

June  
2017

## GOSPEL COMMENTARIES

1 June

Jn 17:20-26

*Jesus said: 'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 'Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'*

The anthropologist Colin Turnbull lived for two years with a Ugandan tribe, the Ik, and described his experiences in a book called *The Mountain People*. They are seen as utterly brutish, loveless and selfish. They never sing, and they laugh only at one another's misfortunes. They turn their children out to forage as soon as they can walk, and they abandon the old to starvation. Presumably they were once a normal easy-going people, but the government took over their lands to create a national park, and these hunter-gatherers were reduced to farming the poor hillside soil, at which they failed miserably. Along with their way of life they lost their culture and even their humanity. It is a depressing picture.

The biologist Lewis Thomas, in *The Lives of a Cell*, sketched a theory about them – and about human beings in any society. “The solitary Ik, isolated in the ruins of an exploded culture, has built a new defence for himself. If you live in an unworkable society you can make up one of your own.... Each Ik has become a group, a one-man tribe of its own.... This is precisely the way groups...from committees to nations, behave.... In his absolute selfishness, his incapacity to give anything away, no matter what, he is a successful committee. When he stands at the door of his hut, shouting insults at his neighbours in a loud harangue, he is a city addressing another city.... Nations are the most Ik-like of all.... For total greed, rapacity, heartlessness, and irresponsibility there is nothing to match a nation. Nations, by law, are solitary, self-centred, withdrawn into themselves.” He concludes, “We haven't yet learned how to stay human when assembled in masses. The Ik, in his despair, is acting out this failure, and perhaps we should pay closer attention.”

There are lessons here for Christian community too. Despite hearing the Gospel, times without number, we are capable of living instead by the gospel of greed. Society breaks down around us, and we fail to create Christian community, receding into ourselves and living out our lives as solitary egos. The ego is my false identity; it is the identity I forge for myself in early childhood and build upon for the rest of my life, unless radically called into community. It is the fundamental lie about who I am. It is not really an identity, it is a strategy for survival, security and comfort. For this reason the ego

cannot love, though it can produce an imitation of love, for strategic purposes. Whenever it pretends to form community with others there is a built-in flaw.

What is meaning? It is to know the fragment in relation to the whole. A madman is so-called because his talk and actions are unrelated to any wider structure. Cut a piece out of a picture and it is meaningless. Put it back and there's a thrill of recognition. This is the small thrill of jigsaw puzzles. Today many people are like isolated fragments of a jigsaw puzzle, with no desire to be part of anything. W.H. Auden once said, "We have to learn to love one another or die."

2 June

Jn 21:15-19

*When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'*

Today's picture is the alternative to yesterday's. Not the Ik, but the community of love. Three times Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" People like to connect this with Peter's triple denial of Jesus: he was being given a chance to undo the damage. In addition, something else is happening in the original language, something that doesn't appear in English.

There are several words for 'love' in Greek. 'Philein' means to love someone as a friend; 'agapan' usually means to love someone in the distinctive New Testament sense: to love them unselfishly, creatively, in the way that Jesus loved. In John's usage, this kind of love is mysteriously deeper and wider even than friendship, because it doesn't depend on like-mindedness as friendship does; it can even reach out to include enemies. Now, Jesus first asked Peter, 'Agapas me?' (Do you love me with this kind of love?) Peter replies, 'Philo se'. (I love you as a friend.) The second time, the words are the same. But the third time, Jesus asks him, "Phileis me?" And Peter answers as before, 'Philo se'.

There is something touching about this. Peter wasn't yet able to love Jesus in that heroic way; he could love him only as the friend he had known for three years. But the third time around, Jesus steps down, as it were, to accept what Peter was able to offer at that time.

Friendship, though it is a precious gift, can have a built-in trap. It could mean that you never allow the other to surprise you or shock you; it can mean 'come into my camp.'

Can we put it this way: all forms of love and friendship are capable of advancing gradually towards to 'agapè'. How do we go along that road? Like Peter, by doing the best we can.

3 June

Jn 21:20-25

*Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, 'Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?' When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about him?' Jesus said to him, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!' So the rumour spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?' This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.*

At an earlier time Peter sounded very courageous, even heroic. "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you" (Jn 13:37). As events unfolded, he failed to live up to his brave talk, preferring instead to save his own skin. That was a profound lesson in humility, and he was now a more truthful man for it.

Today's passage is the closing scene of John's gospel, and in it Peter is invited once again by Jesus to "Follow me!" Peter is now in a better position to understand what following Jesus will involve. Jesus spells out the cost of that love that Peter has just professed three times (yesterday's reading). In his youth Peter was able to follow his own sweet will, but now "you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go" (verse 18).

Peter has been given a leadership role in the community: "Feed (or tend) my sheep." He can have no illusions about what that will entail. He will not lord it over others; instead, like the Good Shepherd, he will give his life for them. He was crucified during the persecution by Nero in the mid-sixties of the first century.

4 June [Pentecost Sunday]

Jn 20:19-23

*Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."*

*Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?" Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."*

"Without the Holy Spirit," said Ignatius of Laodicea (Orthodox Metropolitan, at the third assembly of the World Council of Churches at Uppsala, in 1968) "God is distant, Christ is merely an historical figure, the Gospel is a dead letter, the Church is just an organisation, authority is domination, mission is propaganda, liturgy is only nostalgia, and the work of Christians is slave labour. But with the Holy Spirit, Christ is risen and present, the Gospel is a living force, the Church is a communion in the life of the Trinity, authority is a service that sets people free, mission is Pentecost, the liturgy is memory and anticipation, and the labour of Christians is divinised."

The Holy Spirit is the soul of the Church. The feast of Pentecost is an annual invitation to the Church to look into itself and discover its soul. It is tempted, like all of us, to keep looking the other way.

In one sense it is more natural to forget about one's inner life and to get on with one's work. If you are always worrying about your heart or your liver, etc., you will not take risks or do a lot of work. A healthy person just goes to it. The Holy Spirit is the soul of the Church, and there is a sense in which that Spirit likes to work unseen, undeclared. "It is not those who say to me, 'Lord, Lord!' who will enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Adapting Jesus' words we could say, It is not those who say 'Holy Spirit!' who will enter the kingdom of heaven. It is those who live by the Spirit. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council an Eastern bishop complained that there was little mention of the Holy Spirit in the documents. But something tells us that talking about the Spirit is not the same thing as living by the Spirit.

However, we do have to pay attention to that inner place, to see by what spirit we are being driven. If you never paid any attention to your health you would be asking for trouble. Today's feast is a reminder.

But obviously there is much more to it than this. Traditional images of the Holy Spirit are: Fire, Wind, Water, Cloud, Dove.... Why such strange images? All of them (except 'dove') have indeterminate boundaries or no boundaries at all. They are reminders that we should not dare to restrict the activity of the Spirit to a few things we can understand.

*O Dove, O Flame, O Water, Wind and Cloud...!*

*O love that lifts us wholly into God!*

The Holy Spirit lives in us but is not confined in us. It is God; rather than being diminished in us, it "lifts us wholly into God," as the poet said. Any soul is for expansion, not constriction. Things that have no soul - sticks and stones - are restricted entirely to themselves; plants have a certain ability to reach beyond themselves, for food and for propagating their species; animals still more. But human beings are able to reach vastly beyond themselves and touch the depths of everything. This capacity is enlarged infinitely by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, so that we can touch even the depths of God. "The Spirit searches all things," St Paul wrote, "even the deep things of God. For who knows the thoughts of a person except the person's own inner spirit? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us" (1 Cor 2:10).

In a daring image the same poet, Jessica Powers, wrote that silence is a sort of decoy of the Holy Spirit. Just as hunters attract the flying birds out of the sky by placing a plastic or wooden model of them on the ground, we call down God's Spirit by our silence.

*The decoy of silence,  
hope's unuttered sigh,  
that the Ultimate Silence  
drift down from the sky.*

5 June

Mk 12:1-12

*Jesus began to speak to the crowds in parables. "A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this scripture: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?" When they realised that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.*

The vine was a symbol of the people of Israel. Israel was the vine, a special object of God's care.

*You brought a vine out of Egypt;  
to plant it you drove out the nations.  
Before it you cleared the ground;  
it took root and spread through the land. (Ps 80: 9,10)*

Jesus took up this image and made his own of it. As always, there is a snag in the story. This is what makes it a story about life rather than a piece of escapism. Life may have brief passages of plain sailing, but the whole journey is not plain sailing. Jesus echoes a passage in Isaiah. "My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes" (5:1-2).

In his treatment of this image Jesus identified himself not as the vine but as the son and heir to the vineyard. This version has a special poignancy for readers of the gospel, who see it with hindsight. Mark says, "They killed him and threw him out of the vineyard" (v. 8). But Matthew reverses the order: "they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him" (21:39). Likewise Luke 20:15. They must have been thinking with hindsight about the way Jesus actually died. He was led out of Jerusalem and killed outside the city, not killed inside and then thrown out.

How they see Jesus in every detail, and every detail in Jesus!

6 June

Mk 12:13-17

*Some Pharisees and some Herodians tried to trap him in what he said. They came and said to him, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?' But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, 'Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it.' And they brought one. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Jesus said to them, 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' And they were utterly amazed at him.*

Because Judea and Samaria were troublesome areas the Romans imposed direct rule on them - and as part of the programme, this census tax. This was the cause of deep anger and resentment among the people. Judas the Gaulonite, for example, had proclaimed that taxation was a form of slavery, and he called for violent resistance. His rhetoric influenced many, and taxation was a burning question.

The question they asked Jesus was a trap, concealed under a layer of flattery. If he said it was right to pay the tax, he would incur the anger of the people; and if he said it was not right, he would be reported to the Romans as a revolutionary. There seemed to be no way out of the dilemma.

In the ancient world, coinage was considered the property of the ruler, since it had his image on it. Jesus asked them to show him a coin. This was clever, because by possessing a Roman coin they were already showing themselves to be collaborators with the Romans. This was a sore point, especially for Pharisees. He only had to say, "Give back to Caesar this worthless thing that belongs to him in any case." Then he added, "Give back to God what belongs to God," as if to say, "You were made in God's image: you have his image stamped on you, just as this coin has Caesar's image stamped on it. You don't owe your souls to Caesar."

This principle has served societies well, when it has been observed. This saying, "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar," was of great importance to the early Christians, because they were often accused of disloyalty to the state; see, for example, Acts 17:7: "These people...have broken every one of Caesar's edicts." Paul wrote an exhortation to loyalty to the state (Rom 13:1-7). Clearly there is a tradition of civil loyalty that goes back to Jesus himself.



7 June

Mk 12:18-27

*Some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus and asked him a question, 'Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. There were seven brothers; the first married and, when he died, left no children; and the second married her and died, leaving no children; and the third likewise; none of the seven left children. Last of all, the woman herself died. In the resurrection whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her.' Jesus said to them, 'Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong.'*

Just like yesterday, there is a cunning question, a deceitful 'why?' in today's Gospel. If you thought that questions were always neutral requests for information, these passages show you otherwise. The Sadducees didn't believe in life after death; but here they are, asking a question, the point of which is to reduce such a belief to absurdity. But Jesus didn't tailor his answer to please them: the dead, he said, will be "like the angels in heaven." He knew that the Sadducees didn't believe in the existence of angels, any more than they believed in a next life! It's a lesson in how to deal with dishonest questions: don't give up your ground, don't backtrack.

How does one hold belief in the resurrection? With the mind alone? If so, then it would be no more than what Pascal called "the big bet" (*le grand pari*). It goes as follows: You can't really lose by believing in it, for if there is life after death, you will not be disappointed; but if there is not, again you will not be disappointed – because to experience disappointment you would have to exist! But Jesus did not come to proclaim the Safe Bet; he came to proclaim the Good News. When he said as he died on the cross, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," he was not taking a bet on the resurrection; he was entrusting his whole being, body and soul, to the Father. Unless I am trying to do that, as far as I am able, I don't really believe in the resurrection – neither that of Jesus nor of anyone else.

8 June

Mk 12:28-34

*One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked Jesus, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.' Then the scribe said to him, 'You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that "he is one, and besides him there is no other"; and "to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength", and "to love one's neighbour as oneself";—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.' When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' After that no one dared to ask him any question.*

This was a remarkably friendly exchange between Jesus and the scribe, and it stands in strong contrast with the two exchanges just before it in Mark's gospel. The scribe asked a straightforward question; this ball had no spin on it. It was a much debated question among rabbis. As they tended to expand the Law into thousands of regulations, they also tried to pick out its essence and express it in the shortest form. The scribe in today's Gospel passage came with the usual question. When Jesus answered, the scribe said, "You are right, teacher!" It was perhaps slightly patronising, but at least he was better than the other scribes. "You are not far from the Kingdom," said Jesus. The Kingdom is more than reciting the correct formulas; it is God's grace invading us like a great wave and sweeping us out of our depth.

It was good to meet an honest scribe. This scene may have been put in the gospel to show that Jesus' teaching was not necessarily in conflict with the best of what was before. In other words, a bridge between the two was possible.

How important it is to construct bridges! A bridge is the other side made attainable; it enables you to hope. It was one of St Catherine of Siena's favourite images; she pictured Christ as a bridge. In her *Dialogue*, the Father says to her, "I made a bridge of my Son as he lived in your company. And though that living bridge has been taken from your sight, there remains the bridgeway of his teaching, which... is held together by my power and my Son's wisdom and the mercy of the Holy Spirit." A bridge is a connection. It is all too easy to make disconnections: it is the easiest thing for the mind to do. A disconnection is a negative, and many live naturally in negativity; they are people who cannot invest themselves in anything, or they are people who invest everything in one narrow project of their own and deny everything else.

To love your neighbour as yourself is called The Golden Rule. Sometimes we hear people say that it is the heart of the Gospel and a distinctively Christian teaching. It doesn't take long nowadays to discover that it is common to practically all religions and quite a few philosophies. Four or five centuries before Christ, Plato wrote, "May I do to others as I would that they should do to me." In today's gospel passage Jesus was replying to a question about the Mosaic Law; he was giving his interpretation of it; he was not giving his own teaching. When he spoke for himself he did not say, "Love your neighbour as yourself," he said, "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34).

Many people love themselves in ways that are twisted and destructive. This would not be a very reliable guide to how we should love one another. His love for us, and not our love, is the measure of love.

9 June

Mk 12:35-37

*While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, 'How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared,*

*"The Lord said to my Lord,*

*'Sit at my right hand,*

*until I put your enemies under your feet.' "*

*David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?' And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.*

Today's passage puzzles the scholars greatly. It could bear several interpretations. The people who were listening to Jesus were clear in their minds that the Messiah would be a descendent of King David – because of a text in their Scriptures, "I will establish the throne of his [David's] kingdom forever" (2 Samuel 7:13). They were clear: they knew the kind of Messiah they wanted. Whatever interpretation his saying is to bear, it is obvious that he is ruining their clarity. He is either saying that the Messiah will not be a descendent of David, or that he will be much more than a descendent of David.

There are people who insist on clarity above all else, thinking that clarity is a proof of truth. But there are many things that are clear and false. When we think we have understood something we say "I have it!" We use the words 'having', 'grasping', 'holding', and the like. Even the word 'concept' (from Latin *capio*) means 'to seize'. These words should make us pause, because fundamentally it is not we who seize the truth, it is the truth that should seize us. As Chesterton put it, we are not here to get the skies into our heads, but to get our heads into the skies. To promote false clarity is to be an enemy of the truth.

10 June

Mk 12:38-44

*Jesus said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.' He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'*

Clothes are for warmth and protection, but the layers accumulate – layers of meaning. Clothes become an assertion of one's self-image, one's identity. Clothes say, "This is who I am." Clothes are a language. Uniforms assert membership of a particular class: the army, the police, the clergy....

The Scribes loved to "walk about in long robes and be greeted obsequiously in the market-place." A language is an agreement; there is no such thing as a private language. What use is a special hat if no one knows what it is saying? One gets the feeling that people who depend on robes and uniforms and badges and insignia must be very unsure of themselves and are craving recognition from others. The Scribes believed that their knowledge of the Law was the sum of all wisdom and the only knowledge worth having. But that belief was insecure while there was even one person who disagreed. How Jesus threatened their identity! He challenged them and beat them in argument, though he had never been to rabbinical school. He earned their unremitting hostility.

In today's passage he pointed out a casualty of the Temple system: the poor. A widow at that time was the very symbol of poverty and helplessness. In that world, for a woman to lose her husband was to lose her identity. This poor widow of no identity was being exploited by people who clung desperately to a superficial identity. It is the tragic story of the world.

11 June [Holy Trinity]

Jn 3:16-18

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*

You have probably seen reproductions of the famous Roublev icon of the Trinity. The three Persons are seated around a table in an attitude of harmony and peace; the very lines of the icon create a circle within which the unity of the Persons, the manner of their presence to one another, is visible. At the focal point of the icon there is a cup between them on the table. It is a wonderful use of symbol and suggestion. The Trinity hints at the Eucharist. It is as if the divine Persons were saying to us: be one with one another as we are one (see John 17:21). To make the invitation even clearer, there is an empty place at the table.

Last Sunday was Pentecost Sunday, the feast of the Holy Spirit. It was the end of the Eastertide Liturgy. Today, having (as it were) collected all three Divine Persons, we celebrate the Trinity. We are taking a look at our God. Or admiring the full scope of the Christian revelation. It is vast: it is as vast as three religions! You can't miss God. No matter which way you point (up to the Father, out and around you to Jesus, and in to the Spirit) you are embraced in the vast presence. Christianity is able to feel with all the religions of the world, because it has something of them in itself. Of course Christians have often ignored or despised other religions in the course of its history, but that is not the spirit of Christianity. We are to "discern the spirits" (1 Cor 12:10), to see which come from God. The spirit of our Faith is as wide as the world – wider than the world.

We are being invited and drawn into the inner life of the Trinity, to sit at that empty place at God's table. The Father is the destination, Jesus is the way, the Spirit is the inner urge to move that way. "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Fathers who sent me" (Jn 6:44). Commenting on this in the fifth century, St Augustine wrote: "He did not say lead, but draw. This 'violence' is done to the heart, not to the body.... Believe and you come; love and you are drawn. Do not suppose here any rough and uneasy violence. It is gentle, it is sweet, it is the sweetness that draws you. Is not a sheep drawn when fresh grass is shown to it in its hunger? Yet I imagine that it is not driven bodily on, but bound by desire. In this way too you come to Christ: do not imagine long journeyings; in the very place where you believe, there you come. For to him who is everywhere we come by love, not by sailing."

The Trinity is living in us and we in the Trinity. This contrasts sharply with the experience that many people have of God; but we are never to doubt it. The life of God is ours, and it is to be ours even more. Jesus once said, "It is the Father living in me who is doing this work" (Jn 14:10). We should all be able to say the same.

Let's try to understand this in a homely way. When you do something awkwardly you know all too well that it is you who are doing it. Your thumbs get in the way, you drop things, the job takes a long time. But when you do something skilfully it is as if it happened by itself; it happened *through* you, you were just a finely-tuned instrument. I have heard golfers say things like this, and potters and carpenters. Such skilful actions are like moments of grace – natural grace. They give us some impression of how supernatural grace works. Something perfect happens through you and you say “thanks be to God!” In such moments you are free of the ego and you can say “the Father living in me is doing this work”.

12 June

Mt 5:1-12

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:*

*'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

*'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

*'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

*'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

*'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

*'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

“After he sat down...” This is a significant detail. Rabbis would assume any posture as they discussed matters with their students; but when it came to teaching officially – expounding the Law – they always sat. In saying that Jesus sat down, Matthew is telling us that what follows is no small-talk but the heart of the matter. The Beatitudes are the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, as the Sermon on the Mount is the heart of the whole Gospel.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Another translation, less happily, says “How happy are the poor in spirit.” But there are differences between ‘blessed’ and ‘happy’.

You can be blessed without knowing it. I saw this clearly as I watched a young couple almost competing with each other to hold their baby, while the baby slept through it all. You can also be blessed without appreciating it. “You’re blessed with good health,” someone says to you; but you don’t feel blessed at all, you feel just normal. It is only when you fall ill that you appreciate health. “When you have a toothache,” said Thich Nhat Hanh, “you realise how wonderful it is not to have a toothache.”

Happiness, on the other hand, is just a passing state of feeling. The word ‘happiness’ is related to ‘happen’ and ‘perhaps’: it is about randomness, it is about hit and miss. Feelings, like the weather, come and go and are constantly changing. You can’t stake a claim to happiness because it is not firm ground and stakes take no hold there.

Jesus doesn’t tell you that you are happy. He tells you that you are blessed. He tells the poor in spirit that whether they know it or not, whether they appreciate it or not, they are blessed. Blessedness comes from beyond the changeable world of feelings and ideas. The mediaeval theologians spoke about ‘beatitudo’. The word is normally translated as ‘happiness’, but it was not referring to the subjective feeling of happiness; rather to the objective state of being rightly aligned in one’s life.

As we go through our phases we are to know that there is a loving God who cares for us with the love of a father and mother. It is especially when we are weak and without resources of our own that we come to know it. It is when we ourselves begin to embody some of God's own qualities, made visible in the life of Jesus, that we know it. The Beatitudes are the best portrait we have of Jesus himself, and he honours us by telling us they are our portrait too.

13 June

Mt 5:13-16

*You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

"A city built on a hilltop cannot be hidden." If you go to Italy you see towns and cities built on hilltops and mountaintops. Throughout the world, in fact, this is the preferred location. How inconvenient for old people! Was it for the view that people built in such awkward places? Yes and no: it was not to admire the landscape but to get a view of approaching enemies. It would be hard to hide a city, so you make it fully alert instead: full of eyes, full of consciousness.

As you have guessed, this is not only about cities; it is about human beings. The valley is a symbol of sleep and unconsciousness, the hilltop is a symbol of wakefulness and watchfulness. Most religious sites are high places: Jerusalem, Mount Tabor, Mont St Michel, Croagh Patrick, Skellig Mhichil.... The list could go on and on. And not only Christians have this instinct; most people do. Hindus have said that Shiva lives on Mount Everest (or Sagarmatha, as the Nepalese call it)....

When you choose unconsciousness you descend into the valley of darkness. Sleep is a kind of valley. In sleep you lose your awareness of everything. But our world now finds this kind of sleep no longer enough. It creates TV that enables you (if you spend too much time watching it) to turn even your waking hours into a kind of sleep. It creates drugs that send you into even deeper sleep. It creates a strange suicidal instinct in some of the young. Popular culture is addicted to sleep and unconsciousness. Everything becomes a flight and a kind of merging of the self that caricatures the religious merging of the self. Drugs, alcohol and sex have all now taken on this significance.

Why all this flight? It is because consciousness is painful. To be on a hilltop in some sense – to have to be awake, to be exposed, to be vulnerable and to know it – all that is painful. Or perhaps what makes it painful for me is that I am only partly conscious, fluctuating, it is said, between 5% and 10%. That is enough to provide a glimpse of the 90% or 95% unconsciousness in me. So I bury my head. I blot out that 5 or 10% consciousness. I am an ostrich. The ostrich is said to bury its head (which, as it happens, looks about 5% of its body size) when it sees danger, thinking that it is hiding itself completely. But that is not being fair to ostriches, who are every bit as intelligent as any other bird, and more so than we are at times. Any creature – bird or human – that buries its head is helping its enemy. Let me look at yesterday, or even this morning, and count all the times I took flight from direct experience into unconsciousness....

"You are the light of the world," Jesus said. I don't feel like that, do you? Much of the time I'd like to climb under a tub. I can accept it when he says that he himself is the light of the world (John 8: 12), but when he tells me that I too am the light of the world I feel deeply puzzled. It forces me to look again. He can hardly have been stroking my ego, saying, "Ah, you're not as stupid as you look!" He was referring to something that is lodged in me whether I want it or not, something that is there before I ever perform either badly or well, something that I can never quench: the light that St Paul described as 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God.' "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, shining in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:7).

14 June

Mt 5:17-19

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

I once heard a lawyer say in defence of a patently unjust decision by a judge, "The courts are not courts of justice, they are courts of law." One wonders then what they are for. What justifies the existence of a law, if not that it should be in the service of justice? But justice is a difficult search, and life has to go on quickly, so we settle for law.

"We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die" (Jn 19:7). It was this same law that Jesus said he came to fulfil! What could he have meant by "fulfilling the law"? Not its observance to the letter: he defiantly broke the law on many occasions – as it was understood in his time. The scribes and Pharisees adhered to the letter of the Law, yet he accused them of "setting aside the commands of God and clinging to human traditions" (Mk 7:8). By fulfilling the law he meant fulfilling the *purpose* for which it was made: that is, justice (or "righteousness," as the Scriptures call it – a word that includes a just relationship with God). He may have been thinking of the text in Isaiah (55:11), "My word that goes out from my mouth shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

But why then does he say that "not the smallest letter or stroke of the law will change until all is fulfilled"? It is not the law that is wrong, but its separation from justice. Clever people can even make the law an instrument of injustice. This happens daily in the wide world, and sadly, also in the Church.



15 June

Mt 5:20-26

*For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.*

Law without justice is superficial; it is only about words and appearances of justice. We use all kinds of substitutes for wisdom. If a court doesn't know how to decide, it consults precedent. But that precedent was either based on another precedent, or it was someone's guess at justice in a particular case in the past. Yesterday's guess becomes today's justice.

The scribes and Pharisees loved to quote other scribes and Pharisees. One translation says, "If you are not righteous *in a better way* than the scribes and the Pharisees..." The present translation (NRSV) says, "Unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees..." Another translation says, "Unless your virtue goes *deeper* than that of the scribes and Pharisees. 'Better' is a rather neutral word; 'deeper' says more. It is clearly the sense of the passage. The law doesn't go down to the roots of things: to the mind and heart. It is in the mind and heart that all our actions are conceived and born. Murder is the ultimate flowering of an anger that began small and grew unchecked in the mind and heart. If we never look into those sometimes dark places, we could find later that we have been breeding monsters there.

Superficial virtues are the opposite of virtue. They are an attempt to prove that I am not what I am. Cowards become daredevils (Enneagram 6), weak people look for a way of having power of some kind.... Such 'virtues' are an over-reaction to the unpalatable truth of what I am; they hide their opposite within themselves.

But then how are we to understand St Paul's statement "When I am weak then I am strong!" (2 Cor 12:10)? He was not speaking of a false strength that is only a denial of weakness, but of real strength that comes from accepting one's weakness. Virtue that does not grow out of the truth is like a plant with no roots: it looks all right for a while.

16 June

Mt 5:27-32

*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

As we saw yesterday and the day before, Jesus is not adding more rules, but rather looking more deeply than the scribes and Pharisees. What he sees is not the Law but the heart of the person who is trying to observe the Law.

It is often repeated that there is a diminishing sense of sin in modern times. This is certainly puzzling, for the past century has witnessed some of the greatest atrocities of all time: genocide, cities devastated by nuclear bombs, terrorism, widespread destruction of the environment and even of unborn children, rich countries storing and destroying food while others starve.... How is it that we have a diminished sense of sin?

Today we know about atrocities in every part of the world, and we know about them as soon as they happen. These sins of the world are so vast that our own sins seem puny beside them. If we have a diminished sense of sin, it is not because we think we are better than before; it is because we feel powerless and ineffectual. It is necessary to reflect on this state of mind, because it is the hatching ground of extensive evil.

17 June

Mt 5:33-37

*Jesus said, 'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord." But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one.*

If I feel powerless, then nothing that I do or neglect to do will seem to me to make any difference. This undermines the very source of action, for it robs my actions of their *meaning*. This emptiness of meaning, this vacuum, cannot be endured for long. How could I endure the thought that my life was meaningless and unrelated, like a piece of junk in a scrap-yard? The human heart, like nature itself, abhors a vacuum. This vacuum is soon filled with anger at my predicament. Perhaps this is what underlies much of the violence and vandalism that we see multiplying around us.

Am I really powerless? If the social and political world around me is a violent jungle, is my life therefore meaningless? Have I no meaning unless the whole world agrees that I have it? Surely I can do something myself! Surely I can think my own thoughts and bring them to fruition. If I say I cannot, then I am only blaming others as an alibi for doing nothing myself.

In the words of today's gospel, I can say yes when I mean yes and no when I mean no. Direct speech. I can do something, or I can leave it undone. If I do not want to go I will not go; but if I go I will go, dancing! I will not drag myself.

18 June [Body and Blood of Christ]

Jn 6:51-58

*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'*

*The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' So Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.'*

There is an early Christian document called the *Didachè*, discovered only in 1873, though Christian writers through the ages have known of its existence. It was written (some scholars say) sometime between the years 50 and 100. It contains the very first use of the word 'eucharist'. It is very moving to read this and to imagine the lives of the Christians who spoke and heard those words in the infancy of the Church.

Here is part of what it says: "At the Eucharist, offer the eucharistic prayer in this way. Begin with the chalice: 'We give thanks to you, our Father, for the holy Vine of your servant David, which you have made known to us through your servant Jesus. Glory be to you, world without end.' Then over the broken bread: 'We give thanks to you, our Father, for the life and knowledge you have made known to us through your servant Jesus. Glory be to you, world without end. As this broken bread, once dispersed over the hills, was brought together and became one loaf, so may your Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.'"

I remember that distant day when I made my First Communion. I remember waking up, having nodded off during the Mass, to find my candle dripping grease. But they had got on with things while I slept. Looking back today I think: During all the years since that time they have got on with lots of things while I slept! Some of the best things can happen to you while you sleep. The Scriptures say that God "pours gifts on his beloved while they slumber." And Jesus said that the Presence of God (the "Kingdom of God") is like seed that a farmer scatters in his field and that grows even when he's asleep. "Night and day, whether he sleeps or wakes, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how" (Mark 4:27). We ourselves grew like that, when we were in the womb, and later: by day and by night our mothers watched over us; we were so sure of them that we could go sound asleep when we knew they were around. God sort of mothers us too!

We experienced our mother first as a source of food, and through that visible channel we experienced her as a source of love. God is mothering us, attracting us, trying to tame us frightened creatures. How do you tame an animal? By feeding it. Gradually the animal begins to trust you, begins to believe in your goodwill. We were (and maybe we still are) like little frightened animals. We have to be tamed into human society. Love is invisible and needs a visible channel. That visible channel is originally food. This wisdom of the body is taken up and exalted in the Eucharist. The food which is the Eucharist has the deepest significance. It is about our relationship with God, the ultimate womb from which our existence came.

At the heart of that relationship, for Christians, is Jesus. The great 14th-century mystic, Julian of Norwich, not only called God our 'mother', but she called Jesus our mother! This may seem very strange, even weird. But, as always, she meant something luminous, and she had profound reasons for saying it. She did not mean that Jesus is like your mother. She meant the reverse: your mother is like Jesus. Your mother fed you from her own body. Our mother's care for us may well be the best image we have of God – and of Jesus.

On this feast of the Body and Blood of the Lord don't be too grown-up to let the visceral images of the Eucharist play around your mind!

19 June

Mt 5:38-42

*'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.'*

If today's reading were put into practice, all war would cease immediately; and not only war but every kind of conflict, even minor domestic squabbles. It is highly improbable, to say the least, that that will ever happen.

François Mauriac, the great French all-round man of letters, wrote that society always remains criminal – even while many saints live within it. “[Society] cannot be excused because in every age there has been a Vincent de Paul or a Francis of Assisi to remind them of it – not so much by their words as by their lives of sacrifice. But the course of history has not been influenced by the saints. They have acted upon hearts and souls; but history has remained criminal.”

It can hardly be right to make such a clear distinction (amounting in this case to a separation) between the individual and society: individuals are part of society. But still there is something in what Mauriac said. Many people absorb every influence around them without question, but others are shaped by their conscious rejection of those same influences. The same conditions produce couch potatoes and prophets.

Society will never be improved by everyone telling everyone else to improve. A wise friend said to me once, “Let's not waste our energy criticising what is wrong; let's just do our own work to the best of our ability. If it's any good it will displace what is bad.” This must be true not only of work but of everything.

20 June

Mt 5:43-48

*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Today's reading is the most perfect formulation of Christian love. "Love your enemies" is the summit of love. The New Testament writers used the word 'agapè' – an obsolete word to which they were able to give a new meaning – to refer to the kind of love that moved Jesus. They could have used the word 'philia', meaning 'friendship', but this new kind of love was even wider and deeper than friendship: it was so vast that it would include even one's enemies (see June 2). "Love your enemies," is something so astonishing that it has to be the voice of God and none other. It is normal in some religions to wish (and even to pray) for vengeance on one's enemies, and to gloat over their suffering. Agapè breaks new ground. It is God's kind of love: unconditional and unlimited. Perhaps we should be surprised that there is so much of it in the world, rather than so little.

Thomas Merton wrote: "Our task now is to learn that if we can voyage to the ends of the earth and find ourselves in the aborigine who most differs from ourselves, we will have made a fruitful pilgrimage. That is why pilgrimage is necessary, in some shape or other. Mere sitting at home and meditating on the divine presence is not enough for our time. We have to come to the end of a long journey and see that the stranger we meet there is no other than ourselves – which is the same as saying we find Christ in him."

21 June

Mt 6:1-6, 16-18

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

We used to be exhorted long ago "to give good example." The distinction between this and hypocrisy wasn't always clear. It was not the clear wisdom of the ages. An anonymous early Christian writer has this: "What is done to be seen by others is poured into the wind.... What is human praise but the sound of the whistling winds?"

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

But we need to remember that the inner is not an *escape* from the outer. Thomas Merton was convinced that many 'contemplatives' are not really contemplatives at all but only introspective people, or people in flight from the pain and complexity of ordinary life. Real contemplatives know the urgency not only of going *in* but also of



going *out*. Meister Eckhart said, "Not that one should give up or neglect or reject one's inner life, but in it and with it and from it one should learn to act in such a way as to let the inward break into activity and draw the activity into inwardness, and thereby train oneself to act in freedom. For one should turn one's eyes to this inner work and act therefrom, whether it be in reading, praying or outward work. But if the outward work tends to destroy the inward, one should follow the inward. But if both can be as one, that is best, then one is co-operating with God."

22 June

Mt 6:7-15

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

It is a great pity that so many Christians for so long have identified prayer with 'saying prayers'. We do this despite what Jesus said: "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words." We have long neglected contemplative prayer, content to leave it to people who live in monasteries. But lay people are just as likely to feel the need of it as monks and nuns. Not finding it in local Christian circles, many people began to look elsewhere for it; hence the interest in non-Christian religions. Of course contemplative prayer is now being rediscovered in Christian circles in our own time, but Church authorities (with very few exceptions) have shown no interest in it. This is surely a major tragedy – perhaps even another scandal – in the Church today. Leadership has been seen as administration; but the crying need now is for spiritual leadership.

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

23 June [Sacred Heart]

Mt 11:25-30

*At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

The French mystic, Madame Guyon (1648-1717), wrote, "Through being given rule and method how to love God, people have in great measure been estranged from God. How unnecessary is it to teach an art of loving! The language of love, though natural to the lover, is nonsense and barbarism to one who does not love. The best way to learn the love of God is to love God. The ignorant and simple, because they proceed with more heart and greater simplicity, often become better at it. The Spirit of God needs none of our arrangements and methods; when it pleases him, he turns shepherds into prophets: and, so far from excluding any from the Temple of Prayer, he throws wide the gates, that all may enter; while Wisdom cries aloud in the streets, 'You that are simple turn in here' (Proverbs 9:4)."

I asked an 8-year old American in Iceland how long it took her to learn Icelandic (she was the best in the family at it). She replied, "A day or two days, or a week." In other words, she didn't think about it at all; she just played with her Icelandic friends. Children learn spontaneously; but adults proceed "by rule and method." We need handbooks for everything because we have lost the capacity for direct experience.

While an adult stands back to analyse something, a child just becomes one with it. We have so venerated the analytical mind that the other faculties are scarcely taken into account at all. I have known people who were intellectually gifted but incapable of looking after themselves or anyone else. Far from seeing this as an embarrassment, we make it almost a badge of honour: we may laugh at him, yet we secretly revere the absent-minded professor. But as Chesterton said, "A madman is not someone who has lost his mind; he is someone who has lost everything except his mind."

Neglect of the other faculties costs us dearly. If we neglected the mind to the same degree that we neglect the other faculties, we would be called barbarians. But we

tolerate, even cultivate, a barbarism of feeling and will. Look at the depravity that is held up before us in some sections of the entertainment industry. Is it not barbarism?

If we neglect feeling and will, we will never learn to love; we will learn only a caricature of love: greed. To love is *to respect, to care about*. In its deepest meaning it is *to become one with* (while the word 'analysis' means just about the opposite: *to take apart*). There seems to be a serious imbalance built into our educational systems: we destroy something that children are born with (or perhaps they would soon begin to lose it anyway), and we give them what it takes to fit well into a mad society, leaving many of them as damaged as the society itself.

It was when the towns of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum had rejected Jesus that he exclaimed, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." Perhaps there were many intelligent people in those towns, and he was sick of arguing with them. Their intelligence left no mark on the history of the world: of Chorazin and Bethsaida there is not a trace left; Capernaum is only a couple of ruins. But the extraordinary love that Jesus embodied will never be forgotten.

24 June [Birth of John the Baptist]

Lk 1:57-66, 80

*Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him. The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.*

In celebrating the memory of the saints, the Liturgy doesn't celebrate their birthday but usually the day of their death. There are only two exceptions: Mary the mother of Jesus, and John the Baptist. John gets preferential treatment in the Liturgy; it gives him two feast-days a year.

His humility has deeply impressed Christians through the ages. Before anyone had heard of Jesus of Nazareth, people were coming distances to see John the Baptist. Yet he pointed to Jesus and away from himself. "He must increase, I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). According to John's gospel John the Baptist actually encouraged his disciples to leave him and follow the Lamb of God.

He seems a grim figure; his dress and his way of speaking were equally rough. Yet the gospels associate him with *joy*. At the presence of Jesus and Mary, he leapt for joy in his mother's womb (Lk 1:44); and referring to him, Jesus said, "The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, *rejoices* greatly at the bridegroom's voice" (Jn 3:29). The source of his joy was probably the humility that so characterised him. With power and success there comes a certain greedy satisfaction, but humility is spacious enough to contain joy. "My spirit *rejoices* in God my saviour," cried Mary, "He looks on his servant in her *lowliness*" (Lk 1:46-47).

Humility is not a fashionable virtue today; it tends to be seen rather as a condition calling for therapy – a mousey obsequiousness that could probably be traced back to

an unhappy childhood. But the mere sight of John the Baptist ought to be enough to dispel that view.

25 June [12th Sunday in Ordinary Time]

Mt 10:26-33

*So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.*

The other readings at today's Mass describe situations of fear and terrible anxiety. The Responsorial Psalms follows suit: "I have borne reproach... shame has covered my face." Then the gospel reading begins, "Have no fear...."

This phrase, "Have no fear" runs like a refrain through the Gospel, indeed through the whole Bible. To Abram, God said, "Do not be afraid, I am your shield." To the prophets, "Do not be afraid, I am with you." To Mary, the angel said, "Do not be afraid." To the apostles, Jesus said, "Do not be afraid." To Paul, the Lord said, "Do not be afraid." To all his disciples, Jesus said, "Do not be afraid, little flock" (Luke 12:32).

Fear is a powerful factor in the life of every human being, perhaps especially in people who pretend to have no fear. Children are afraid of the dark; teenagers are often afraid of themselves, or of the other sex, or of life itself. In young and old alike, fear can express itself as shyness, feelings of inferiority, aggression, and (most painful of all) anxiety. Anxiety is a generalised form of fear: fear of nothing in particular but of everything in general. It is often about possible future troubles rather than present ones: the future, possible illness or accident, and death.

We often tell one another, "Don't worry, don't be afraid." But there is only slight comfort in it, because we all know how easy it is to say this when we are not in the line of fire ourselves.

Today's gospel reading offers a more substantial support. It does not say, "Don't be afraid, it won't happen." It says something more like, "Don't be afraid; it may well happen, but when it does happen you will not be destroyed as a person." This is the

difference between optimism and hope. The 14<sup>th</sup>-century English mystic Julian of Norwich put it clearly. "He did not say, 'You will not be tempted, you will not be troubled, you will not be distressed,' but he said, 'You will not be overcome.'"

"Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known." The truth will out. There are no hidden traps or hiding-places. In the ultimate stakes everything will stand in the full light of truth; everything, even the detail. "Even the hairs of your head are all counted." There is a Father who cares about what we do and what happens to us. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).

From the beginning and throughout the ages Christians have found strength in this. St Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:57-58).

26 June

Mt 7:1-5

*"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye."*

All our judging – positive and negative – is about ourselves. It has become a commonplace in the interpretation of dreams to say that every element in the dream represents something in oneself. This is easy enough to accept. But it is harder to accept when someone wants to apply it to our waking life too.

*"What the sayer of praise is really praising  
Is himself, by saying implicitly, 'My eyes are clear.'  
Likewise, someone who criticises is criticising  
himself, saying implicitly, 'I can't see very well  
with my eyes so inflamed.'"*

Jelaluddin Rumi (1207 – 1273)

This may not be true in every instance, but just because it is not true all of the time, nor to the full degree, I should not reject the truth in it. It may be true 50% of the time, or 80% - or even more! Isn't that enough to make it a useful insight and a useful check on my tendency to judge everything?

"Do not judge and you will not be judged," said Jesus. "The measure you give is the measure you get." This already puts the spotlight on the judge in each of us, suggesting like Rumi that our judging has more to do with ourselves than with the truth of things.

What or whom do you hate? Look again now. This time don't look at the object or the person you hate, but at the hate itself. What is it about? Look also at what you approve. What are the things and who are the people you approve of? What are you really approving of? What is it about? I guarantee that you will see your own ego everywhere.

A genuinely religious person doesn't sit in judgment on others, but there are people who identify with religion *in order to be able to condemn others*. This is the stuff that the Pharisees were made of, and it is still widely available. A man gave money to a drunkard. When criticised for it, he said, "Should I be more particular than God who gave me the money?"

27 June

Mt 7:6, 12-14

*Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you. In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.*

The spiritual path is narrow at first, Meister Eckhart said, and then it broadens out to include everything. 'The more the soul is collected, the narrower she is, and the narrower, the wider.'

Mde Guyon, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century French mystic made the same point: "How very narrow is the gate which leads to a life in God! How little one must be to pass through it, it being nothing else but death to self! But when we have passed through it, what enlargement do we find! David said (Psalm 18:19), 'He brought me forth into a large place.' And it was through humiliation and abasement that he was brought there."

Think of a jet of water. It is because of the restriction that it has power. When there's no restriction there's ultimately just stagnant water. Thank God for our limitations, restrictions, disabilities...! When we see a person who has total freedom and no restrictions we often see just stagnation. People who win the lottery, or suddenly shed some restriction, are often seen to fall to pieces as persons. Total freedom has to be hard-earned if it is not to destroy us. Only a spiritually mature person can live with it.

28 June

Mt 7:15-20

*Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.*

The fruit is the plain truth about the tree, and everyone can not only see it but test it and taste it for themselves. Likewise human action. Everything becomes visible sooner or later. I feel that the word 'depth' can hold us too much in thrall. When we talk too much about depth we give ourselves the impression that it's a whole inner separate world, sufficient unto itself. Wittgenstein, one of the most influential philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, said once, "The depth is on the surface!" He, of all people, could not be accused of superficiality. There is a very radical truth here: the depth and the surface are one, the inside and the outside are one. The hidden, the inner, part flows towards the outside, as with a tree. Since the beginning of our race, human beings have been sitting under trees, looking up at them, climbing into them and hiding, playing around them as children, eating their fruit, resting in their shade, relying on them to be there. If you have never sat under a tree in a forest at night, you are missing something great. Trees are our great teachers – strong and silent, dependable, able to endure great storms that would blow us away.

Christians down the ages have seen deep significance in trees. In the late mediaeval period it was common to hear of the 'Axle-Tree'. The stars and planets were thought of as whirling around the Axle-Tree of heaven, the pivot of the universe. This image was applied to the cross of Christ: the tree on which he died was seen as the axle of all that exists.

Something for your imagination: follow Jesus in his lifelong relationship with trees – from the first time he climbed a tree...to the last.



29 June [Sts Peter and Paul]

Mt 16:13-19

*Now 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."*

The popular notion of Messiah in Jesus' time was that of a political leader, someone who would organise to defeat the Romans, drive them out of the country, and go on to establish a world empire. Jesus didn't seem to fit this description, so the belief was that he was a prophet, a *precursor* of the Messiah. Yet he claimed at times that the Kingdom of God was already established (Mt 12:28), which is tantamount to saying that the Messiah had already come.

The Kingdom of God according to the popular notion would be bristling with arms, and bathed in the blood of Roman soldiers. The Kingdom according to Jesus belonged instead to the poor, the gentle, the merciful, the peacemakers (see the Beatitudes), to the childlike (Mt 18:1-5). Its King would not be a military general but a leader who would "banish chariots from Ephraim and horses from Jerusalem" (Zechariah 9:10).

The greatness of Peter's response, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God," was that he was breaking through beyond the popular belief to a realisation that Jesus, with his talk of mercy and compassion, was himself the Messiah. Something of Jesus' teaching was at last getting through.

30 June

Mt 8:1-4

*When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.' He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, 'I do choose. Be made clean!' Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. Then Jesus said to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.'*

There is some kind of polarity in this passage: between public and private, between manifestation and concealment: "Great crowds followed him," but he said, "Do not tell anyone."

Talk (and especially gossip) creates a crowd. Talk is itself a kind of crowd – a crowd of words. Talk is endless, like the sand on the seashore. Like the sand, it drifts and blows here and there. Living today is like walking in a sandstorm of words (and here am I adding more!).

But Jesus told the healed leper to tell no one about his healing. In another passage he took a deaf man "aside in private, away from the crowd" (Mk 7:33). This tells us that sometimes it is necessary to stand in from the storm. Sometimes it is necessary to be alone and think one's own thoughts. He himself frequently went away by himself to pray: Lk 4:42; 5:16; 6:12; Mk 1:35; etc. And there are moments when he tells others to keep silent about him: Mk 1:44; 8:30; Lk 9:21, and today's passage. And read the wonderful passage, Mt 6, in which everything is divided, so to speak, into two columns, headed "in secret" and "to be seen by others." (See June 21). Why not meditate on this today: the silence of Jesus?

The ancient world was terrified of leprosy, and in its terror it probably mistook many less harmful skin diseases for it. By Jewish law the sufferer was isolated totally from society: "The leper...shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, 'Unclean, unclean'. He shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp" (Lev. 13:45f). No leper would ever have approached an

orthodox rabbi, but the leper in this story approached Jesus confidently for help. This was exceptional, but even more exceptional was what followed: "Jesus stretched out his hand and *touched* him...." That touch healed him – healed his disease, yes, but healed also his feeling that he not only had a disease but was a disease; it healed his isolation, his loneliness, his despair, his belief that he was cursed by God.... It also made Jesus himself 'unclean' in the eyes of the Law. This is the God revealed in Jesus - a "Father of Mercies."

1 July

Mt 8:5-17

*When Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralysed, in terrible distress." And he said to him, "I will come and cure him." The centurion answered, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you according to your faith." And the servant was healed in that hour.*

*When Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever; he touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to serve him. That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were sick. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases."*

Meet an army officer (a centurion: in charge of a 'century', 100 soldiers) used to giving and receiving commands. Here we are dealing with a tight organisation with its clear-cut ranks – an army – and not with the shifting sands of ordinary life and speech. For this officer, language was as clear as everything else in army life. This clarity holds great attraction for some people, and they would love to impose it on the whole society. They are called fascists. This comes from the Italian word 'fascio', meaning 'a bundle' (it is related to the English word 'fascicle'). Mussolini's Fascists used to carry a bundle of twigs at the front of their marching columns, signifying the greater strength there is in a bundle of twigs than in any number of single twigs.

Armies look very efficient, but they are surely the most wasteful organisations in any society. Why do soldiers have to march rather than just walk? Because when they march they look more like a machine, and this is calculated to strike fear into everyone who sees

them. Sartre wrote about the way we imprison ourselves in our roles: "A soldier at attention makes himself into a soldier-thing with eyes straight forward, eyes that do not see at all, since it is the *regulation* and not the interest of the moment which determines the point he must fix his eyes on (the sight "fixed at ten paces")." Uniformity is all right for things, but not for people. We have to beware of people who worship uniformity and 'efficiency' – in Church and state alike. It is only about appearances. There is infinitely more vitality and creativity in the drift of ordinary life.

But wait a moment! The army officer in today's reading says to Jesus, "I am not worthy to have you under my roof." He knew that Jews incurred ritual uncleanness on entering the house of a pagan, and he wanted to save Jesus this inconvenience. It was out of consideration that he said, "Say but the word..." He wasn't an army man through and through. He was a human being. There is hope for every one of us!

2 July [13th Sunday in Ordinary Time]

Mt 10:37-42

*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."*

Commenting on the first line of today's Gospel reading, St John Chrysostom (c. 349-407 AD) wrote, "It is holy to render one's parents every honour, but when they demand more than is due, we ought not to yield." But then, to save the parents' feelings, Chrysostom adds that they are not being put in the second place to their son or daughter but to Jesus. To follow Jesus, he explained, we have to be prepared to give up everything - even our own life. The parents are not being put in the second place to oneself, but to the Lord; that should ease their feelings.

What is being expressed here is the absolute character of the following of Christ. Faith is not a separate compartment in one's life, a special interest or hobby to be taken up when we put down our serious work. "Do you not know," wrote St Paul, "that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4). The word 'baptised' means 'plunged'. We have been plunged into death with Christ – plunged into his death – and so we hope that we will also be raised with him. It is not an 'interest', then; it is a matter of life and death.

"What a morbid religion you have!" a Muslim said to me once in Pakistan. "All that emphasis on suffering and death can't be good."

But suffering and death do not stand by themselves, for a Christian. We are never to think of them as if they were the whole story. We never think of Christ's suffering and death without thinking of his resurrection; and likewise our own suffering and death are openings to resurrection. The last word is not suffering and death, but "that we might walk in newness of life."

This pattern (death-resurrection) is stamped on our whole life: it is not only the pattern of the whole, it is stamped on every cell of the body, so to speak. There is no deep life without a lot of dying to oneself. The way to deeper life is not through exaltation of the ego, but through its death. The false self, the self-made self, the ego and its false pride: this has to die – or rather burst, because it is nothing real but only a bubble. "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

3 July [St Thomas, apostle]  
Jn 20:24-29

*Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*

The others said to Thomas, "We have seen...." Thomas said, "Until I have seen...." What's the difference? None. The others believed because they had seen; why shouldn't Thomas insist on the same?

Thomas has been unfairly nicknamed "Doubting Thomas." Of course the gospel writer has *us* in mind. Like Thomas, we're late on the scene – much later. We have to be reassured; we are the real Doubting Thomases.

He invites us as he invited Thomas to "put your finger here and see my hands; stretch out your hand and put it into my side." Everything has to come back at last to experience. "Today," wrote St Bernard of Clairvaux in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, "we read the book of experience." That sentence might have been written this morning. We need to be reassured that our experience, however painful or discouraging, has the power to bring us to Christ. Most of us know the wounds of Christ first-hand. I talked with a woman who lives, you could say, in the side of Christ. Many have lived there, throughout the ages. "We are now dying with him on his cross, in his pains and Passion," wrote Julian of Norwich in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, "and when we deliberately remain on that same cross, holding on to the very end, with his help and grace, then suddenly we shall see his expression change and we shall be with him in heaven. Without a moment's break we shall pass from one state the other – and we shall all be brought into joy."

4 July

Mt 8:23-27

*When Jesus got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"*

"A windstorm arose on the sea..." In the original Greek the word is *seismos*, which means an earthquake. To this day, that would better describe the sudden storms that break over the Lake of Galilee. The boat was "hidden", the Greek says, in the troughs of the waves.

If the only meaning of this story is that Jesus on one occasion calmed a severe storm on the Lake of Galilee – a long time ago and very far away – then it need not hold our attention for very long. And we would be justified in asking why he doesn't do the same again. But there are great subtleties in these stories, and in the reasons for their inclusion.

*Before* calming the sea, Jesus reproached the disciples for their lack of faith. This is telling us that at least some faith must precede a miracle. It is consistent with Matthew's general account. Take for example the scene with the blind men. "Jesus said to them, 'Do you believe that I am able to do this?' They said to him, 'Yes, Lord.' Then he touched their eyes and said, 'According to your faith let it be done to you'" (9:28-29); or the scene where the woman had touched the hem of his garment; "your faith has saved you," he told her. Have faith and then something will happen – not the other way around.

These simple details carry great weight and a great deal of encouragement for us in our struggles. The Gospel is telling us: Every time you feel your boat is about to sink, have faith. What does this mean? Does it mean, Try to look holy? Hardly. Does it mean, Cultivate a special inner feeling? Hardly. I think it means: attempt the seemingly

impossible thing, and you will find that something even greater will happen. Douglas Hyde (not the Irish president of that name, but the author of *I Believed*) described his first fumbling steps to faith. He had observed a girl praying in church, had seen the light in her face; and he forced himself to go through the exact motions. "When I was sure no one was about I went, almost hang-dog fashion, down the aisle as she had done. Down to the front, round to the left, put some coins in the box, lit a candle, knelt on the stool – and tried to pray.... The candle spluttered and flickered, growing shorter and shorter but no words came." Instead, gradually, faith in God began to brighten in him, replacing his faith in militant Communism. But it must have begun to dawn even earlier. It was that first glimmer of faith that made him get up from where he had been sitting and approach the altar.

5 July

Mt 8:28-34

*When Jesus came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs coming out of the tombs met him. They were so fierce that no one could pass that way. Suddenly they shouted, "What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?" Now a large herd of swine was feeding at some distance from them. The demons begged him, "If you cast us out, send us into the herd of swine." And he said to them, "Go!" So they came out and entered the swine; and suddenly, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and perished in the water. The swineherds ran off, and going into the town, they told the whole story about what had happened to the demoniacs. Then the whole town came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their neighborhood.*

The city of Gadara was in pagan territory, and so it was "unclean" to Jews. It is not surprising to find pigs there: these were "unclean" animals, which no Jew would ever have on the land. In this unclean place they were met by two demoniacs who lived in the tombs. For Jews, a dead body was "unclean", so tombs were "unclean" places. To touch a tomb, even accidentally, was to become ritually unclean. Only a demoniac would think of *living* in one. Everything in this story, then, is unclean, untouchable. At least it was appropriate that all these unclean things and people should be in the one place. There's a kind of right order in that.

By the end of the story Jesus has rearranged everything: the demons have gone into the pigs, which in turn have gone into the water. Jews had a great fear of water – for them the sea was the abode of Leviathan, the monster of the deep – so it was appropriate that the pigs should end up there. [Jesus' walking on water (Mt 14:26) was a symbol of his power over evil.] Besides, water was also considered fatal to demons: so it was right that they too should end up there. Meanwhile (in Mark's account) the demoniac was "clothed

and in his right mind” (5:15): he was restored to his family. Thus, in this story, Jesus restores everything to its proper place. He establishes right order.

But the other order could be said to be ‘right’ too, in a sense. The local people were happy with it. They begged Jesus to go away: he had upset the arrangement of their world. That makes us ask: what are the arrangements in our life that seem ‘right’ to us (at least in the sense of being familiar), but which are far from right...?

6 July

Mt 9:1-8

*After getting into a boat Jesus crossed the water and came to his own town. And just then some people were carrying a paralysed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.’ Then some of the scribes said to themselves, ‘This man is blaspheming.’ But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, ‘Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, “Your sins are forgiven”, or to say, “Stand up and walk”? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—he then said to the paralytic—‘Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.’ And he stood up and went to his home. When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings.*

Fergus Kerr OP, author of the highly significant book *Theology after Wittgenstein* (first published in 1986), identified two great pathologies of the western mind: 1. the divide between the *individual and the community*, and 2. the divide between *body and mind*; and he showed how Wittgenstein’s philosophy represents a healing of these divides.

In today’s gospel reading we see how close this is to the healing work of Jesus. In the story we see both of these divides being bridged by Jesus.

1. “When Jesus saw *their* faith, he said to the paralytic...” He did not enquire about the paralytic’s own faith. Peter Chrysologus (380 – 450 AD) had this to say about this verse: “God does not inquire into the wants of those who are deliriously ill.... A doctor does not inquire into or examine the wishes of such a patient.” The point, I think, is that we are always a *community* of faith. For about four centuries now the western world has laboured under philosophies that are profoundly individualistic; all meaning is thought to repose in the individual rather than in the society or even the family. It was on this basis



that the theory of Limbo (only recently disowned by the Church) was constructed. Even new-born babies, dying at birth or soon after, were thought to be on their own before God; the faith of their parents had no bearing on their destiny, and they could not be buried in consecrated ground. This, even though St Paul, writing about marriage between believers and unbelievers, had written: "The unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy" (1 Cor 7:14). We need not imagine that we have entirely cast off the individualistic mindset.

2. The other great divide in western philosophies has been that between body and soul (or, depending on the particular interest, body and mind, or body and spirit). St John Chrysostom (349 – 407 AD) wrote, "[Christ] heals the paralysis in both soul and body. The healing of the soul is made evident through the healing of the body, even while the body still remains a creature crawling on the ground." Central to the Christian faith is the affirmation that the Word became flesh. It is surprising that in a part of the world shaped in large measure by the Christian faith we should ever have been tempted to divide body and spirit.

The two great divides were expressed together in a leaflet that was handed out at a parish mission in my childhood. On it were written the words: "Remember, man, thou hast but one soul to save. And after that, the judgment." (There were no women in the world in those days!) There is no mention of community; and there was no life of the body. There was just *one soul*. And the appeal was to fear, not to love. It was a far cry from St Paul's teaching that we are the *body of Christ* and members of one another: see Col 1:18; Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:13). Pius XII attempted to reinvigorate this teaching in 1943 in an encyclical letter entitled *Mystici Corporis*. "The unbroken tradition of the Fathers from the earliest times," he wrote, "teaches that the Divine Redeemer and the Church which is His Body form but one mystical person, that is to say, the whole Christ." We still have much need for healing at these two sick places of the soul.

7 July

Mt 9:9-13

*As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."*

St Augustine thinks Matthew wasn't called at the same time as the others because he had some financial matters to finish off. But a 6<sup>th</sup>-century writer took it that Matthew left his affairs in disorder, a thing that greatly impressed that writer: it must be particularly difficult for someone who deals with figures to leave them unbalanced. Do we have to balance our books before we set out on the Gospel path?

Matthew wrote his gospel to convince Jews that Jesus was the fulfilment of their prophecies. Sixteen times in his gospel he uses the phrase "so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled." He sees Jesus through the lens of the Old Testament: in him are fulfilled all the hopes of the Jewish people. In view of this conviction, his tax-gathering papers must have seemed very unimportant. Financial matters are so precise, so tangible and near.... His must have been a powerful conversion, because he had been in the service of Mammon, God's greatest rival. "You cannot serve God and Mammon," he quotes Jesus as saying (Mt 6:24).

Business people tend to be hard-headed, and perhaps his conversion took a little longer. St John Chrysostom suggested that "Matthew was not called at the same time as Peter and John and the others because he was still in a hardened state." Whatever the case,

he was called from his tax business to follow Jesus. It was a call from one way of thinking to another. It was a call from security into insecurity, from wealth to poverty, from power to powerlessness. He was called to follow Jesus, the Logos, the Wisdom of God. He was not asked to make a donation from the profits of his business, but to follow in person.