] self is dead.... If a man's work is to live, it must come from the depths of him – not from alien sources outside himself – but from within."

13 January [Baptism of the Lord]

Lk 3:15-16, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus is there anonymously in the crowd, coming forward with the rest to meet the famous John the Baptist. It is impossible for us to see him as an anonymous person; to us he stands out from every crowd and from the whole human race: above them, beyond them; we can't imagine him not yet majestic. But there he is, the village man, Jesus, known only to his family and neighbours. He is not yet famous.

There is only one famous man there: John the Baptist. When we imagine a famous person among the crowds there is nearly always something false about it: he or she is looking for something, votes or applause or some other sort of ego-stroking. But John the Baptist isn't looking for anything; he is delivering! He is delivering a verbal lashing of extraordinary severity, calling the crowd 'a brood of vipers.' Jesus is there, watching, listening, anonymous. He is indistinguishable from the brood of vipers. He is one of us. This is nothing new for him; this is how he has been all the thirty years of his life.

But this meeting with John the Baptist is a turning point. Something happened. He experienced the Spirit, and it is described in the kind of language that mystics have used throughout the ages to describe their union with God: 'You are my son, the beloved.'

Have you ever known that in your very bones: God speaking to you (in some sense), 'You are my son, my daughter, the beloved?' If you experience God at all how could it be otherwise? God is love. Even the thundering 19th-century preacher, Spurgeon, became quiet in front of today's gospel passage. He wrote: "The wings of the dove are as soft as they are swift. Quietness seems essential to many spiritual operations; the Lord is in the still small voice, and like the dew, His grace is distilled in silence." The unshakeable intimacy with his Father that Jesus demonstrated throughout the rest of his life bears witness to his experience of God's Spirit.

Was he now somehow 'above' the crowd? Would he no longer queue up with them? On the contrary. He was now more than ever one of them. He spent the rest of his life seeking out "the weak, the sick, the wounded, the strayed, the lost" (see Ezekiel 34). He was for the lost sheep, the outcast, the sinner. This has ever since been the mark of true greatness. Among us human beings (and not only in the farmyard) there is usually a well-enforced pecking order: people who climb up a step are sure to make it visible in some way and sometimes they will even move into a different circle of friends and abandon the old circle. But Jesus never abandons the abandoned. Again the mighty Spurgeon: "Gentleness is a sure result of the Spirit's transforming power: hearts touched by Him are meek and lowly henceforth and for ever."

Can language convey this? I know a man who conveys it better than words ever could. When he is talking with you (or, much more often, listening) and someone interrupts, he totally ignores the interruption. His attention is unwavering. Nothing else exists for him at that moment, and you know that he would stop at nothing to help you, and there is not the slightest hint of ego in it - he has no agenda of his own. This is a rare quality. People know instinctively that he is a man of God. In case you've never met one, that's what meeting a saint is like.

If meeting a saint is like that, what must it be like to meet Jesus himself?

14 January [First Sunday in Ordinary Time]

Mk 1:14-20

After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the Good News from God. 'The time has come' he said 'and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News.' As he was walking along by the Sea of Galilee he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net in the lake - for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you into fishers of men'. And at once they left their nets and followed him. Going on a little further, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John; they too were in their boat, mending their nets. He called them at once and, leaving their father Zebedee in the boat with the men he employed, they went after him.

The gospels are not big books, nor even small books; they would be better described as booklets. Mark's is the shortest, about 25 normal book-size pages. That means that all the content is compressed. Mark's style is above all rapid: he often uses words like 'immediately' and 'straight away'. When he says in today's reading, "Jesus...saw Simon and his brother...and said to them, 'Follow me,' and at once they left their nets and followed him," this, no doubt, owes much to Mark's style of writing. Likewise when "he saw James and John...and immediately called them and they followed," this is more quickly said than done.

But we have plenty of time, we can dwell on it and let it expand to a long conversation. We see everything with hindsight: we see things that were not seen then. We see the utterly compelling presence of the Son of God, crucified and risen. They saw a man from the backwater town of Nazareth. Whatever attracted them at the first meeting, it was his lengthy conversations, the freshness of his thinking, his compassion, that held them.

When we are confused and distressed we can take time to sit down by the lake (any lake - or indeed anywhere) and enter into conversation with him, listening to his deep mind and great heart.

15 January
Mk 1:21-28

The disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

“The earth was literally a hell,” wrote someone describing the belief in evil spirits in Jesus' time. The air was thought to be full of them. They were believed to cause physical and mental illness when they gained access to a person. It sounds a little like what people say about microbes today, but these evil spirits were seen as sinister and malicious.

Synagogues were places of teaching; there was no music, no sacrifice (that was in the Temple). But in casting out demons, Jesus was doing something for people; he wasn't just discoursing on the Law, as the scribes did endlessly. When Jesus frequented synagogues (before they expelled him and he never returned) he didn't just preach; he healed people's tortured minds and bodies; he restored their strength.

Sometimes preachers disable people, by a habit of denunciation, by forever enjoining obedience, quoting rules.... But see what happens when Jesus comes near people. “He spoke as one having authority,” the gospels say. This expression 'having authority' usually means being authorised, having the right from some authority to act as one does. But the word 'authority' itself means just the opposite. It means to be oneself the source (the 'author') of one's words and actions. Jesus spoke with authority; he was not quoting texts, like the scribes and Pharisees. The best quoters are people who have no ideas of their own, just as the cruellest people often say they were acting under authority. But Jesus was his own man. That is what attracted people to him.

16 January
Mk 1:29-39

On leaving the synagogue, Jesus went with James and John straight to the house of Simon and Andrew. Now Simon's mother-in-law had gone to bed with fever, and they told him about her straightaway. He went to her, took her by the hand and helped her up. And the fever left her and she began to wait on them. That evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were sick and those who were possessed by devils. The whole town came crowding round the door, and he cured many who were suffering from diseases of one kind or another; he also cast out many devils, but he would not allow them to speak, because they knew who he was. Jesus quietly leaves Capernaum and travels through Galilee. In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there. Simon and his companions set out in search of him, and when they found him they said, 'Everybody is looking for you'. He answered, 'Let us go elsewhere, to the neighbouring country towns, so that I can preach there too, because that is why I came'. And he went all through Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out devils.

When fame begins to catch up with him Jesus heads for the mountains or for a lonely place (Mk 1:35; Lk 5:16; 6:12; Jn 6:3, 15; see also tomorrow's reading). In today's reading, when they told him everyone was looking for him he said, 'Let's go somewhere else.' There is a wrong kind of fame. Many people do everything they can to be famous, and some even resort to criminal acts. Having perhaps a deficient sense of identity they crave notice: the notice of a crowd will persuade them that they exist.

But on a smaller scale we all want to have our existence noted by at least a few people. Anyone who can live even for a while in a desert must get over the need for recognition. Many have gone to live in solitude because they needed to get over it completely. Their hope is that they will discover their true identity, which is, if we are to believe Julian of Norwich, as deep as God. "I saw most surely that it is quicker for us and easier to come to the knowledge of God than it is to know our own soul. For our soul is so deeply grounded in God and so endlessly treasured that we cannot come to knowledge of it until we first have knowledge of God, who is the Creator to whom it is united."

But for very self-conscious people, their own self is audience enough. Bishop Fénelon (1651 – 1715) wrote, "By fixing the mind wholly upon God, [abandonment to God] takes away the disposition of the soul to occupy itself with reflex acts; that is, with the undue examination and analysis of its own feelings." And again, "Those who pray perfectly are never thinking how well they pray." External solitude is not enough; we have to get rid of the invisible audience that follows us around; we have to enter into inner solitude. It was because he was able to enter into inner solitude that Jesus was able to be so fully present to people when he came down from the mountain.

17 January
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.

Leprosy terrified the ancient world; it was seen by Rabbis as "a special scourge from God" and "a living death". More than other diseases, it was seen to be a punishment for sin; and Mark speaks of it as demonic possession. The repulsive physical aspect of the disease lent credence to this. To heal a leper, then, was to show a power approaching the divine. Scholars say that the words "he sternly warned him" in v. 43, which seem emotionally so inappropriate, are in fact addressed to the demon that had just been expelled, and not to the pitiful man who had just been healed.

Lepers were people you didn't touch. In fact they were compelled to stand at a distance, cover their upper lip and cry 'Unclean! Unclean!' when they saw someone approach. If this disease – seen at that time as the extreme of physical illness, social ostracisation and demonic possession – was so readily healed by Jesus, we are being assured that we are never beyond the reach of his hand. In this passage it is even literally so: "Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him."

I've often heard people say, "I felt like a leper!" No need to look at their skin, though, or to count their fingers; what they are saying is that they felt isolated or completely discredited. In that sense the world is still full of lepers. There are lepers in every parish and there may even be a leper or two in one's own house.

18 January

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 Rabbis had a saying, "There is no sick man healed of his sickness until all his sins have been forgiven him." The Jews linked suffering to sin: if a person was suffering, that was proof positive that he or she was a sinner. So when Jesus healed this man, he was not just ridding him of physical symptoms; he was turning his life around, healing him in the deepest places of his being.

Today we make a clearer distinction between sin and suffering; in fact we make a separation between them. We say sickness and suffering have nothing to do with sin. We say, quite truly, that good people often suffer more. Are we right?

Not all suffering is due to sin, certainly; but who will deny that there is sin that entails suffering? To live a life of sin is to miss the mark and to lose the meaning of life. That surely is a deep wound in any human life – unless we have defined life as having a good time in the short term.

"There is nothing hidden but it must be disclosed," Jesus said once, "nothing kept secret except to be brought to light" (Mk 4:22). How is a thought, for example, brought to light? By becoming an action. Thought is a kind of incipient action; when it is full-blown it is an action. The Japanese Zen master Deshimaru, who lived about fifteen years in France, said that western culture had become weak and decadent. We have been weakened, he said, by excessive use of the mind and imagination, without action. Of course we are active, but it is nervous activism, which can be a flight from real action. We don't bring our deepest thoughts to fruition in action, we complicate them so much that we can scarcely even understand them ourselves. Thinking become so specialised that only philosophers can engage in it, and they become professors rather than doers. Meanwhile the doers dive into activism. You have lost the run of yourselves, he said.

Jesus wasn't thinking about sin as a concept, he saw it as a crippling thing. "Is it easier to say to this paralysed man: Your sins are forgiven, or to say: Rise, take up your mat and walk?" Then he said, "Stand up!" And the man stood up and walked.

19 January
Mk 2:13-17

Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples – for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "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."

What a wonderful mix: these extraordinary powers of Jesus, and the seedy world of prostitutes and tax-collectors! It is a scandal for anyone who likes to divide the world neatly into groups: the good and the bad, the 'right people' and the wrong people, religion and the wicked old world. The English proverb, "a cat may look at a king," is based on the understanding that there is no parity between them. And we know, of course, that it is not really about cats and kings, but about different classes of people! Jesus had no class-consciousness; he had friends from every quarter.

Tax-collectors are frequently mentioned with prostitutes in the gospels (e.g., Mt 21:31; Lk 5:30); they were excluded as unclean. Levi (generally believed to be Matthew) was one of them. Jesus called him, and we usually pause here to wonder at the great open heart of Christ. Let's not forget the great heart of Matthew either: he gave up a job that he could never return to. Peter and the others returned to their fishing, but for Matthew there was no going back. Let's praise all the great-hearted people who have followed Christ at great cost to themselves.

20 January [2nd Sunday in Ordinary time]

Jn 2:1-11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Some commentators with a strict attitude to alcohol had trouble with this parable. Why would Jesus make a thousand bottles of that offensive drink? Some even resorted to saying that what he really made was grape-juice. But the steward was surely a better judge of wine than that. No, it was the real thing.

Many people turn water into wine. I did it myself on one occasion. It takes at least six weeks. But with Jesus it took no time at all. And it required no effort: he did it without even a word or a gesture or command; it just turned into wine in his presence, and he instructed the waiters to take it to the table. C.S. Lewis remarked that all the miracles worked by Jesus were in accord with the laws of nature, and not against them. There are no magical transformations, no weird metamorphoses. He did in a moment what nature does slowly. "Each miracle writes for us in small letters something that God has already written, or will write, in letters almost too large to be noticed, across the whole canvas of nature."

Water into wine is a wonderful transformation, but it is not magic. Who needs magic? When a hard man gets the courage to leave the door of his heart open, it is not magic. When a miser begins to practise the bounty of God, it is not magic. When a sinner turns into a saint, it is not magic. It is a miracle.

In the presence of Jesus things like this happen all the time. John calls the miracle at Cana "the first of his signs." So it was not just a favour - even a miraculous one - for an embarrassed host. It was a parable in action. It carried a profound teaching about Jesus himself (it "revealed his glory"), and also about our life as his disciples.

He appeared transfigured (transformed) on the mountain before the eyes of Peter, James and John (Matthew 17:2; Mark 9:2). But his disciples too are being transformed: "All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). "He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself" (Philippians 3:21).

Transformation is not magic; there is a line of continuity (by God's grace) between the beginning and the end. We continue with our ordinary life, our daily employment; but like the water changed to wine, it is given a kind of flavour and fragrance that is beyond what we call 'ordinary'.

Our whole life is 'sacramental' in this sense. The ordinary bread of labour is transformed into the Body of Christ. After we celebrate the Eucharist the celebration continues into every moment. It is not magic. The sacraments are not magic. But when we detach a sacrament from its home in a life-being-transformed, we can only think of it magically. For a long time now we have been losing the power of symbolic thinking, and replacing it with a barren literalness that is nowhere found in the Scriptures. It is getting worse. Fundamentalists are appearing everywhere, accusing of heresy. The first part of us that needs transformation is our mind. "Let that mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5).

21 January

Mk 2:18-22

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' Jesus said to them, 'The wedding-guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. 'No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.'

Jewish weddings lasted a full week; the young couple did not go away on a honeymoon, they stayed at home and held open house for all. It was the happiest week in a person's life, and there was a rabbinical ruling that went, "All in attendance [at a wedding] are relieved of all religious observances that would lessen their joy." Wedding guests were dispensed from all fasting.

There are very good reasons why a Christian disciple might fast. But they are reasons; they are not a gloomy and miserly attitude that can appear very religious while being nothing of the sort. A reason applies at one time and not at another, but an attitude goes on forever. People who are capable of the deepest joy are also capable of the deepest sadness, because they are responding to life as it comes. But others become mired forever in a half-way place, experiencing neither joy nor sorrow. Joy is the chief characteristic of a Christian – "joy even in tribulation," as Tauler said – and one of the first fruits of the Spirit (see Gal 5:2).

22 January

Mk 2:23-28

One sabbath Jesus was going through the grain-fields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

I knew a canon lawyer who used to say, There are two kinds of canon lawyer: the one who studies the law in order to tie you down with it, and the one who studies it in order to set you free. He himself was the latter kind. It sounded somewhat seditious in a Church lawyer. Yet, as he loved to point out, in Latin the Code of Canon Law is called 'codex *iuris canonici*'; and the word 'ius' (genitive: 'iuris') does not mean 'law' but 'right'. Canonical Rights. It is about defending people's rights.

Jesus never bound people up with the Law; in fact he accused the Pharisees of doing just this. "Woe to you lawyers also! for you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them" (Lk 11:46). In today's reading he scanned history to find exceptions to the law against working on the Sabbath, and he found them! Then he made the most radical statement about law and law-making: the Law is for human beings, not human beings for the Law. He said this in relation to the Sabbath, which was no corporation bye-law, but a law of divine origin (Exodus 20:10). The deepest intention of the Law is to set you free. When you think about it, this is not so surprising. Surely God wants to set you free: your freedom is God's gift. Jesus came "to set captives free" (Lk 4:18).

23 January

Mk 3:1-6

Jesus entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come forward.' Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

If Jesus had only gone around saying, "Love God," or "God loves you," no one would have crucified him. But he was no shrinking violet; he lit the ground around the religious authorities and undermined their position. Mark is the only gospel-writer who mentions his anger. Of course John mentions that he drove the buyers and sellers out of the Temple (Jn 2:15), but he doesn't say explicitly that he was angry. Another small but distinctive thing in Mark's gospel: he often says that Jesus "looked around" (3:34; 5:32; 10:23; 11:11). In today's reading you get both, "he looked around at them with anger." Many pictures of Jesus have him looking up at the sky with a sad sentimental look on his face. Have you ever seen a picture of him looking around with anger? I haven't. Such a picture would never become popular, but it would at least show that we weren't restricting Jesus to being merely 'nice'. (Incidentally, in Middle English the word 'nice' meant 'stupid'.)

Why was he so furious? "Because they had closed their minds," one translation says. "Because of their hard-heartedness," says another. These only seem different. The mind is open by its nature; it is the heart that closes the mind. These sullen people in front of him had no feeling for people, no love; and so their minds were closed. Love is an opening, a kind of wound. Julian of Norwich prayed for "the wound of true compassion." It is a wound that should never be healed.

24 January

Mk 3:7-12

Jesus departed with his disciples to the sea, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him; hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon. He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him; for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, "You are the Son of God!" But he sternly ordered them not to make him known.

Things were getting out of hand: this reading is crammed with people: 'a great multitude,' 'great numbers,' 'many.' And look at that litany of places they came from: they represented the whole country. Jesus hasn't room to stand, he has to sit in a little boat and speak from there. Besides being faintly ridiculous, this is not the most stable platform for a passionate speaker.

It seems to have been a turning point. After this he changed his method: he began to concentrate on teaching his disciples.

This is a good reading for people who tend to over-stretch themselves and feel guilty if they are not always working frantically. More is not necessarily better. It doesn't flatter the ego to say so, but sometimes the best thing you can do for others is to rest. Even Jesus had to leave many things undone.

25 January [Conversion of St Paul]

Mk 16:15-18

Jesus said, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptised will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.'

Jews look to Jerusalem, Muslims to Mecca, but Christians are not asked to regard any city as more sacred than another (Rome has quite a different meaning for Christians than has Jerusalem for Jews or Mecca for Muslims). Christians were sent out to the whole world and were not told to look back. We are free in many more ways than we want to know. There is a hymn that says, "Let us build the city of God..." Your own village is the city of God. The city of God is not made of stones but of people, "living stones," St Peter said (1 Peter 2:5).

What are we to make of those "signs that will accompany those who believe"? St Augustine (354 – 430) gave a broad imaginative interpretation of them. "What else are hearing, reading and copiously depositing things in the memory, than several stages of drinking in thoughts? The Lord, however, foretold concerning his faithful followers, that even 'if they should drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them.'" Then he adds that if they read with discrimination, even if what they read is false, it will not poison them. "Even if they commit to their memory heretical statements which are declared to be worthy of disapproval, they receive no harm from the poisonous and depraved nature of these sentences." The implication is that they can go out not only to the whole geographical world but also to the whole intellectual and cultural world without fear.

Gregory the Great (540 - 604) was at pains to play down the importance of these signs. "Is it, my brethren, because we do not have these signs that you do not believe? These were needed at the church's beginning. The new faith needed to be nourished by miracles to grow. When we plant a vineyard, we must water the plants till we see they have begun to grow in the earth, and when they have once taken root we cease to water them constantly.... But true life cannot be obtained by means of these outward signs by those who perform them. For although corporeal works of this kind sometimes do proclaim an inner holiness of life, they do not bring it about."

26 January

Mk 3:20-21

Jesus went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.'

I knew a man who had spent some time in a psychiatric hospital. On being discharged he went drinking with a few of his old friends. When a dispute arose among them, one of them dismissed some opinion of his by saying he was only a madman anyway. "On the contrary," he replied, "I'm the only man here who can prove that he's sane!" "Prove it then!" they challenged. He invited bets, and when he had secured bets of several pints of Guinness he put his hand in his pocket and drew out his certificate of discharge from the psychiatric hospital. It stated there in black and white that he was sane.

Who is sane and who is mad? Today's reading is ambiguous, though the translations all say that it was Jesus who was mad. But a scholar noted that since the Greek pronoun could mean 'him' or 'it', the passage could also be translated, "they (the family) set about controlling it (the crowd) because it was beside itself." Was Jesus mad, or was the crowd mad?

What is madness but a definition by some group who may be madder themselves? In the 4th century, Abba Antony, the founder of monasticism, said: "A time is coming when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him saying, 'You are mad, you are not like us.'"

27 January [3rd Sunday in Ordinary time]

Lk 1:1-4; 4:14-21

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

"To bring good news to the poor." What is good news for the poor? That they are going to become rich? And then it will be their turn to oppress the poor!

Hurrah for revolution and more cannon-shot!

A beggar on horseback lashes a beggar on foot.

Hurrah for revolution and cannon come again!

The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on. (W.B. Yeats)

This could not be what Jesus meant. "Blessed are you who are poor," he said (Luke 6:20). Are they blessed in being poor, or because they are poor, or for some other reason that is only materially connected with their being poor?

Is poverty a value? It is hard to see how it could be a value in itself, seeing that it is just the lack of something good: an adequate level of wealth. (It is not wealth that is evil, but the selfish misuse of it.) Where is the value in poverty, then? In 1965 Paul VI, in *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, wrote, "That which is already due in justice [to the poor] is not to be offered as a gift of charity." In fact he was just repeating the much earlier teaching of the Church: for example, St John Chrysostom (5th century) had written, "Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours, but theirs." And Pope Gregory the Great (also 5th century) wrote, "When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice."

In the time of Jesus, wealth was seen as a sign of God's favour, and poverty a sign of disfavour. His good news for the poor was not that the rich would welcome them when they came begging, nor that they could prove how humble they were, but that they had an equal dignity in the eyes of God and an equal right to the earth's goods. The good news was not that they would become rich, but that they could stand in their full dignity before God and the world.

Many have imagined a future Utopia, a perfect place where everything will be as it should be. But the word 'Utopia' does not mean a perfect place; it means a 'non-existent place' (from the Greek, *ou* = not, and *topos* = place). Is the Christian vision a Utopia? In a sense yes. The world is not a place of perfect justice, love, or peace. We have not arrived, but we are "on the way," in *via*, as the mediaevals put it. The work has started, the seed has been sown. "This

text is being fulfilled today even as you listen,” Jesus said. We are not invited to dream ineffectually of a Utopia, but to work for the coming of God's Kingdom on earth.

People who practise *lectio divina* - the slow careful meditative reading of Scripture - stress the importance of being aware, when reading any passage, that ‘this text is being fulfilled today even as we read.’ Something of the word of God is already moving in us. If there were nothing, then we would only be dreaming of Utopia. The practical way is to care for the little that is there, rather than dream and do nothing. “Better an acre in Wessex,” said Macaulay, “than a principality in Utopia.”

28 January
Mk 3:22-30

The scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He [Jesus] has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.' And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, 'How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

In the verses just before today's passage (Mark 3:21; see also John 10:20), Jesus was thought to be mad; in today's he is thought to be possessed by the devil. There's no telling what people will say; public opinion, someone said, is a lottery. A lottery is a random selection. Language itself is a kind of lottery. You can say the first thing that comes into your mind, and the words stand there as self-assured as if they had been thoughtfully selected. Sometimes the only factor that narrows the selection is the malice of the person speaking. If people called Jesus mad and possessed by the devil, what can they not say about all of us fragile and compromised human beings?

We all have this fatal capacity to speak in ways that injure other people. We have the ingredients of the explosive device: language + malice. Language is the explosive material, and malice is the detonator. (Election campaigns sometimes resemble the conditions of war.)

Society is not always the noble thing described in text-books. At its worst it is a mass of individuals milling in every direction, apparently at random but in fact with a million different purposes, some of which merge but many of which collide. When an individual collides with another the problem is just local. The real problem is when there is a merging of many individuals for an evil purpose. This kind of lower merging has all the attractions of community: mutual esteem and support, banishing painful feelings of self-doubt. Religious and political fundamentalism gives us clear examples of this today. Angry words seem confirmed when many others are repeating them, and when the whole thing gains momentum it screams, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

Jesus was able to step out of society with its Babel of voices. He would spend nights alone on the mountain. We all need to do something similar – a retreat, a meditation practice, even a long solitary walk – if we are to hold our own against the random floods of language that threaten our sanity. We need it nowadays more than ever before. Meditation is about becoming silent, dropping out of language to some degree. "Anyone who has the word of Jesus as a true possession," said St Ignatius of Antioch, "can also hear his silence."

29 January

Mk 3:31-35

Jesus' mother and brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

If indeed Jesus' family thought he was mad (see Mk 3:21), then they belonged to those who "stood outside." Belonging to the same family or race as Jesus does not make one a disciple (see Mt 3:9). Not that, but doing the will of God. This was the passion of his life; anyone who was not part of that was not part of him. In the agony of Gethsemani he was able to say, "Not my will but yours be done." In him the passion to do the Father's will was deeper than death; it is not surprising then that it should also be deeper than birth and kinship.

How many things are deeper than birth and death? Or more practically, what would I live and die for? "Nothing to live or die for," sang John Lennon, imagining an ideal world. It was a sort of negative ideal. Ideals can be a crushing weight, and they make us painfully aware of our own fragility. When Vincent McNabb was asked in Hyde Park, London, what he would do if he was faced with martyrdom, he replied, "I'd probably deny the Faith immediately!" He knew that in the real world, as distinct from the ideal, everything is grace when it comes to the crunch. "Nothing to live and die for" is not a description of an ideal world but precisely the opposite: a world without an ideal. Better to be a failure (under grace) in the real world than to imagine one where it is impossible to fail because there is nothing at which to succeed.

30 January

Mk 4:1-20

Jesus began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

In a later verse of this passage (not quoted above), Jesus said to the disciples, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables." But he will not reject those outsiders and shape his own followers into a narrow circle, a cult. No, he will teach them in parables: that is, with stories, images. Jesus was a consummate story-teller; some of his stories are among the greatest in any literature, and would be remembered even if he wasn't who he was.

Abstract statements you either understand there and then or you fail to understand. You have to catch them in the air as they fly; you get no second chance. But a story stays with you even if you don't grasp its full meaning. It waits for you, it gives you time. It's the part of courtesy to wait for people who cannot move fast. Think of parables as part of the courtesy of Jesus. He's waiting for our minds to open, our spirits to deepen. And that's the point of this particular parable: the readiness of the soil makes all the difference.

31 January

Mk 4:21-25

Jesus said, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lamp-stand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" And he said to them, "Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

"We have a great cloud-bank of ancestral blindness weighing down upon us," wrote William James (1842 – 1910), the American philosopher and psychologist. Through it, he said, we receive "only fitful revelations of the truth." That cloud-bank doesn't just happen to be there; we throw it up ourselves, to protect ourselves from the truth. There is such a thing as hating the light because one's deeds are evil, as St John said. And there are many other reasons too why one might not want to see light. The truth would be far more popular than it is if it didn't challenge us so thoroughly.

But this will not always be the way of it, Jesus says in today's passage. "Everything hidden will be disclosed." Time brings everything out, brings everything to ripeness, like a harvest. That may be why Pilate didn't wait for an answer to his question, "What is truth?" It is an easy question to ask, but the hardest of all to wait with. The very word truth in Greek, *aletheia*, means manifestation. Everything will be made manifest. How is truth made manifest? By explanations? Maybe so, at times. But more fundamentally, by becoming embodied in deeds. Tertullian (2nd – 3rd century) wrote: "What can you do to illumine the world? Let your faith produce good works."