

August
2017

GOSPEL COMMENTARIES

1 August

Mt 13:36-43

Jesus left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.' He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

They are looking for explanations. They want to get their minds around this parable, so that they can put it 'out there' from them: that's what explanations do.

Still, it must be all right to look for explanations – so long as we don't put too much store by them, or imagine that the one we give is the only possible one.

It is about seeds. Seeds are the beginning of things, not the end. Good and evil will be separated out only at the end of time. That means, in practical terms, never. In the ultimate, yes, in eternity; but not in time – at no time. We have heard politicians talk about "stamping out evil." I heard someone comment, "Jesus didn't do it, the Buddha didn't do it, but this politician is going to do it!" Only in the final sifting will it be done, and we don't know anything about that. Let's not be too surprised at evil deeds: we are part of the picture ourselves. Besides, many things that we call good today we will call evil tomorrow. We don't have the full picture. Only God has. To claim to have the full picture is to claim to be God.

This thought doesn't make evil any less evil, or less painful to its victims. But if we don't spend all our time wondering why there is so much evil in the world, we may have a little left over for wondering why there is so much good.

2 August

Mt 13:44-46

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

These brief parables are without the moral elaboration that was usual in such stories. Rabbis' stories of finding valuable pearls typically emphasised the finder's piety. For example, a tailor pays an inflated price for a fish because he needs it to keep the sabbath, and later finds in it a pearl that covers all his needs for the rest of his life. Other features of stories about discovered treasure were some kind of bargain or compromise with the field's owner; or sometimes the subsequent wasteful life of the finder. All such elaboration is missing in these brief parables. Jesus puts the images there, mentioning only the value of the treasure and the joy of finding. Then he leaves them to do their work.

"Where one cannot understand without words, no amount of explanation will make things clear," wrote Myrtle Reed. Deep understanding is always silent. "I was speechless," we say later. When we get our speech back we make up for lost time, but if there is no silence at the beginning there was nothing really new. If I sit under a tree and only remember lines of poems and beautiful sayings about trees, I haven't really sat under the tree; I have only been talking to myself. Trees are silent beings. If I were truly present to a tree I too would become silent.

Contemplation is silent presence. Even there – or I should say especially there – we discover our compulsion to fill every space with words and readymade feelings. It is a way of trying to stay in control. "I am master of all I explain," someone said. What a pity that the words 'meditation' and 'contemplation' are pale Latin words, just as pale as 'explanation'! Think of some chunky Anglo-Saxon word for it. Thomas Merton did: he dropped these words and began to use the word 'wisdom'. The greatest advantage of that word, for Christians, is that it has a human face and a heart: Jesus is the Word made flesh, the incarnation of the Wisdom of God.

Mt 13:47-53

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.

I can see how old things can be brought out of the store: that's where they are kept. And new things begin to be old as soon as they are put in storage. But how can you bring new things out of a store?

It must be that the old thing begins to be new again as soon as it is brought out of the store. It appears in a new light, it is constantly renewing itself as it is seen from different angles. Bringing a truth out of storage is not like hauling out a lump of dead matter from a storeroom. It is a new discovery in the present.

I had a multitude of professors in my youth who went to great pains to show how the new was *caused* by the old. But if the new is caused by the old, then there is nothing new. (This conclusion probably gave them some kind of reassurance.) When light comes into a dark room you don't say that the light is caused by the darkness. Instead there was an opening and the light came in. Sifting the past is moving things around so that new light can shine through them.

4 August

Mt 13:54-58

Jesus came to his hometown and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?" And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honour except in their own country and in their own house." And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.

Like Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah, Jesus knew rejection by his own people. The family and the village are realities that cling close to you, but their loving embrace becomes a stranglehold when you disappoint them. Nazareth was a village of perhaps 500 people: just about the best size for malice. The people were happy with Jesus while he was bringing credit on them, but when he compared foreigners favourably with Israelites they wanted to throw him over a cliff (Luke 4:29).

Matthew says Jesus "did not" (would not) act because of the people's unbelief. But Mark says he "could not" do a miracle in Nazareth (Mk 6:5). A village is able to choke up the sources of life itself.

The theme of rejection runs right through the gospels. "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first" (Jn 15:18). See also Mk 6:4; Lk 4:24; Jn 4:44. It was the expected thing that prophets were rejected. "Can you name a single prophet your ancestors never persecuted?" asked Stephen, just before they killed him (Acts 7:52).

We don't get the impression that Jesus was bitterly disappointed or angry about his treatment in his home town. Perhaps he expected it. In Luke's account he even seemed to provoke it. We start out in life with our ego-dream: we expect everyone to love us as much as our mothers did. When we discover that the world isn't like that we become bitter and disillusioned; and so begins the rollercoaster of emotions. If we had no expectations, but also no bitterness, we would be free of two major traps on the path of discipleship.

5 August

Mt 14:1-12

At that time Herod the ruler heard reports about Jesus; and he said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him." For Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because John had been telling him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." Though Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded him as a prophet. But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and she pleased Herod so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given; he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. The head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, who brought it to her mother. His disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus.

John's fate prefigures that of Jesus. If John was put to death, how could Jesus – who was “a prophet without honour in his own country” – be expected to escape a like fate? In each case their teaching was interpreted by politicians as an intrusion on their sphere. To this day, this happens in the world.

At that time, nobody even nodded towards freedom of speech: to denounce a ruler's character was suicidal. Israel had a long-standing tradition exempting prophets from severe punishment for their speech, a rule that only the most vicious rulers broke. Herod was one such ruler. John reproached Herod for violating the law against incest (Lev. 18:16). We know how Herod thanked him for that.

But the story didn't end there. King Aretas, the father of Herod's repudiated wife, was aggrieved by Herod's treatment of his daughter, and he didn't hold his feelings in: he waged war and inflicted a humiliating defeat on him. This led many people to believe that God had used Aretas to punish Herod for the execution of John. The trouble with this interpretation – and all others like it – is that it sees God as part of the squabble; it sees God as just a more powerful politician.

When a politician says to a religious leader, “Stay in your own spiritual world and leave the real world to me,” or “Leave science to the scientists,” he is saying that religion has nothing to say on any question that he chooses to call ‘political’ or ‘scientific’. Would he also say, “Leave medicine to the doctors,” silencing everyone else on questions such as abortion, euthanasia, etc.? Or leave wars to the military? Or financial affairs to bankers? Religion has something to say to everyone, and more than a little to say to politicians. Scientists and doctors have all endured long years of arduous study; but politicians, like auctioneers, have no specific training for their job. Nobody should be intimidated by them. There is the witness of countless brave people, from John the Baptist to Oscar Romero.

6 August [Transfiguration]

Mt 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

The Transfiguration of Christ is recorded in the first three Gospels (Matthew 17, Mark 9, Luke 9). The fourth does not recount the story, but John 1:14 could possibly be a reference to it: "We have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." And Peter wrote, "We were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain" (2 Peter 1:16-18).

This voice from heaven was heard before, at his baptism in the Jordan. The words were the same (Matthew 3:17. In Mark 1:11 and in Luke 3:22 the words are, "*You are my Son, the Beloved...*"). In each case a cloud overshadows him (in the Old Testament the cloud was frequently an image of God's glorious presence: for example, in Exodus 19:9; Leviticus 16:2; etc.). So the scene is like a backward glance to the beginning of his work. It is also a glance to the future: it is like a moment's preview of the Resurrection. The beginning and the end of the story are brought together in one luminous moment.

In all three gospels this Transfiguration scene comes just after Jesus predicted his suffering and death for the first time. Death, and even the thought of death, freezes the action and brings the whole of one's life into a point. But that point is not a fading into extinction; it is a moment of Transfiguration. In this lies the meaning of our own suffering too.

7 August

Mt 14:13-21

Jesus withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

This provision of food in the wilderness stands in vivid contrast to the drunken feast of Herod Antipas that we heard about on August 1. What a variety of values food can express! It is about far more than satisfying physical hunger; it is rich in symbolism. If you get a chance, read Roland Barthes' 'mythologies', of which there are a few volumes. It is fascinating to see everything we do as language.

This meal in the desert was not without precedent: Moses, Elijah and Elisha had fed people without the benefit of resources. The present miracle resembles particularly the one performed by Elisha in 2 Kings 4:42-44. In both cases, unlike the manna in the desert, there are leftovers. Leftovers mean that everyone has had enough and more than enough. The point is that this miracle is greater than the manna of the exodus.

Jesus did not say, "I will feed them." He said, "You feed them." Miracles don't leave us passive; we have to provide some material, however inadequate. When Moses said he wanted a sign to take with him, God said, "What is that in your hand?" He worked on that (Exodus 4:1-3). A widow needed financial help. Elisha asked what she had in her house. She replied that she had only a small amount of oil. He told her to borrow jars into which to pour the oil and then multiplied it until all the jars were full (2 Kings 4:1-7). In today's reading Jesus asked them to bring him the loaves and fish. We have to bring something to the table.

8 August

Mt 14:22-36

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. After the people of that place recognised him, they sent word throughout the region and brought all who were sick to him, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

That little boat crossing the stormy lake is a perfect parable of our life. St Thérèse of Lisieux noticed it and took comfort from it. Describing a time of great disappointment in her life she wrote: "My soul was a like a fragile boat delivered up to the mercy of the waves and having no pilot. I knew Jesus was there sleeping in my boat, but the night was so black it was impossible to see him." But sadness turns into joy, and soon she could write: "In place of the wind of trial, a light breeze expanded my sail and I believed I'd reach the blessed shore, now seemingly so close. It was really very close to my boat, but more than one storm was still to arise."

Fifteen centuries earlier St Augustine meditated on this same boat, and saw meaning in it for the whole Christian community, the Church. St Thérèse was born in the modern era, where the individual is seen as the primary bearer of meaning. An earlier consciousness looked at the community first. Certainly the story has meaning for the individual; but let's see how St Augustine applies it.

"The boat carrying the disciples — that is, the Church — is rocking and shaking amid the storms of temptation, while the adverse wind rages on. That is to say, its enemy the devil strives to keep the wind from calming down. But greater is he who is persistent on our behalf, for amid the ups and downs of our life he gives us confidence. He comes to us and strengthens us, so we are not jostled in the boat and tossed overboard. For although the boat is thrown into disorder, it is still a boat. It carries the disciples and receives Christ. It is in danger indeed on the water, but there would be certain death without it. Therefore stay inside the boat and call upon God. When all good advice fails and the rudder is useless and the spread of the sails presents more of a danger than an advantage, when all human help and strength have been abandoned, the only recourse left for the sailors is to cry out to God. Would God, who helps sailors to reach port safely, abandon the Church and prevent it from arriving in peace and tranquillity?"

9 August

Mt 15:21-28

Jesus went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

The famous Dean Inge (1860-1954) wrote, "It is becoming impossible for those who mix at all with their fellowmen to believe that the grace of God is distributed denominationally." Or, as Edith Stein (1891 – 1942) expressed it: "It has always been far from me to think that God's mercy allows itself to be circumscribed by the visible Church's boundaries. God is truth. All who seek truth seek God, whether this is clear to them or not." This was the growing realisation of the disciples as they watched how Jesus treated foreigners and pagans. Jesus praised the faith of foreigners and pagans (Mt 8, Jn 4).

In the present case, however, there seemed to be some reluctance on his part. Commentators exercise all their ingenuity to smooth this out. Here are some of the points they make:

- * Jesus was in that place because he needed to rest and to have time to teach his disciples, so he was off-duty.
- * He didn't actually send the woman away, as the disciples had urged him to do.
- * He didn't try to convert her to Jewish beliefs, as other teachers would probably have done.
- * In Mark's milder account of it, he said the children of Israel had to be fed "first" (Mark 7:27).
- * His reference to "dogs" may not have been the racial snub it appears to be, but a reference to children's pet dogs, whose needs would be secondary to those of the children.
- * He may have wanted to show reluctance so as to distinguish himself from the many wandering magicians who were only too willing to perform cures for the sake of fame or financial reward.
- * And finally, St Augustine: "The woman was ignored, not that mercy might be denied but that desire might be enkindled; not only that desire might be enkindled but... that humility might be praised."

Whatever force these various points may have, in the end Jesus helped this foreign pagan woman and even praised her faith. This must be a challenge to every purely intellectual definition of faith. Like the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:25-29), this Canaanite woman publicly acknowledged Jesus' identity before any of the disciples did (Mt 16:16).

Jn 12:24-26

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

St Laurence was martyred in Rome in 258 during the persecution under the Roman emperor Valerian. He was among the seven deacons serving Pope St Sixtus II, who was martyred a few days before Laurence. When he was challenged to hand over the Church's treasure to the authorities, he asked for a few days' grace; then "he went all over the city, seeking out in every street the poor who were supported by the Church, and with whom no other was so well acquainted. On the third day, he gathered together a great number of them before the church and placed them in rows: the decrepit, the blind, the lame, the maimed, the lepers, orphans and widows; then he went to the prefect, invited him to come and see the treasure of the Church."

Although Lawrence was probably beheaded, St Ambrose of Milan and the Latin poet Prudentius, among others, recorded that he was roasted to death on a gridiron. Many conversions to Christianity throughout Rome reportedly followed Laurence's death, including those of several senators witnessing his execution. The Basilica of San Lorenzo, Rome, was built over his burial place.

11 August

Mt 16:24-28

Jesus told his disciples, "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 will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

During the reign of the Emperor Trajan – that is, sometime between 98 AD and 117 – Ignatius, the third bishop of Antioch after St Peter, was condemned as a Christian and brought bound in chains to Rome to die in the amphitheatre. Along the way he wrote letters to several Christian communities, and sent one ahead of him to the Christians in Rome. He pleaded with them not to attempt to save his life. It is the best commentary in all literature on today's reading.

"I am wheat for him, ground fine by the lions' teeth to be made purest bread for Christ...When there is no trace of my body left for the world to see, then I shall truly be Jesus Christ's disciple. So intercede with him for me, that by the instrumentality of the beasts I may be made a sacrifice to God...."

"All the ends of the earth, all the kingdoms of the world would be of no profit to me. So far as I am concerned, to die in Jesus Christ is better than to be monarch of earth's widest bounds. He who died for us is all that I seek; he who rose again for us is my whole desire. The pangs of birth are upon me; have patience with me, my brothers and sisters, and do not shut me out from life, do not wish me to be stillborn. Here is one who only longs to be God's; do not make a present of him to the world again, or delude him with the things of earth. Allow me to attain to light, light pure and undefiled; for only when I am come thither shall I be truly a man. Leave me to imitate the passion of my God.... Here and now, as I write in the fulness of life, I am yearning for death with all the passion of a lover. Earthly longings have been crucified; in me there is left no spark of desire for mundane things, but only a murmur of living water that whispers within me, 'Come to the Father.'"

12 August

Mt 17:14-20

A man came up to Jesus, knelt before him, and said, 'Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water. And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.' Jesus answered, 'You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.' And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly.

Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, 'Why could we not cast it out?' He said to them, 'Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move from here to there", and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.'

The Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* used to believe, she said, six impossible things before breakfast. With Lewis Carroll you expect sense behind the nonsense. What is impossible? And who says so? No boundaries of any kind are pushed out by people who are always declaring things impossible. Sir Thomas Brown, the 19th-century Manx poet and scholar, said, "I think there are not impossibilities enough in religion for an active faith." It was a fair comment on the pale rationalism of 19th-century theology.

Rationalism is no friend of faith; it is one of its biggest enemies because it looks so...rational. If you meet a religious rationalist you see that everything is on narrowly limited terms, everything is clear, everything is man-made; there is no grace, no depth, no paradox, no sense of wonder, and no humour. For all its apparent rationality it is a kind of blind faith in a status quo.

But when you meet a genuinely religious person there is always a sense of grace or effortlessness, and sense of largeness and freedom. Such a person is able to take life as it comes from the hand of God at each moment, without being consumed by suspicion or the will to control. "Take everything evenly from the hand of God," said Meister Eckhart. Let God be the judge of what is possible and what is impossible. You will never know what is possible while you sit there doing nothing but declaring impossible everything you haven't seen before.

Mt 14:22-33

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

Water is the source of life. "On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem," said the prophet Zechariah (14:8), prophesying the new age. "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water," said Jesus (John 7:38), echoing many passages in the Scriptures.

Yet water also reminded the Jews of the Deluge of old and was therefore a symbol of destruction. The prophets used this symbol of the chaotic sea to speak about coming disasters. In its depths lurked "Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent... the dragon that is in the sea" (Isaiah 27:1). Water, then, is a symbol of both life and death. (Both of these meanings are merged in baptism; by immersion in the baptismal waters we die to sin and self, but emerge into new life.)

In today's reading Jesus appears out of the night, "walking toward them on the sea." It is a symbol of his triumph over chaos and evil. The scene is full of symbolic association. Peter, the chief disciple, ventures into this dangerous element, and makes his way while he keeps his attention on the Lord, but he sinks once he begins thinking only about danger. With him it was an experiment: "if it is you...." 'If' is an expression of doubt, not of faith.

Peter's cry for help is a pure expression of prayer. Christians have long meditated on this. Here are some brief reflections from the great 19th-century preacher, C.H. Spurgeon: "Sinking times are praying times....Short prayers are long enough....There were but three words in the petition which Peter gasped out ("Lord, save me!"), but they were sufficient for his purpose.... Not length but strength.... A sense of need is a mighty teacher of brevity.... If our prayers had less of the tail feathers of pride and more wing they would be all the better.... Verbiage is to devotion as chaff to wheat. Precious things lie in small compass, and all that is real prayer in many a long address might have been uttered in a petition as short as that of Peter."

14 August

Mt 17:22-27

Jesus said, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised." And they were greatly distressed.

When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax came to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?" He said, "Yes, he does." And when he came home, Jesus spoke of it first, asking, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?" When Peter said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the children are free. However, so that we do not give offence to them, go to the sea and cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a coin; take that and give it to them for you and me."

There was an annual two-drachma tax on every Jewish male throughout the Empire. It was for the upkeep of the Temple. Certain people were exempt: priests, rabbis, and dependents of a king. Jesus did not regard this tax as binding on himself or Peter: because they were God's own children. But he told Peter to pay it anyway. He would choose the areas of confrontation with the authorities, and this was not one of them.

There were Jewish stories of God blessing pious people by leading them to find precious objects in fish, and this may be behind Jesus' instruction to Peter. A more prosaic interpretation would be that he told Peter to do a bit of fishing and earn some money to pay the tax.

This passage suggests a tradition of civil obedience going back to the beginning. The following is from an early Christian writing (of uncertain date: sometime between 70 AD and 200), *The Epistle to Diognetus*: "The difference between Christians and others is not a matter of nationality, or language, or customs. Christians do not live apart in separate cities of their own, speak any special dialect, nor practise any eccentric way of life.... Nevertheless, the organisation of their community does exhibit some features that are remarkable... For instance, though they are residents at home in their own countries, their behaviour there is more like that of transients; they take their full part as citizens, but they also submit to anything and everything as if they were aliens. For them, any foreign country is a motherland, and any motherland is a foreign country...."

Lk 1:39-56

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Muslims have a tradition that Mohammed was illiterate. It is a way of saying that the Koran was God's production, not his. This tradition is similar, as far as it goes, to the Christian teaching about Mary's virginity. One of the differences is that the normal way of nature requires only one author for a book, but two parents for a child. Muslims then can say that the Koran is not a human production at all, but Christians can say that Jesus is fully from God and also fully human. "Perfectus Deus, perfectus homo," says the Athanasian Creed.

Human. What is human? Many say human when they mean human pride. When the Roman emperor Nero saw his immense palace, the *domus aurea*, finally completed, having burnt down part of the city to make way for it, he said, "Ah, at last a house fit for a man!" Many who are less extreme than he (there have been very few who were more) would still think of human life as consisting in some degree of success, power, recognition....

By every standard of the day, Mary was only barely human. She was not only female in a world ruled by men, she was unmarried (though betrothed); she was young in a world that valued age; she was poor in a world that saw poverty as God's curse; she was a peasant remote from the centres of power. Yet the Liturgy calls her "the greatest honour of our race." (Incidentally, did the person who composed that line forget about Jesus at that point?) 'Human' must mean something deeper than power, recognition, and the rest.

Is she powerless then? "I am the servant of the Lord," she said, "let it be done to me according to your word." Does it confirm her in her identity as a powerless woman, passive and dependent? If so, then it confirms all women in that identity. But more: it confirms all disciples, all Christians – for Mary is seen as the perfect disciple, the model for all disciples, men as well as women. Was she powerless?

Far from it. As she crossed the hill country to visit her elderly cousin, she was not bearing a child for her husband, as other women did. She was in the role of a prophet. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you," as later the Spirit would later overshadow Jesus at the Transfiguration (Lk 9:34), and the group of disciples in the upper room (Acts 1:8). In her, God is doing a new thing. She does not model conventionality and social compliance; she is in the line of Old Testament valiant women, as her *Magnificat* makes clear. In her the spiritual paradox of power and powerlessness is plain to be seen.

16 August

Mt 18:15-20

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

There was an ancient Jewish saying that where two or three were gathered to study the Law, God was present among them. Jesus echoes this, but he says "I am there among them." He is himself the Presence of God. Jewish teachers often called God "the Place". Jesus is the place where we meet God; he is "God with us" (Mt 1:23; 28:20).

This is the only proper context in which the difficult subject of "fraternal correction" should be raised. We all have painful memories of being corrected, when the correction was an expression of superiority or control or anger or impatience or a critical spirit, or indeed anything but love. In a word, when there is ego in it, it is guaranteed to harm you in the end, even if it improves your behaviour in the short term. The ego doesn't know how to love, and therefore it doesn't know how to correct.

Happily we also have memories of being corrected with love: when someone, out of genuine goodness and concern, took us aside and put a respectful and loving word in our ear. That kind of correction cannot be an over-the-shoulder thing, it can only come from a life of love. If you don't love people don't try to correct them, leave it to someone who can do it. If you love someone, the love itself corrects them, often without your having to say a word. "The Lord corrects the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights" (Proverbs 3:12).

17 August

Mt 18:21—19:1

Peter came and said to Jesus, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?'

Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

"If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold" (Gen 4:24). Jesus turned this vicious saying right around, making it a measure of forgiveness rather than a measure of vengeance. It is unclear whether the number is 77 or 70 x 7, but it hardly matters, since it is not about reckoning. Forgiveness, he is saying, must be beyond reckoning.

The numbers are off the scale in the rest of the passage too. Ten thousand talents would come to about 275,000 years' wages for an average worker. Clearly, repayment is impossible. The point being made is that we are in infinite debt to God and we can never clear that debt by ourselves. We could imagine the older brother in Luke 15 thinking that he could do it by himself. Or the Pharisees with their extreme legalism, attempting to get even with God. But Jesus is expressing the grace of God. The word 'grace' means 'gift'. "If you but knew the gift of God."

If I have never experienced this gift, I can't believe in it. How could I? If my sense of God is still tangled up in what Meister Eckhart called "the merchandising spirit," I will not be able to come into my inheritance, the gift of God. I will be measuring everything by my own reckoning; I will be totting up my account, instead of blowing figures away into absurdity, as Jesus did. I will have none of the expansive joy of the Gospel. And so I will be equally calculating in my relationship with other people. I will not know how to *give* or how to *forgive*. These two words seem to be twinned in many languages.

There is a legitimate self-interest too in forgiveness. To forgive is to set a prisoner free, only to discover that the prisoner is you. If you refuse to forgive you are making yourself a prisoner of the past. The past is your cradle, not your prison. You cannot half-escape from prison; you have to make a full escape. That means you must forgive "seventy seven times." If everyone were to follow 'lex talionis' – an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth – soon, as Gandhi said, the whole world, including ourselves, would be blind and toothless. Nor should we hold out for apologies: that would be like stealing back into prison.

A few words from the Zen master Joko Beck, "Failing to grasp the importance of forgiveness is always part of any failing relationship and a factor in our anxieties, depressions, and illnesses - in all our troubles. Our failure to know joy is a direct reflection of our inability to forgive.... Non-forgiveness is rooted in our habit of thinking self-centred thoughts. When we believe in such thoughts, they are like a drop of poison in our glass of water. "

18 August
Mt 19:3-12

Some Pharisees came to Jesus, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" He answered, "Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." They said to him, "Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?" He said to them, "It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery." His disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." But he said to them, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can."

On the very first page of the Bible, in the Book of Genesis (1:27) there is a beautiful lyrical description of the creation of man and woman: "God made human beings in his own image, in his own image he created them; male and female he created them." (see also 5:2) 'Adam' is not a name like James or John; it means 'the creature made of dust' (the word for which is 'adamah' in Hebrew). In the first three chapters of Genesis, 'Adam' means man and woman equally. Obviously, then, man and woman are on an equal footing and both are equally images of God.

All this, of course, is before the Fall! After the Fall, all is changed. Humans are seen as being under a curse, and they suffer differently for it. To the man, God said, "By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken" (Gen 3:19). To the woman he said, "Your husband shall rule over you" (Gen 3:16). Scholars regard this as a reflection of actual conditions in the ancient Near East at the time that Genesis was written. In particular, it reflects the position of women in society at that time. A woman was subject first to her father, and then to her husband. She was subject to them because she was their *property*. The ninth Commandment, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife," had nothing to do with chastity. The neighbour's wife was seen as his *property*: "You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour. (Exodus 20:17)

Divorce was very easily obtained in the time of Jesus. Some Rabbis taught that if a woman ruined a meal or spoke badly about her in-laws her husband could divorce her; some even said that if a man spotted a woman who was more beautiful than his wife he could divorce his wife.

All this was the background to the Pharisees' question to Jesus, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Instead of going into a legal haggles with them about the law of Moses, Jesus harked back to the original state of innocence (before the Genesis story of the expulsion from Eden). He affirmed the *original* state over the corrupted one; he stated God's idea of man, woman, and marriage. The original state was the companionship of equals, not ownership by the man; it was love, not domination and subjection.

Today, wherever husbands and wives respect and love each other, refusing to regard each other as property - disposable or otherwise - the mind of Christ is made visible and human beings are living in a state of original innocence instead of original sin.

Little children were being brought to Jesus in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.

The great French mystic, Jeanne Guyon (1648-1717), wrote, "The simple ones, so far from being incapable of perfection, are, because of their docility, innocence, and humility, peculiarly adapted and qualified to reach it; and as they are not accustomed to reasoning, they are less employed in speculation, and less tenacious in their own opinions. Because they know that they know little, they submit more freely to the teachings of the Divine Spirit: whereas others, who are blinded by self-sufficiency and enslaved by prejudice, give great resistance to the operations of Grace."

We must never become cynical about human gifts: it would be no compliment to the Giver of all gifts. It would be very short-sighted to take up an anti-intellectual attitude to the Faith. However, we have to distinguish between the gift of intelligence, and the more subtle gifts of intuition and wisdom. Rational intelligence is able to mount an attack on these and to destroy them by leaving no room for them. Then it becomes a form of darkness and a defence against the light. "The eye is the lamp of the body," Jesus said. "So if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Mt 6:22-23).

Young children have very little knowledge compared to the average adult. But they 'know' a lot of things that have become frozen over in adults. It is to such as these, Jesus said, that the kingdom of God belongs.

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

In last Sunday's gospel reading, Peter's prayer was condensed into three words, "Lord, save me!" In today's reading the Canaanite woman's prayer is exactly the same. Peter was the Lord's chief disciple, the Canaanite woman was a pagan; but their prayer was the same, and the Lord responded to both.

In today's reading, however, he appeared rather reluctant to help the woman. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" meant "I was sent to help Jews, not Canaanites." To make it worse, he added "It is not fair to throw the children's food to dogs." The 'children' were the Jews, "the children of Israel." The 'dogs' were foreigners. It was a Jewish epithet for all foreigners at that time.

It is not easy to know how his mind worked at that moment. Was he just repeating the prejudices of his own people against foreigners? It was his first and only time away from his own country. Or was he just tired, as he often had cause to be? Was he protecting his boundaries, something we all understand to be necessary at times? Or was he testing her perseverance?

All such is only speculation. The gospel text is silent on it. What is stated in the text is that he granted her request and even *praised her faith*. How could a pagan be said to have faith? Clearly, faith must mean more than being able to rattle off the right words on all aspects of Christian teaching. Not even his closest disciples could do that at the time. From that point on, the great divide would no longer be between Jews and non-Jews, but between those who had faith and those who had not. On another occasion too he praised the faith of a pagan; "nowhere in Israel have I found such faith," he said to a Roman centurion (Matthew 8:10; Luke 7:9). And to his disciples he once said, "Whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:38).

However he also said something that appears opposed to this last quotation. "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters" (Luke 11:23). But notice that he said "with *me*." He did not say "with you." Once a group of people get together they begin to be exclusive. Even a group of disciples can be exclusive in a way that Christ himself would never be. Notice too that the first statement (Mark 9:38) is addressed to his own disciples and refers to the work of outsiders, while the second (Luke 11:23) is addressed to outsiders and refers to his own work. There are many who claim to be working with him - good Christians, good Catholics - but who have nothing of his great mind and Spirit, nothing of his compassion and love, and who may be surprised to know that they are working against him.

Much good work is done for Christ outside the fold. In its document on non-Christian religions, the Second Vatican Council stated: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people." (*Nostra Aetate*, 2). In our own time too there are movements without number for the development and liberation of humanity. If they are not against Christ they are with him, and their followers are our brothers and sisters.

On 24 January 2002 Pope John Paul II welcomed more than 200 leaders of the world's religions to Assisi to pray together for peace and to do their part to fend off "the dark clouds of terrorism, hatred (and) armed conflict." It was a courageous prophetic gesture and a sign of hope for the future of our anguished world.

Someone came to Jesus and said, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?' And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.' He said to him, 'Which ones?' And Jesus said, 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' The young man said to him, 'I have kept all these; what do I still lack?' Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

This was a highly moral young man: he had done everything right, or at least nothing wrong; he had kept all the commandments since his youth. He was even better than that: he had not sunk down into self-satisfaction, he was still searching. "What do I still lack?" Jesus did not give him an additional list of commandments. Instead he said, "Come follow me." He didn't say where he was going or what he was going to do; so it was open-ended, very unclear.

Laws and rules are about clarity. Clarity is very reassuring and quite useful when you don't try to live on it. Most of us know a few people with clear minds who made a total mess of their lives – and of other people's lives too. Referring to the Law of Moses, St Paul wrote, "No one can be justified by keeping the Law.... If the Law can justify us, there is no point in the death of Christ" (Galatians 2:16, 21). Law is a guide to life, not life itself. It is 'out there' – where it should be. But the trouble with it is that it can give me the impression that I can live my life 'out there', like a game of chess. And because it is clear and 'out there', it gives me the impression that it is alright for me to judge people.

In the same letter Paul wrote, very mysteriously, "Through the Law I am dead to the Law" (2:19). This is one of those hard koan-like sayings that you cannot gloss over. He was an insider to the Law: "as to righteousness under the Law, I was blameless" (Philippians 3:6). It gave him his power, his prestige, his position; it made him a leader, a zealot; it gave him his identity. Then he became free of the Law by coming to the end of it. Unlike the rich young man in today's reading, he gave up this 'wealth' to follow Jesus into the unclear future. Had he been less of an enthusiast for the Law he would probably have stayed with it all his life. It was not by discovering faults in it that he came to the end of it. Jesus too said that he did not come to set aside the Law but to bring it to fulfilment (see Mt 5:18, Lk 16:17). A law is not fulfilled 'out there': by external observance, less still on the page. It is fulfilled 'in' a life. A Zen Master asked a student if an enlightened person is subject to the law of causality, or free of it. Take your pick, but the truth is that we are 'one with' the law of causality. Only if you think it external to you do you have a question about being free of it or subject to it. St Paul says that no law is made for the just person (1 Tim 1:9). Henry Suso (1300-1366) clarified this as follows: "Just persons conduct themselves more submissively than other people because they understand from within, in the ground of the soul, what is proper outwardly for everyone, and they view all things accordingly. The reason that they are unfettered is that they do freely, out of an attitude of detachment, what other people do under compulsion."

Paul came to a new kind of clarity marked with the paradox of the Gospel. You can imagine him saying, "When I am clear then I am unclear." He wrote, "I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, "Then who can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." Then Peter said in reply, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

I remember a line from some forgotten poem, "Question and answer were like two peas in a pod, / And neither mattered." But paradoxes always matter, and they never go away. They are not solved or answered like other matters. "The last shall be first and the first last," said Jesus (Mt 19:30). "When I am weak, then I am strong," wrote Paul (2 Cor 12:10). Every 'explanation' of these is unsatisfactory. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 332 AD – 395) revelled in paradox more than most: "luminous darkness," "sober inebriation," "wise folly," "stationary movement...." Today's gospel reading, you might say, is about 'rich poverty'.

The history of Christian spirituality is rich in this kind of understanding. Here are a few examples. Meister Eckhart said, "The more the soul is collected, the narrower she is, and the narrower, the wider." Jeanne Guyon, the 18th-century French mystic, wrote, "How very narrow is the gate that leads to life in God! How little one must be to pass through it, since it is death to self. But when we have passed through it, what enlargement we find! David said (Psalm 18:19) 'He brought me forth into a large place.'" Her friend, François Fénelon, wrote, "When we are faithful in instantly dropping all superfluous and restless reflections, which arise from a self-love that is totally different from charity, we shall be set in a large place even in the midst of the strait and narrow path." And again, "We are in a narrow place, indeed, when we are enclosed in self, but when we emerge from that prison, and enter into the immensity of God and the liberty of his children, we are set at large."

"The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

The verse immediately preceding this reading says, "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." The same verse occurs at the end of the story, framing it neatly. This story then illustrates the principle in practice.

Rabbis told a story about a landowner who paid a man as much for two hours' work as he paid others for a full day's work. But this was because the man had done as much work in two hours as the others had done in a whole day. The story is only superficially like Jesus' parable: theirs is a story about merit, not about grace. In Jesus' parable, the late arrivals didn't deserve as much as the others, but by the generosity of the landowner they received as much. The landowner would know that a man could not support his family on the pay for one or two hours' work, so he paid him a 'family wage'. In other words, he didn't see the workers as just 'hands', he saw them as full human beings.

Those who had worked all day were "envious". An older and more literal translation had, "Is your eye evil because I am good?" They had an evil eye. When they looked they were blind to the generosity of the landowner because it was others who were benefiting by it, and not they themselves. This is how the ego sees: it is the original evil eye. When the ego prays it says, "Give me this day my daily bread, and don't worry about the others."

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 towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

The first three gospels never mention Nathanael, and the fourth gospel never mentions Bartholomew. It is probable, most scholars say, that they were one and the same person under different names. In the first three gospels Bartholomew is always mentioned with Philip, and in the fourth gospel Nathanael is always mentioned with Philip - a further reason to suspect that Bartholomew and Nathanael are one man.

Nathanael was puzzled that Jesus seemed to know him already - and indeed to have a high opinion of him. "Before Philip called you," Jesus said, "I saw you under the fig tree." Palestine is a scorching hot country, and people often had a fig tree growing at the door of their house. Besides fruit it offered shade in the heat. It would be a place to sit and be quiet. It may be that Nathanael had been praying under the fig tree when Jesus spotted him earlier. "Behold an Israelite in whom there is no guile!" Jesus had said. Our faces, it may be, are never so transparent as when we are praying.

"Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree?" Jesus said to him. "You will see greater things than these.... Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." The word 'angel' means 'messenger'. You will see the transparency of the Son of Man to God. Not just peace and rest in the shade of a tree, but entry into the counsels of the Father.

What is that to us? It is everything, because everything that is about Jesus is about us too. Sometimes what brings us to meditation is the need for peace and quiet, or the need for a certain openness and transparency. But we can hope for more than this. We can hope to become transparent to our ultimate source, we can hope "to see the angels of God ascending and descending."

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

I was once visiting a family when the grandmother emerged from her room wearing her best hat...and an apron. "I'm half thinking of going out," she announced. That moment is now part of the fun history of the family.

To do anything with your whole heart is much easier than to do it with half a heart. It is the same with your mind, your soul, your strength. When you do something with half your heart, the other half fights against you and you cancel yourself out. This inner conflict is exhausting, and the net result is nothing. Once you begin to pick and choose, the trouble begins. Meister Eckhart said, "Sometimes it is harder for you to keep silence about a single word than to cease speaking altogether. And sometimes it is harder to endure a single word of reproach...than a fierce blow; or it is much harder to be alone in a crowd than in the desert; harder to abandon a small thing than a great, or to do a small task than one which is considered much greater." Another witness: François Fénelon (1651-1715) wrote, "People are wrong to suppose that the death of self is the cause of all the agony they feel; on the contrary, their suffering is caused by the way they cling to life."

Other Jewish teachers had picked out the two greatest commandments. Jesus was not original in that. The first was the most familiar verse of the Old Testament: the 'Shema', Deuteronomy 6:5. The second was Leviticus 19:18. When he quoted the Old Testament he quoted accurately of course. But when he spoke from himself he did not say, "Love your neighbour as yourself," but "Love one another as *I have loved you*" (Jn 13:34; 15:12). There's a colossal difference.

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

An anonymous 5th-century Christian writer had this to say: "Mistaken lay people are easier to set straight; but clerics, if they are evil, are almost impossible to set straight." That sounds like the voice of experience. He was referring in the first place to the Pharisees, but by extension to all clerics of all time. "The chair does not make the priest," he continued, "but the priest, the chair. The place does not sanctify the man, but the man, the place. Not every priest is holy, but all the holy are priests."

Origen (185 - 254) leaves us in no doubt about who is meant. The delight in receiving honours and sitting in front and being greeted respectfully: "We must admit that this kind of delight is found not only among the scribes and Pharisees but also in the Church of Christ, and not only at dinner, while taking places at the table, but also the front seats in church.... 'Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled....' I wish everyone might hear this, and most of all deacons, priests and bishops." Then he quotes in full the passage (Phil 2:6-9) about Christ's self-emptying. "Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name."

Chrysostom (344/354 – 407) adds his voice: "Christ continually reminded the disciples of this virtue [humility], both when he brought a child into the midst and now [in this passage]. Even when he was preaching on the mount, beginning the Beatitudes, this is where he began. And in this passage he plucks up pride by the roots, saying, "Whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

"He's a man, he's just a man," sang Mary Magdalene in the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*. It is one answer to the question, Who is Jesus Christ? "We're more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first, rock 'n' roll or Christianity," said John Lennon of the Beatles on a famous occasion. Later he explained that it was a comment on society and not on Jesus. Many people through the ages have imagined how Jesus would be received if he were to appear in modern society. In most scenarios society comes out looking bad. Thomas Carlyle, the 19th-century historian wrote, "If Jesus Christ were to come to-day, people would not even crucify him. They would ask him to dinner, and hear what he had to say, and make fun of it."

But "Who do people say I am?" was only a preliminary question; the real question was "Who do *you* say I am?" The first question is easily answered; one has only to be a reporter. But the second question is a searching one; and only a disciple can come anywhere within range of an answer.

When we recite the Creed at Mass we give the Church's answer. "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father...."

However, the mere repetition of a right answer is not the answer. We found out in primary school that the right answer given at the end of the arithmetic book was useless unless we reached it by valid steps ourselves. We don't just repeat the Creed; we profess it. It is more than a set of theoretical statements; it is a commitment and a renewal of faith. This is more demanding. We cannot 'find' Jesus in the way you find some lost object, or a piece of information. In a sense, the seeking has to continue even when we have found him, and especially then. There are different kinds of seeking. There is a seeking to know, and there is a seeking to find. These need not be opposed to each other, but they can be. The first is about possessing knowledge, the second is about possessing a reality. The first engages the mind, the second one's life. The Wise Men "sought diligently for the child," they asked everyone about him, but when they found him they "they knelt down and paid him homage" (Matthew 2:11).

After the Resurrection, the disciples met in pairs and in groups and they told one another of their experiences: Mary Magdalene "went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and that he had said these things to her" (John 20:18); "the disciples said, 'we have seen the Lord'" (John 20:25); the disciples returning from Emmaus "told their story of what had happened on the road and how they had recognised him at the breaking of bread" (Luke 24:35).

When we Christians meet in his name we are responding to his question, "Who do you say that I am?" and sharing our experience of him with our brothers and sisters.

28 August [St Augustine]
Mt 23:13-22

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.' You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? And you say, 'Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath.' How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it; and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it.

This passage (and the remainder of chapter 23) has been used by Christians in the past to fuel anti-Jewish polemic. But clearly it is not Judaism itself that Matthew's gospel had in focus, but those Pharisees who opposed and ultimately destroyed Jesus. Matthew himself was a Jew, as of course were Jesus, his disciples, and his entire family.

The problem with the Pharisees was the absence of an interior spirit to give life to their religious practices. They are a warning headline for all time, because any group in any religion is capable of going their way. They would strain out a gnat (*qamla*) from their drink, Jesus said, but swallow a camel (*gamla*). They would give tithes not only of their field grain and fruit crops, but even of the herbs in the back garden; and yet they neglected the really important things: justice, mercy and love. They quibbled with words in order to have things both ways.

The Pharisees interpreted the law so strictly that no one could observe it, not even they themselves. There was certainly no hope of observing it, they felt, if one remained immersed in ordinary living, so they withdrew (the word 'Pharisee' means 'separated'). Of course they came to despise others who were still immersed in worldly affairs. They were constantly scandalised by Jesus's association with tax-collectors and sinners (Mt 9, Mk 2, Lk 5). They were consumed by zeal for the Law rather than zeal for God. Their interpretations were strict to the point of absurdity. We should be thankful to them: they exemplified perfectly a track that religious people are forever in danger of slipping into. They show us that it is quite possible (and easy) to be interested in religion without being interested in God.

Herod 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 baptiser.' 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.

John was a child of the desert and of the wild open spaces. To imprison him in the dark dungeons of Machaerus must have been for him the last refinement of torture. But he was a man who preferred death to falsehood. Jesus, who was his cousin, said of him (equivalently) that he was the greatest man who ever lived. It was a sad irony that such a man should meet his death because of the whim of a drunken tyrant, Herod. "Power gradually extirpates from the mind every humane and gentle virtue," wrote Edmund Burke. From the mind of the tyrant, yes, but not from the mind of the human race. Here are we today – thousands of years later and thousands of miles away – remembering the greatness of John the Baptist!

John the Baptist was Herod's bad conscience; that is why he thought John had come back from the dead; bad conscience is always sending us ghosts from the past, incidents that refuse to die. Jesus and John were cousins, and there is a tradition that they looked alike. This would give fodder to Herod's addled conscience. A bad conscience feeds on everything and grows worse.

Herod was a weak man, but all the more cruel for that. Rather than face his own falsity he killed the man who pointed it out to him. Still, inside every bad conscience there is a scrap of good conscience: otherwise we wouldn't *suffer* from bad conscience. To know a bad conscience as bad is surely good. He died in exile from his kingdom, in the company of Herodias. They had ruined each other's lives. No one knows if their bad consciences grew still worse, ruining each other to the very end; or if the hidden scraps of good conscience were able to reach the surface and grow.

Does anyone care? Yes, we all do, because we know about good and bad conscience ourselves, and their life-long drama. We will all be exiled from our kingdom sooner or later. We will lose our power over others (if we have any), our power to make decisions, even our power over many aspects of our own lives. But the drama of conscience will not end; it will continue to our last breath.

Jesus said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, and you say, "If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets." Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors."

St John Chrysostom (344/354 – 407) is able to give as good as that anonymous 5th-century author we met yesterday. "You have been counted worthy to become temples of God. But you have instead suddenly become more like sepulchres, having the same sort of smell. This is dreadful. It is extreme wretchedness that one in whom Christ dwells and in whom the Holy Spirit has worked such great works should turn out to be a sepulchre, a place for death. What wretchedness is this? What mourning and lamentation does this call for...! You were intended to be a temple without fault, beautiful, not adorned with gold or pearls but with the spirit that is more precious than these.... You carry around a dead soul. You are shunned. Be honest. If anyone were to go around carrying about a dead body, wouldn't everyone else rush for cover! Wouldn't they all flee? But this is what you are like. You go about carrying a corpse far more grievous than this. It is a soul deadened by sins, a soul paralysed."

The Pharisees have always been sitting ducks for Christian preachers. "The true prophet says humbly, 'To me, a sinner, God spoke.' But the scribes and Pharisees declare, 'When we speak, God agrees.' They feel no need of a special revelation, for they are always, in their own view, infallible. It is this self-righteousness of the pious that most breeds atheism, by inspiring all decent, ordinary people with loathing of the enormous lie." It is clear, of course, that the person who wrote that wasn't thinking only of the historical Pharisees. The reason they continue to be so popular is that they are still breeding.

Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. 'Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. But if that wicked slave says to himself, "My master is delayed", and he begins to beat his fellow-slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know. He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Master Zuigan called to himself every day, "Master!" and answered, "Yes, sir!" Then he would say, "Be wide awake!" and answer, "Yes, sir!" "Henceforth, never be deceived by others!" "No, sir, I won't!"

He was playing at being two people; but he knew it, and that made all the difference. When I play at being two people and I'm not conscious of it, then I really am divided in two, and I don't know who's asleep and who's awake. Zuigan knew. With him it was conscious play, and therefore he could stop playing whenever he wished. The *unconscious* games are the ones that control us and that never end. There are games we have been playing all our lives: 'I'm an innocent victim', or 'I can trust no one', or 'Everyone ought to be helping me', or 'Nobody cares', or 'I'll never have enough', or 'I'm not one of them, anyway!' or 'The world is gone to hell,' or 'Nobody understands me', or 'I should be in charge here', or 'What's the use?'....

These, and a thousand others, are ways of being asleep. All real religious teachers, whatever their differences, have one thing in common: they all say, "Wake up!" The whole world, you might say, is trying to wake up. Perhaps it's still early morning in human civilisation!

When Zuigan said to himself, "Never be deceived by others," I presume he didn't mean only people. He also meant circumstances. Don't be deceived by anything. But ultimately it's not circumstances that deceive us; it's only we who deceive ourselves.

The kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

This reading is about wakefulness, watchfulness: a central factor in any spirituality. When I'm asleep I don't know what is happening. If I walk in my sleep I don't know where I'm going, or why; I'm capable of stepping through a window to my death. What then if my waking life is also a kind of sleeping? What if my fits of anger and fear, and the non-stop craving in my life, are just like wheels turning by themselves, with no one in charge? People only have to press the right button and there's my anger; press another and I cringe with fear; show me an advertisement and I buy a product I don't need. I'm a machine, reacting to stimuli, not a conscious being responding to life. Or, to say it another way, I'm sound asleep.

No one could like those wise bridesmaids in today's parable, I think. They remain awake all right, but they are not the kind of people you would go to if you had a problem. Some 'good' people are like that. But this is to misread the parable, which is a parable and not an allegory. An allegory has points of application all along the line, but a parable has only one point. The point of this one is the need to stay awake. (It would be wrong to apply it in other ways: for example, to deduce from it that we shouldn't help people who are in need, if it is their own fault.) The meaning of the parable is in the last line, "Stay awake!"

St Augustine did his best to make those bridesmaids attractive. "What does the oil signify?" he asked. "Do you think it might be love...? I will tell you why. [St Paul] says, 'I will show you a more excellent way (1 Cor 12:31)... It is [the way of love], 'that way *above* the rest....' Now, oil swims *above* all liquids." Nice try.

"It is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Today's parable has an unpleasant tone at first sight. Instead of telling us that everything is a gift of God, it tells us about investments and profits. And worse: the punch-line could come from a director of a multinational company. "To all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

That's how the business world operates. How could this have anything to do with the world of the spirit? The business world is only about 'outer things' – property – but the spiritual world has to include also 'inner things'. How could the same rules apply?

To say that the spiritual world is all 'gift' is to say the truth. But to say no more would be to make it a purely passive thing. In reality we know that nothing deep or 'inner' can ever be given to us without our effort. You would love to give your knowledge of, say, a foreign language to someone you love, but it cannot be done without their labour. How much more your understanding, your wisdom, your experience? Even God's gifts, poured out without measure, cannot really become mine unless I interiorise them myself. Struggle is part of the spiritual life, even though it remains true that everything is gift. And it is a fact of experience (not a policy statement of a company) that the more I have the more I will receive. The more I know the more I am capable of knowing; the more I love the more I am capable of loving; the more I pray the more I am able to pray.... And likewise the less.

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Then Jesus told his disciples, "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 will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.

*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)

The word 'suffer' comes from two Latin words, 'sub' (under) and 'ferre' (to bear). There's a sense of supporting something from below. It is an active vigorous word. It lets you imagine some human being who has taken up his or her burden of pain and is bravely carrying it along.

There are related words that seem to look at the matter from a different side – from the outside. The Latin origins of these words tell the story: 'depression' ('to press down'), 'grief' (also 'to make heavy'), 'affliction' ('to knock around'). If I may put it this way: these words seem to look at human life not from the point of view of the sufferer but from the point of view of the burdens that bear down on us. They suggest incapacity and weakness.

If it were only about words, how easy it would be! But it is about us. We have two ways of living with suffering: we can take it on our shoulders and try to walk with it; or we can just sit down under it and feel like victims. No one pretends that either way is easy. If it were easy it wouldn't be suffering.

Our instinct is to run away from suffering, and when we can't escape from it, to treat it as an enemy that has defeated us; then we are full of complaints and self-pity. This is the harder way in the end: harder for ourselves and for everyone around us. The wisdom of the Gospel tells us to face our suffering, not to treat it like an enemy but like a friend, to learn from it, to let it draw us away from self-centred thoughts and feelings, and ultimately to see it as a sharing in the Passion of Christ.

There's a striking phrase in John's gospel, "You will have sorrow, but your sorrow will turn into joy" (16:20). He did not say "Your sorrow will be replaced by joy." Your joy will somehow be born out of the heart of your sorrow. Then it will be able to endure; it will not see sorrow as a threat and an enemy. It will not be at the mercy of sorrowful circumstances. Sorrow itself will give birth to a strange deep kind of joy. A great meditation teacher was weeping at the death of her daughter. Someone expressed surprise that such a person would weep. "Yes, I weep," she said, "but every tear is a jewel." Her suffering was real suffering, yet it did not lead her into desolation, but into greater depth.

"The word of the Lord has meant for me insult, derision, all day long," said Jeremiah (today's first reading). For Jesus it meant crucifixion. But neither of them turned back, neither of them was silenced. Jeremiah said, "There seemed to be a fire burning in my heart." Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth" (Luke 12:49). It was that inner urgency that drove them forward in the teeth of great suffering. It was inner but it was also a call from beyond.

We are inclined to see these as opposites. How could it be both? In experience that is just how it is. There is a clear expression of it in the *Confessions* of St Patrick (another man who suffered greatly for the word of God). "I saw God praying within me, and I was as it were, inside my own body, and I heard Him above me - that is, above my inner self."

Jesus did not turn back from death; he went through the heart of it, and it was transformed into resurrection. "Your Son the royal path of suffering trod," says the hymn. Our faith does not hold us back from life or life's sorrows, but it enables them to be a royal path to God.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, Jesus 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 favor." 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?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

The listeners' minds were set afar off; they didn't expect anything to happen here and now. Cyril of Alexandria (375 – 444) wrote: "The Israelites used to say that the prophecies concerning the Christ were fulfilled either in the persons of some of their more glorious kings or in the holy prophets." But they were unable to realise that what they were hearing was written about the man standing before them. About him they were only "wondering perhaps how he could read without having been taught," wrote Cyril.

We think little of the present moment or the present place; and that rubs off on anyone who happens to be present. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Yet all great religious teachers keep emphasising the here and now. If nothing is happening here and now, nothing is happening, simply.

Imagine everyone who has ever sat in church listening to a preacher. They are encouraged by the readings to think about the past, and by the preacher to think about the future. A curate in my childhood used to preach all the time about the next life. The actual life of the village seldom got a mention. What happens to the present? It is somehow forgotten. The past cannot face the present, so it moves into the future.

It would be an interesting theme to follow up. Is the 'present' the same for everyone? Not really, I think. Imagine it this way. Someone in the village has climbed to the top of a tree and he sees a horse coming; while I, sitting at the foot of the tree, can't see it. The horse is still the future for me, but for the person at the top of the tree it is the present. The 'present' depends on where you are. Applying the image, we could say it depends on the level of your consciousness. For people with a low level of consciousness the present is almost non-existent; for Jesus it is an immensity. For his listeners the kingdom of God was about some distant future; for Jesus it was already being inaugurated: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus went down to Capernaum, a city in Galilee, and was teaching them on the sabbath. They were astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with authority.

In the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, 'Leave us alone! 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!' When the demon had thrown him down before them, he came out of him without having done him any harm.

They were all amazed and kept saying to one another, 'What kind of utterance is this? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and out they come!' And a report about him began to reach every place in the region.

Jesus was frequently accused of breaking the sabbath. (Even when he was dead he descended on Holy Saturday into the underworld, the Creed says, and liberated all who had languished there since the time of Adam.) I found a passage in St Ambrose (c. 333 AD – 397) that tries to make sense of all this sabbath activity. He wrote, “[Luke] describes the works of divine healing begun on the sabbath day, to show from the outset that the new creation began where the old creation ceased.”

Ambrose also noted that Jesus healed a man (today’s reading) and a woman (tomorrow’s). Just as at the beginning God “created them male and female” (Genesis 1:27; 5:2), Jesus now heals both. “The Lord came to heal both sexes,” he wrote.

Jesus spoke with authority, Luke says. ‘Authority’ is one of those words that can have opposite meanings, depending on their use. Speaking or acting ‘with authority’ can simply mean you have the official piece of paper, you are authorised by someone else. In the time of Jesus, rabbis were forever quoting other rabbis, or quoting texts. Yet the word ‘authority’ comes from the Latin ‘auctor’ (source), from which the word ‘author’ is also derived. People speaking with authority in this sense are speaking from themselves; they are the *authors* of what they are saying. Jesus “spoke with authority,” that is, he spoke from himself, from his Self. His words came from somewhere (they were not quotations). For that very reason they were able to go somewhere: they were able to cast out demons, freeing people from their torments.

By acting as he did, Ambrose wrote, “Jesus showed us that the Son of God is not under the law but above the law.” It might have been better if he had said Jesus was *one with* the law, in the sense that he was one with the mind of the law-giver, God. In him the law was being *fulfilled*, not set aside (Mt 5:18). A law is not necessarily being fulfilled when it is interpreted into thousands of details; it is being fulfilled when its *purpose* is being realised. The law was being fulfilled in Jesus, despite his apparent breaches of it, in ways that it was not fulfilled in the Pharisees, despite their devotion to it.

After leaving the synagogue Jesus entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked him about her. Then he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. Immediately she got up and began to serve them.

As the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them. Demons also came out of many, shouting, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Messiah. At daybreak he departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowds were looking for him; and when they reached him, they wanted to prevent him from leaving them. But he said to them, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose." So he continued proclaiming the message in the synagogues of Judea.

It is as if Jesus' healing power was pent up from his experience in Nazareth, and now in Capernaum it rushes out in full flood. There, familiarity robbed him of his power. But here there is no barrier: first he heals Peter's mother-in-law, and then crowds of sick and demon-tormented people.

Dreadful thought: like the people of Nazareth we have the power to prevent miracles. The chances are that we all have prevented many miracles, just by filling the air with criticism, or cynicism, or discouragement. We can even do it with a belittling look; in short, with a habit of mind that *reduces* everything. Some people have a presence that is negative. In their atmosphere we die a little: we keep our stories and anecdotes to ourselves, we talk safe. This is how human community is corroded. It is also how faith is corroded. We talk about "denying the faith," as if words were the worst we could do. We can do much worse than that! Words at least are explicit. But by a look, by our very presence, our atmosphere, we can corrode the faith subtly and silently and deeply. And we may not even be aware that we are doing it.

In Jesus' ministry, preaching and healing went together. It suggests that all preaching should be healing in some sense. But what if nobody feels especially sick? Well, to feel totally comfortable in today's weird world is a bit sick. St Paul castigated the Corinthians for "behaving like ordinary people" (1 Corinthians 3:3 JB). In some way all our words can be a prayer for healing, a plea to be free of life-draining atmospheres, and to build up the broken body of Christ.

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and Jn, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

How important it is to come to the end of your resources! "Jesus allowed pitch darkness to sweep over my soul," wrote St Thérèse of Lisieux. "I wish I could express what I feel, but it is impossible. One must have travelled through the same sunless tunnel to understand how dark it is.... There is... a wall which towers to the sky and hides the stars." Her next words were (how amazing!), "I have never before felt so strongly how gentle and merciful God is. He sent me this heavy cross just at the time when I was strong enough to bear it.... Nothing now hinders me.... I no longer want anything except to love until I die of love. I am free and fear nothing."

A French biographer of St Thérèse said it was characteristic of her to be always at the end of her resources. It is because she always gave everything she had. She never had anything up her sleeve: no tricks, no escapes, no clever explanations, no blaming, no postponing.... She remained always fully present and vulnerable to experience. That is why God could give her so much.

"We worked hard all night and caught nothing," said Peter in today's reading. Peter was quite often at the end of his resources. He had given up everything to follow Jesus. It didn't matter that all he gave up was a boat and a few nets; it was everything he had. It is not these (or any material possession) that would hold him back, but his reliance on them. He had had the courage to come to the end of his resources. Later he would be dragged even further beyond. The man he followed would be killed, and having nothing else to do he would go back to fishing; but that terrible night too he would catch nothing (Jn 21:3). He would be without a past and without a future. That must have been like St Thérèse's wall reaching up to the sky and letting in no light. But for them both, it was the moment of recognition: "It is the Lord!" (Jn 21:7).