1 December [1st Sunday of Advent – Year A]
Mt 24:37-44

As the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Years ago a friend of mine in Italy took her very simple computer to be repaired. The man in the shop glanced quickly at it and said, “That is not a computer, signora; it is a domestic appliance – è un elettrodomestico.” Today our computers and ipads and mobile phones, though much smaller, are thousands of times more powerful than those early PCs. They have penetrated everywhere; they have found their way into our lives to the point that we could scarcely imagine life without them. This came home to me recently when a 90-year-old lady said to me, “Why don’t you google it?” (I had just uttered the words, “I don’t know.”)

There are many things, however, that we google to no avail. We can find information about every subject, but information is not the only kind of knowledge. There are other kinds of knowledge that do not come at the tapping of a few keys. There is understanding, which no one can do for you; there is wisdom, which doesn’t come to order, but comes only when we are ready for it.

Jesus is called the incarnation of the Logos, the Wisdom of God. The theme of Advent is that we have to wait for him to come. Waiting is something we have more and more trouble with, and computers are driving the pace: ‘zero wait state’ is considered the goal – no waiting at all. Advent is like a four-week course on how to wait.

When we have to wait a long time, we tend to nod off to sleep. Advent is about waiting… but not falling asleep. “Stay awake,” Jesus often said (Mt 24:42; 26:40; Mk 13:33; etc.). ‘Awake’ means attentive to what is happening – attentive to the present, not dreaming about the past or the future. This is the wisdom of the ages.

Let me quote here a few short passages from early Christian writing (3rd, 4th, and 5th centuries) in deliberate contrast to the computer age. No, we won’t throw out our computers – I am using one to write this and you are using one to read it – but it may be helpful to dwell on ancient wisdom at the beginning of Advent.

Commenting on today’s gospel reading, Origen (3rd century) wrote: “All who listen to the depths of the Gospel and live it completely… care very little about whether the end of the world will come suddenly and all at once, or gradually and little by little…. What is important is to be vigilant.”

John Chrysostom (4th century): “If ordinary persons knew when they were going to die, they would surely be striving earnestly at that hour. In order therefore that they may strive, not at that hour only, the Lord does not tell them the hour or day. He wants to keep them on their toes looking for it, that they may be always striving.”
And from the 5th century, the *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew*, a comment on the verse ‘If the head of the household had known the hour at which the thief would arrive.’ “The head of the household represents the human soul, the thief is the devil, the house is the body, the doors are the mouth and ears, and the windows are the eyes. Like the thief who gains access through the doors and windows to despoil the householder, the devil also finds easy access to the soul through the mouth, ears and eyes to take a person captive. This is why Jeremiah wrote, “For death entered through our windows.”
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.”

Twice in the gospels Jesus is said to have been “amazed”: first, at the pagan centurion’s faith (today’s reading), and secondly, at the contrasting lack of faith among his own townspeople (Mk 6:6). It was typical of him to turn things back to front and upside down. However, the case is not as clear-cut as it might seem.

Jesus undoubtedly had contact with Gentiles, but the outreach to Gentiles was not central to his work. When he sent out the Twelve he told them: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans” (Mt 10:5); and on the two occasions when he healed Gentiles he did so from a distance (Mt 8:13; 15:28). The outreach to Gentiles did not become central till after his death. So when it did, the disciples naturally combed through their memories of him for examples of his respectful treatment of Gentiles.

Matthew makes it quite clear in today’s passage that discipleship demands a clean cut with religious, cultural and ethnic prejudices. He was a Jew writing for Jews, and he knew that hatred of the Romans would come natural to them – especially officers of the Roman army. This would be especially true after the destruction of the Temple and the scattering of the nation after the year 70. But Matthew goes even further and reminds his readers that Jesus even required them to love their enemies. “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” (Mt 5:44-45).

Some Christians with a militant turn of mind almost make hatred a measure of faith: you are a true believer if you show intense hatred towards people who are different from you, or who have different views and values. Today, many people’s minds run naturally on political rather than on religious lines, and some Christians have a political rather than a religious or spiritual mind. This colours all their views. But listen to St Paul: “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (1 Cor 1:10). But partisan politics, as we see today in many countries, makes enemies even of brothers and sisters in the faith. Today’s gospel passage makes sober reading for our times.
Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and 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 who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.’

Jesus was getting a taste of success. The seventy whom he had sent out with no resources, “like lambs among wolves” (Lk 10:3), had just returned full of excitement, telling of their success. His way of powerlessness was working. “He cried out in joy and in great delight, as if attuning himself to the spirit of the little ones,” wrote Clement of Alexandria (150 – 215). The things that were hidden from “the wise and the intelligent of this world” – hidden by their very wisdom and intelligence – were being made visible through these simple men, these “little ones.”

We put great store by our intelligence, because the whole society puts great store by it. A teacher told me that the most terrible thing you can say to a parent is that their child is unintelligent. It is seen as a bigger disgrace than any kind of misbehaviour. Not that we should be against intelligence – intelligence is one of God’s gifts, and when it is allied to love it is an unstoppable force – but we must be aware that it can be used in the service of any instinct whatsoever: greed, hatred, cruelty…. It readily becomes an arm of the ego.

The kind of mind we venerate is the adult mind: especially that of the scientist, the investigator, the barrister, the journalist. These are logical, critical, suspicious, judgmental…. You can know a lot about theology with this kind of mind, but you cannot know God. Every disciple needs to learn again to see like a child; we must be like children, Jesus said, if we are to enter the Kingdom of God – which means the Presence of God. We have to become like children if we are to understand God’s newest deed – which is a Child.
4 December
Mt 15:29-37

Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, and went up the mountain, where he sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way." The disciples said to him, "Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?" Jesus asked them, "How many loaves have you?" They said, "Seven, and a few small fish." Then ordering the crowd to sit down on the ground, he took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all of them ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.

There’s this account of the feeding of 4,000, and in the previous chapter there’s an account of the feeding of 5,000. Were there two separate events, or have we two separate accounts of a single event? This question has been asked times out of number.

Both Matthew and Mark report two miracles of the loaves: Matthew 14 = Mark 6; and Matthew 15 = Mark 8. They seem to want to distinguish them, mentioning that in the first case there were “five loaves and two fish,” but in the second case “seven loaves and a few fish.” The first meal came at the end of his ministry in Galilee, and the second at the end of his brief ministry to the Gentiles. The third meal, the Last Supper, was at the end of his entire ministry.

St Augustine thought there must have been two separate events, “Wherever anything is done by the Lord, and the accounts of it by any two Evangelists seem irreconcilable, we may understand them as two distinct occurrences, of which one is related by one Evangelist, and one by another.”

But a modern scholar (McKenzie), noting that the same doublet is found in the earliest gospel, Mark’s, and that in all cases the accounts have Eucharistic overtones, writes, “That this story should have given rise to variant forms so early may indicate that it was very often told; and this in turn suggests that the connection of the story with the Eucharistic rite was present from the beginning.”

It is easy to imagine this story being told over and over again to a great variety of congregations from the earliest times, as they celebrated the Eucharist. They are our ancestors in the faith. Each time they heard the story (in the version we are reading today) they heard also that the disciples came bringing “the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others.” Those early Mass-goers could identify themselves with that. We are one with them in that, because in different ways we are all blind and deaf and maimed….
5 December
Mt 7:21, 24-27

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!

“I love you, Lord, my strength, / My rock, my fortress, my saviour. / My God is the rock where I take refuge…” (Psalm 17). These are strong images of God, and there are times when that is just what we need. It is when we feel most insecure that we long for security and safety. The little orphan girl always wept when they sang Rock of Ages. Psalm 17 continues: “The waves of death rose about me; / The torrents of destruction assailed me.” That is why the writer of the psalm calls God a rock and a fortress.

A person who feels powerless calls on a God of power, and that seems all right. But a person who feels powerful and calls on a God of power is very likely to be calling on just a bigger version of himself. (That was Nietzsche’s understanding of theology.) So when you feel strong and healthy, use soft or fluid images of God. There are many of them in the Scriptures.

Sand is made of rock, but it has the characteristics of a fluid. As a foundation for a house, it doesn’t have the best of both; it has the worst of both. It is neither strong nor weak, neither hard nor soft, neither fixed nor unfixed.

Sand reminds me of words. Words give the impression of fixity, but they pour like sand; and they are as numerous as grains of sand. They are no foundation for a life. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” Our life is not a spectacle to be commented on but a reality to be lived with gusto. Meister Eckhart wrote, “When St Paul had done a lot of talking to the Lord, and the Lord had reasoned much with him, that produced nothing, until he surrendered his will, and said: ‘Lord, what do you want me to do?’ Then the Lord showed him clearly what he ought to do. So too, when the angel appeared to our Lady, nothing either she or he had to say would ever have made her the Mother of God, but as soon as she gave up her own will, at that moment she became a true mother of the everlasting Word and she conceived God immediately, who became her Son by nature. Nor can anything make a true human being except giving up one’s will.”
As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, crying loudly, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and 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." And their eyes were opened. Then Jesus sternly ordered them, "See that no one knows of this." But they went away and spread the news about him throughout that district.

Teilhard de Chardin said that the purpose of evolution was to produce perfect eyes. He must not have meant simply these physical eyes (otherwise eagles and even humble hawks have left us far behind) but the intellectual and spiritual dimensions as well. A century before Plato, Anaxagoras was asked, “Why are you here on earth?” and he replied, eis theorian, “To see!” This word was translated into Latin as contemplatio.

But some of the greatest literature of the last century has emphasised darkness rather than light: see, for example, the plays and novels of Samuel Beckett, or Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. Someone described Conrad’s novel as “reaching down into the heart and finding simply darkness: there is no heart at all – not in man, not in religion; there is only a void.”

In the darkness of our times, light will shine again, all the more clearly because of the darkness. Soon we will celebrate the birth of Christ, the Light of the world.
Mt 9:35—10:1, 5, 6-8

Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.” Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

When you hear radio advertising in a language you don't understand, you could be led to believe that the world was coming to an end. Such excitement, such urgency! But when you know the language you realise it’s only about soap powder, or foods that make you lose weight. It is untruthful, it’s designed to lead you astray. It devalues language and human feeling. There are real urgencies and tragedies and wonders in the world, but the language in which they might be described has been used up by the advertising industry. The house is on fire and there are people everywhere shouting, “This way! This way!” as they direct us into brush-closets or attics. It’s not that we have no shepherds to direct us; it’s that we have millions of them who don’t care what happens to us.

We are at the mercy of the advertisers when we believe that fulfilment is not to be had in the present but in the future. They exploit our dissatisfaction with life as it is. The promise they hold out to us – that we can be fulfilled in the future – is a false promise. That's how they can continue year after year, generation after generation. No one was ever fulfilled in the future; if we refuse to live in the present, we are refusing to live, and no product will ever remedy that.

We are “harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.” What is surprising, when you think about it, is that these words were first used to describe a tiny 1st-century population, hardly more than a tribe. If they were to see the confusion we are in today!

Where does hope lie? It’s intriguing to think that the change we see in time does not go all the way down. What is really intriguing is what lies below that. If we have glimpses of that we have glimpses into the heart of humanity – and into the heart of God, which is called the Kingdom of God
Mt 3:1-12

_In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”_ Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptise you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

The voice of prophecy had been silent for four hundred years. John the Baptist spoke with such fire that people believed God had now broken the long silence. Even many of the Pharisees and Sadducees were convinced, or at least willing to consider it. We are more aware of the Pharisees - they get such a bad press in the New Testament. It must have taken an immense force to lift their heads from their study of the Torah, the Law. The Torah was God's definitive word, according to their belief. But here they were, listening for a new word from God.

God’s new prophet did not flatter them. “Brood of vipers!” Pit of snakes! Don’t rely on your Scriptures, your past (he told them); God is able to do a new thing.

But in fairness to them, they had put aside their commentaries and come to listen. St Paul had been a Pharisee, and it took the power of God to cast out his old certainties. These seem more amenable. He could have thanked them for coming! But John is a rough diamond, an uncut diamond. He has the hardness, but there is little beauty, and not much light coming through. Take away the rhetoric and his message is conventional: “Tax collectors came to be baptised, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’” He said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’” (Luke 3:12-14).

But there would be another diamond, an Immortal Diamond, and John's greatness was that he pointed to him. "He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" - he, the Immortal Diamond formed in the crucible of earth's suffering. With him every mortal sufferer can be immortal diamond, can say with Hopkins: "I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am."
9 December [Immaculate Conception]
Lk 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

On the face of it, today's reading seems quite like the angel's visit to Zechariah announcing the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:8-20). But when you look more closely you see that they are set in clear contrast to each other. Zechariah was standing right at the centre of the nation's place of worship, and "the whole assembly of the people was praying outside," but Mary was a tiny unknown figure, remote from all centres of power. Mary's demeanour too is contrasted with Zechariah's: she takes God at his word, unlike the argumentative Zechariah; she is seen as the model believer. It is a subtle contrast: she too had a question, similar to Zechariah's question, but there are many different kinds of 'why' (or 'how'). Zechariah's question was literally, "by what shall I know this?" (kata ti), as if asking for independent confirmation; while Mary's was simply "how" (pos;). Meister Eckhart said in one of his sermons that we should not ask 'why'. At first sight this is surprising; he was an academic theologian whose business it was to ask many whys. But he was also clear about the differences. There is the 'why' that is like locking a door ("I will admit only what I can understand"), and there is the why that is like opening a door, wanting to enter more deeply. Mary's 'why', I imagine, was of the second kind.

Though Mary appears in a perfect light, it is clear that it is not her virtue that has earned her the great honour that is to come. The angel's greeting makes it clear. "Favoured one," kecharitomene; what is coming to her is God's gift, not reward for virtue. In the biblical passage the favour being offered was, of course, the conception of Jesus in her womb. There is nothing in the Scriptures about the beginnings of Mary's own life, and no mention of course of her conception (which is what today's feast is about), so the Liturgy takes today's passage instead.

Mary is the model of Christian discipleship. When her story is presented only as the story of her special privileges, that role is being taken from her. When we only stress her differences from us we are subtly pushing her away. There have been many aberrations of Marian piety, and we need to stay close to the authentic tradition. St Ambrose gave it luminous expression in his comment on this passage. "Every soul who has believed both conceives and generates the Word of God and recognises his works. Let the soul of Mary be in each one of you to magnify the Lord. Let the spirit of Mary be in each one to exult in Christ."
10 December
Mt 18:12-14

What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

A neighbour long ago had twelve children, and when the eldest emigrated to America she was heart-broken. That evening she said to the others through her tears, “It’s easy to count you now!” (or, as she said it, “’Tis aisy to count ye now!”). That’s how mothers think: not in numbers or percentages. That seems to be how God thinks too.

God doesn’t think in percentages. The head makes distinctions and oppositions; it thinks in numbers and percentages. In Samuel Beckett’s play, Waiting for Godot, one of the characters, on hearing that one of the two thieves crucified with Jesus was saved, remarked, “It was a fair percentage!” The shepherd in today’s Gospel passage, had he been working only with his head, would have found 99% quite satisfactory. But he was working from his heart, which knows nothing about percentages, and he went searching for the one that was lost. That’s the nature of the heart.

Compare it with the following, “Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said [to the Sanhedrin], ‘You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed’” (Jn 11:49-50). In other words, since it was politically expedient it was all right to put an innocent man to death. Caiaphas was the high priest, but he thought like a politician, an unscrupulous one at that. It should serve for all time as a warning to all priests, high and low. And to every Christian.
11 December
Mt 11:28-30
Jesus said, "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."

As a carpenter Jesus would have made many yokes for donkeys, mules and horses. He would know the difference between one that fitted well and one that chafed the animal’s neck. A well-made yoke is called ‘easy’; it is comfortable on the animal; a badly-made one must be torture. He said his way was an easy yoke. It may tire you but it does not frustrate you. He doesn’t ask you to drag your life along on open wounds. He keys into your real strengths, he doesn’t harp on weaknesses that you show in the course of the work.

Rabbis spoke about “the burden of the Law.” “My burden is light,” Jesus said. He could say this because he was not binding up heavy burdens to lay them on our shoulders — which is what he accused the scribes and Pharisees of doing (Matthew 23:4). He may ask us to bear burdens much heavier than any the scribes or Pharisees envisaged: justice and mercy. But, unlike them, he first captivates the heart.

He captivates the heart because he is himself “gentle and humble in heart.” He has no strategy, no technique — those things we put such trust in. “How unnecessary is it to teach an art of loving!” wrote Mde Guyon (1648-1717). “The best way to learn the love of God is to love God. The ignorant and simple, because they have more heart and greater simplicity, often excel in 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, ‘Whoever is simple let them turn in here’ (Proverbs 9:4)…. And does not Jesus Christ himself thank his Father for having hidden the secrets of his kingdom from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children? (Matthew 11: 25)."

When the yoke is easy, nearly every burden seems light.
12 December
Mt 11:11-15

Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. Let anyone with ears listen!”

Jesus said, equivalently, that John the Baptist was the greatest man (or among the greatest) who ever lived. Yet, he added, “the least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” The expression ‘the least’ is the superlative form of the expression ‘little one’. ‘Little ones’ is the term used for disciples (see 10:42; 18:6, 10, 14); so ‘the least’ is the least disciple. The greatest man who ever lived thundered judgment, but even the least disciple knows the greater depth and the superior power of love.

The scholars have found no satisfactory interpretation of the middle part of today’s reading. Enough for us to meditate on the strange paradox that power is ultimately weak, and weakness ultimately powerful. “When I am weak, then I am strong,” wrote St Paul (2 Corinthians 12:10). Expand it from your own experience: when I fail, I learn more (and more deeply) than when I win; when I am disappointed, I begin to emerge from the fog of my illusions and touch reality; when I stop trying to surpass myself, I discover only then that I have been trying to abandon the child in me who alone will enter the kingdom of heaven…. 
13 December
Mt 11:16-19
Jesus said, ‘To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-
places and calling to one another, “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we
wailed, and you did not mourn.” For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He
has a demon”; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Look, a glutton and a
drunkenard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!” Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.’

Today’s reading indicates that the teaching of Jesus was not getting through to his hearers.
There was widespread disaffection. The people rejected John because he was too different
from them and Jesus because he was not like John.

It was said of the population of ancient Rome that they were interested only in “bread and
circuses.” Bread to kill the real ache in the stomach, circuses to set up a fictional ache in the
heart. Tolstoy (or was it Dostoyevsky?) used to be very impressed, when he was a child, by
the tears his mother shed in the theatre; she must have a really compassionate nature, he
thought. But later in his life he remembered the coachman who had to wait outside the theatre
in sub-zero temperatures – she had no compassion for the real man, only for the fictional.

Jesus rejected the temptation to fame (Lk 4:9-12). He rejected theatre. And so he was not a
success. Celebrities in our own time sacrifice their lives to fame: they have to court their fans,
knowing that that these same fans could turn on them mercilessly in a moment. Yes, the
triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Mt 21:6-11) had a touch of theatre about it; and inevitably the
crowd that shouted ‘Hosanna!’ were soon shouting ‘Crucify him!’

Jesus had no illusions. That's who he is: the one who has no illusions.
The disciples asked Jesus, ‘Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’ He replied, ‘Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognise him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.’ Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.

Illusions are soft comfortable things usually. They are cushions against reality. Whoever thinks that faith is a flight from reality must never have read the psalms or the New Testament. What we see there is an overwhelming realism. There are few of us, probably, who wouldn’t describe ourselves as realists; but you could have realism coupled with self-indulgence, or with heroic pessimism, or with cynicism…. But in the Scriptures realism is coupled with faith in God. “They will make the Son of Man suffer.”

Jesus predicted his suffering, to prepare his disciples for the shock. But otherwise he never talked or complained about it. When you talk about your suffering you are creating a distance between you and it; you are not ‘suffering’ your suffering (‘to suffer’ originally meant ‘to allow’). It cannot work its chemistry in you if you don’t let it come near – in fact, nearer than near: you have to become one with it. When you are one with it, there is no distance and therefore no talk.

When you talk about your suffering, people are usually too polite to change the subject. How boring a subject it is! People have too much suffering of their own, and they don’t know what to do with yours. If you said you had a leaking roof they could offer to fix it for you, but what can they do about your suffering if all you can do about it yourself is talk? And behind the talk they can often sense a plea for pity and sympathy; they sense that you are trying to make capital out of it. Instead we have to make a life out of it.
15 December [3rd Sunday of Advent]
Mt 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me." As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

John the Baptist is almost a New Testament figure; he is a kind of honorary member of the new community. The Church does not refer to Isaiah or Jeremiah or any of the great prophets as ‘Saint’, but we call John ‘Saint John the Baptist’. Yet, as Jesus said to the crowd, “the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

Do you feel greater than John the Baptist? Few in history could equal him for fire and passion. Jesus said of him, equivalently, that he was the greatest man who ever lived. But membership of the new community does not depend, it seems, on the qualities that John had to such an exceptional degree. What does it depend on, then?

John’s ‘persona’ was 100% adult male; he was the original Iron John, hard and demanding. He lived on the edge of society, not integrated with it and perhaps not integrated in himself. There are many like him, there always have been. It is a straightforward, two-dimensional image, lacking in depth and humour. The essential missing ingredient is paradox. There are Christian preachers (especially on TV) whose persona is exactly John’s.

Kierkegaard (1813-1855) identified three stages in the spiritual development of a human being: the aesthetic, the moral, and the spiritual. The first (the stage of beautiful thoughts and feelings) runs aground after a time, and you grow (probably through crisis) into the second, the stage of responsibility and moral awareness. But after struggling here a long time you come to know your own weakness and the ambiguity of your motives; you learn that it is impossible to be a moral person if you are attempting only to be a moral person. You realise that your religion has become self-righteous, judgmental, resentful, even hypocritical. This crisis opens you to deeper spiritual reality. When you can no longer disguise your failure, you learn the wisdom of failure; you learn the meaning of the Cross of Christ. God has to come to you from beyond all your efforts.

Jesus, like John, came from the desert and appeared at the edge of society. But unlike John, he came in and sat down with sinners and outcasts. He created a new kind of society in which the values of the old were inverted: success/failure, first/last, even death/life. If John had lived he would surely have embraced the new society and its paradoxes; he would not have run from Calvary as the others did; it was never in his nature to be a reed shaken by the wind. His raging fire would long since have been transformed into intense love, his judgments into compassion.
16 December
Mt 21:23-27

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard Jn as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

St Jerome (c. 340 - 420) wrote, “The Lord could have confuted them…by a simple answer, but He put a question to them of such skilful contrivance, that they must be condemned either by their silence or their knowledge.” And St John Chrysostom (347 - 407) added, “Even if He had told them, it would have profited nothing, because the darkened will not perceive the things that are of the light. For we ought to instruct the one who enquires; but the one who is only testing we ought to overthrow by a stroke of reasoning, and not to reveal to him the power of the mystery.”

It’s a very wonderful thing to read the insights of those who lived many centuries before us. We can do so because of the scholarship of countless people through the centuries. We are never alone when we read the Scriptures; they are a sacred heritage passed on to God's people of every century. It’s sometimes said that we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before. Often, I think, we only cling to their coat-tails. I love to quote them, because it makes clear that we stand in an ancient tradition and the insights of all the ages are ours to have, as far as we are capable of them. T.S. Eliot wrote, “There never was a time, I believe, when those who read at all read so many more books by living authors than books by dead authors; there never was a time so completely parochial, so shut off from the past.”
An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon. And after the deportation to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

Severus of Antioch (+538) wrote: “Jesus is before the centuries and of one substance with the Father himself, from the standpoint of eternity. But by this genealogy he is also numbered among the families of humanity according to the flesh. For in truth, while remaining God, Christ became human without ceasing to be God, unaltered till the end of time. This is why there is also mention of the ancient patriarchs in the lineage, the narrative and observation of the times and vicissitudes that are indeed proper to human history. Through all this Matthew made it clear that Christ participates in our human generation and in our nature. Otherwise some might claim that he appeared in illusion and in imagination only, rather than by becoming genuinely human. Think of what might have been said if none of this had been written?”

Indeed the first Christian heresy was Docetism, a belief that Jesus only appeared to be human, that he only appeared to be born, to suffer, to die. The reaction to this heresy is already visible in the New Testament writings: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands...” (1 Jn 1:1). It was and is crucial to hold that Jesus was one of us, truly and fully human; that in fact is the real source of our hope. He entered our life as it is, not as it should be (it doesn’t exist as it should be). Severus mentioned “the ancient patriarchs in the lineage” of Jesus. That was the reputable side of Jesus’ ancestry. He might also have mentioned the disreputable side.

The names in that long list have a great deal of shock-value. All human life is there: murder, treachery, incest, adultery, prostitution…. In the first list of fourteen names there are three women, an unusual feature: Tamar, Rahab and Ruth. Tamar gave birth to twins by her father-in-law; Rahab was a prostitute, and Ruth was a Moabite, a foreigner. In the second list of fourteen, there’s another woman, Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. King David observed her bathing from the roof of his house, and invited her in and seduced her; then he had her husband killed, so that he could marry her. At the end of the third section a fifth woman is mentioned: Mary the mother of Jesus. It is an unedifying litany of names that leads us to Mary and Jesus. This is the world they entered. Nothing in the Scriptures encourages us to look at it with rose-coloured spectacles.
18 December
Mt 1:18-25

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,

Christmas is now upon us – the season in which we celebrate the Saviour's birth. But December 25th was almost certainly not the date of his birth. That date was not fixed on till the year 440. I remember being severely hassled on this point by a Jehovah's Witness. To him it summed up the tissue of lies that he took the Catholic Church to be. Would it affect your faith if you heard that Jesus was born in the middle of August, for instance, or at the end of February…? Would it at least ruin your Christmas?

Of course symbolically it was a wonderful choice of date – and that is the whole point. In the dead of the year when the days are shortest and the sun seems to be abandoning the world, we celebrate the feast of the Unconquered Sun, the new Light, Christ, born into a despairing world.

It would shock that young Witness too, probably, to hear that scholars are not even sure of the year of Christ's birth. But one thing is sure: he was not born in the year 0, because there was no such year. (1 B.C. was followed immediately by 1 A.D.) His birth is usually put at 3 or 4 B.C., though some put it earlier.

Christmas festivals, generally observed by Christians since the 4th century, incorporate pagan customs, such as the use of holly, mistletoe, Yule logs, and so on…. Many other things that we might have imagined deriving from Bethlehem itself are of much more recent origin. The Christmas tree is derived from the so-called paradise tree, symbolising Eden, of German mystery plays.

Our poor world offers him whatever it has. No problem.

Mary was found to be with child, "through the Holy Spirit." The Spirit hovered over the waters at the beginning of creation (Genesis 1:2), and the Spirit hovered over the valley and made the dry bones live (Ezekiel 37). In other words, the Spirit's work is creation and re-creation. As the life in us is God's breath or Spirit (see Genesis 2:7), we see our redemption begun in Mary; the son born of her is "of the Holy Spirit."
In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

Zechariah was standing in the holiest place on earth: in the Holy of Holies, the innermost part of the Temple. Standing there he began to look for an explanation of the message just given to him. But in the same instant he was struck dumb. Rightly so! The Holy of Holies is no place for explanations. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. For many teachers in the Church, you feel, the Holy of Holies is lined with books. The Holy of Holies in the Temple was empty in the time of Jesus, and this has always been a potent symbol of contemplation. But we fill the place with words, and when we have finished all our explanations there is no mystery left, no enchantment, no fascination…nothing but words. Why aren't we struck dumb?

Meister Eckhart, like many others, is called a mystic. The word means 'one who is silent'. Yet all these people had a lot to say! No doubt there have been many genuine mystics who seldom if ever spoke about their knowledge of God. But what all mystics have in common is a profound awareness that the mystery is deeper than their words. Underneath all their words is a great silence. Eckhart had a gift for removing names and labels from familiar things and allowing them to be mysterious again. Let's hear something from him on this familiar reading.

"If anyone were to ask me, Why...did God become incarnate? – I would answer, 'In order that God may be born in the soul and the soul be born in God.' For that reason all the scriptures were written, for that reason God created the world and all angelic natures: so that God may be born in the soul and the soul be born in God.... The soul has no name. Just as no one can find a true name for God, so none can find the soul's true name, although mighty tomes have been written about this...."
For all his words, he was dumb. His experience of God had struck him dumb, like Zechariah in the Holy of Holies.
In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Let Meister Eckhart provide the commentary on today’s familiar reading. (We saw parts of this passage yesterday.)

“If anyone were to ask me, Why do we pray, why do we fast, why do we do all our works, why are we baptised, why (most important of all) did God become incarnate? – I would answer, in order that God may be born in the soul and the soul be born in God. For that reason all the scriptures were written; for that reason God created the world and all angelic natures: so that God may be born in the soul and the soul be born in God….

“The angel was called Gabriel’.…. The angel took the name ‘Gabriel’ from the work of which he was a messenger, for ‘Gabriel’ means ‘power of God’.…. No one can know an angel’s name. No master and no understanding ever got to where an angel received his name: perhaps he is nameless…..

“The soul, too, has no name. Just as no one can find a true name for God, so none can find the soul’s true name, although mighty tomes have been written about this. But she is given a name according as she has a regard to her activity.

“In this birth God works powerfully…. In God there is plenitude of power, therefore in his birth he produces his like. All that God is in power, truth and wisdom, he bears altogether in the soul.”

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21 December
Lk 1:39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’

Ancient Christian writers delighted to notice that John was a prophet even before he was born, because he gave witness to Christ by leaping in his mother’s womb. Origen (b. 185) wrote, “At that moment Jesus made his forerunner a prophet for the first time.” Maximus of Turin (d. 408 / 423) wrote, “Not yet born, John already prophesies and, while still in the enclosure of his mother’s womb, confesses the coming of Christ with movements of joy—since he could not do so with his voice.” Later the same Maximus noted that at the end of his life John was still giving witness to Christ – from the confines of a prison. “We should not be surprised that after Herod put him in prison, he continued to announce Christ to his disciples from his confinement, because even when he was confined in the womb he preached the same Lord by his movements.”

What does it seem to say? There is more to people than what comes from their conscious wills. The story of my life is much more than what I did between and what happened to me between birth and death. To push it to the end: the full story of my life would have to be the story of the universe – and also, the mystics tell us, the story of God. Any selections are bound to be out of context; they are abstract in a literal sense: abstrahere is ‘to pull away’. When Hegel said the individual was abstract, he was just trying to get the full view.

Crucially, for a Christian, the full story of your life is the story of Jesus. He is your larger self. St Paul wrote, “As in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another” (Rom 12:4-5). “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?” (1 Cor 6:15).

St Ambrose (333 – 397) relates it to today’s reading: “Elizabeth exclaimed, ‘Blessed is she who believed.’ But you also are blessed who have heard and believed. For a soul that has believed has both conceived and bears the Word of God and declares his works. Let the soul of Mary be in each of you, so that it magnifies the Lord. Let the spirit of Mary be in each of you, so that it rejoices in God.”
December [4th Sunday of Advent]

Mt 1:18-24

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife.

Like a planet in conjunction Isaiah looms very large in the Advent Liturgy. Many of his expressions could almost be from the New Testament. John the Baptist comes even closer. But in Mary the contact is made; the Presence has become a reality.

“She will bear a son” (Matthew 1:21), or “You will bear a son” (Luke 1:31). Matthew’s gospel tells the story from Joseph’s point of view, Luke’s tells it from Mary’s. But the story is the same: the Child will soon be born of her.

Christmas is now upon us. But December 25th was almost certainly not the day of his birth! That date was not chosen till the year 440 A.D. I remember being severely hassled on this very point by a Jehovah’s Witness. To him it summed up the tissue of lies that he took the Catholic Church to be. Would it affect your faith if you heard that Jesus was born in the middle of August, for instance, or at the end of February…? Would it at least ruin your Christmas? Would it shock you even more to know that scholars are not even sure of the year of his birth? But one thing is sure: he was not born in the year 0, because there was no such year! (1 B.C. was followed immediately by 1 A.D.) His birth is usually put at 3 or 4 B.C.

Scholars believe that December 25th was chosen because in Anglo-Saxon England the year began on that date. It is the winter solstice (more or less), the shortest day in the year.

Christmas festivals, generally observed by Christians since the 4th century, incorporate pagan customs, such as the use of holly, mistletoe, Yule logs, and so on. Many other things that we might have imagined deriving from Bethlehem itself are of much more recent origin. The Christmas tree is derived from the so-called paradise tree, symbolising Eden, of German mystery plays. The use of a Christmas tree began in the early 1600s, in Strasbourg, France, spreading from there through Germany and then into northern Europe. In 1841 Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria, introduced the Christmas tree custom to Britain, from where it spread to America.

Meanwhile, Dutch settlers in America had brought with them the custom of celebrating St Nicholas’ Day on December 6, and especially St Nicholas’ Eve, when gifts were given to children, of whom the saint was patron. British settlers there took over the tradition as part of their own Christmas Eve celebration. The English name of the legendary jolly, red-garbed man who delivers presents to good children at Christmas, Santa Claus, is derived from the name ‘St Nicholas’ (say it fast and you will see why).

If any of that information disappoints you, let me assure you that our faith doesn’t rest on dates or customs or folklore, but on the simple accounts of the life and death of Jesus that the gospels give us. It is true that St Luke takes great care to show that the events he is recounting are precisely located in history: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar - when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and
Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas…” (3:1). But it is enough to know that the Word became flesh in human history; we don’t need to put exact numbers on it.

Celebrating the birth of Jesus at the winter solstice has immense *symbolic* meaning, however, and that is why the date was chosen in the first place. When the days are shortest and it looks as if the sun is abandoning the world to darkness... suddenly the sun begins to return, and the days lengthen! The Sun is returning to us! It is the surprise of Newgrange, experienced since 3,200 B.C. But for Christians, symbolically it is the surprise of the Incarnation: the Light has come into a dark world.... “The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).
23 December  
Lk 1:57-66

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.

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, which gives him two feastdays 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” (John 3:30). John 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 (Luke 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” (John 3:29). The source of his joy was, no doubt, 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” (Luke 1:46-47).

Humility is not a fashionable virtue today; it would 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.
Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Two days ago we had the Magnificat, today we have the Benedictus: two canticles found only in Luke’s gospel. They are great cries of praise to God, who enters our world “to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.” A scholar said of these canticles that they are like “an aria in opera; the action almost stops so that the situation may be savoured more deeply.”

“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.” I once heard someone say that darkness is primary: that it is more fundamental than light, because light needs fuel but darkness does not, and that darkness is therefore eternal. We are afraid of the dark, he said, so we say God is light. In some ways, he said, we don’t grow up; we are still terrified of the dark bedroom where we cannot see our mother. So we say God is light.

A Christian says that light is more fundamental than darkness. Darkness is nothing in itself, it is just the absence of light. Light is more fundamental than darkness. God could not be an absence. God is a tremendous presence, God is light. Darkness gives life to nothing, but light gives life to everything: all living things are forms of light, stored light-energy from the sun.

We say God is light in the way that we say God is good. The intention is not to limit God to what we know of these; but we say these realities point us towards God; or in St Paul’s phrase, they make us “alive to God” (Romans 6:11).

Tomorrow we celebrate the birth of Jesus. In the obscurity of a windowless cave it will be hard for us to appreciate that the light has come into the world. But to the eye of faith – which is used to darkness – he is “the light shines in the darkness, which the darkness cannot overcome” (John 1:5).
25 December [Christmas Day]
Jn 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

There is a kind of timelessness about Christmas: it takes us out of our routines; suddenly all the rush of preparation is over and there is nothing more to do. This could be the moment to experience something different from the perpetual motion that is our ordinary life. But what happens? We turn on the TV, which is what we may have been doing every single evening since last Christmas. No change. Then we say Christmas is boring, or sad, or too commercial.... Of course it is; it is just like all the other days. We have not allowed change to happen. We have not allowed space for anything new to appear. Paradoxically, all the flashing lights, the incessant television, the emailing and text-messaging...all have the effect of filling our lives and so leaving no space to move, no space for anything really different to appear; so we are enclosed in a cave of artificial lights that never lead us to the sun.

“The light shines in the darkness.” But it does not shine in artificial light. We have to turn something off. We have to leave space and time for the new thing to appear.

The Child born today is God's new deed: the newest, the youngest, the most recent...the latest. But this is not announced in the excited voice of the advertisers; it is a silent deed. He is the Word made flesh, but he lies there as helpless to speak as any infant. Only in silence can this silent Word be heard. The new blade of grass does not make a scene or a noise; neither does the Word made flesh.
26 December [St Stephen’s Day]
Mt 10:17-22
*Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.*

“The one who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster,” wrote Nietzsche. He becomes one if he uses the same means that the monster uses. Violence has its own logic and is willing to stay in place indefinitely. When Stalin was asked how long he was going to go on killing people he replied, “As long as it’s necessary.” That means forever, because a regime put in place by violence remains violent even after the killing stops. Violence breeds more violence in an endless spiral if some new element is not brought in. The new element is one that would never occur to a tyrant. “Hate cannot drive out hate,” said Martin Luther King, “only love can drive out hate.”

That new element is what the Gospel is about. Commenting on today’s passage St John Chrysostom (+407) wrote: "Jesus is preparing the disciples for a new kind of combat. They are to suffer wrong and willingly permit others to inflict punishment upon them. This is meant to teach them that the victory is in suffering evil for the sake of good…. He does not instruct them to fight and resist those who would persecute them. All he promises them is that they will suffer with him the utmost ills." Jesus was born into a terrible world where violence is seen as normal. He was, and still is, the Prince of Peace in the kingdom of violence, but he refused to live according to its logic, so he had to die. After him, Stephen was the first Christian martyr, the first of many.
27 December [St John, apostle]
Jn 20:1-8
Mary ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;

In art St John is represented by an eagle, because (as St Augustine said) no one soared so near heaven as he did. Still, he had his feet on the ground too. It was he who showed us, rather than the institution of the Eucharist, Jesus washing the disciples’ feet at the Last Supper and saying (equivalently), “Do this in memory of me.” The most down-to-earth service of one another, it seems, is like another Eucharist – certainly a communion. As Eckhart put it, “Heaven can only work in the ground of the earth.”

He became a disciple first of John the Baptist and then of Jesus, who called him to be an apostle and nicknamed him and his brother James 'Boanerges', “sons of thunder” (Mk 3:17). John, together with James and Peter, made up the inner group of disciples who were with Jesus on the heights and in the depths: they witnessed his Transfiguration and were present in Gethsemane. Next to Peter, John was the most active of the apostles in organising the early church in Palestine and, later, throughout Asia Minor. According to tradition, during a period of persecution of Christians by the Romans, John was banished to Patmos, where he wrote the Book of Revelation. Later he is said to have gone to Ephesus, where he wrote three Epistles and the fourth Gospel.

The prologue to that gospel begins with the language of sublimity, but soon we hear the hearts-welling words, “The Word was made flesh and lived among us, and we saw his glory....”
28 December [Holy Innocents]
Mt 2:13-18

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

‘A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.’

“Herod!” says the Office of Readings, “you slay those little ones because fear in your heart slays you.” It was a penetrating psychological insight from an early Christian writer. Aggression is a manifestation of fear. But how is it that it looks just the opposite of fear? Why, because it is the repression of fear. If a person has not faced his own fear he will project it onto others and fight it there. If he hasn’t fought the war within he will fight it without. And of course (because it is all about fear) he will pick the easiest target. Even school children discover it: deep down, bullies are cowards.

God help the innocent who become victims of the psychological twists of other people. God help the many millions of war victims throughout the world.

But the Christian spirit is not one of fear (2 Tim 1:7). Instead we are to draw courage from the suffering of those who went before. St John Chrysostom wrote, “At the birth of Christ you see a tyrant raging, a flight ensuing, and a departure into exile. It was because of no crime that his family was exiled into the land of Egypt. Similarly, you yourself need not be troubled if you are suffering countless dangers. Do not expect to be celebrated or crowned promptly for your troubles. Instead you may keep in mind the long-suffering example of the mother of the Child, bearing all things nobly, knowing that such a fugitive life is consistent with the ordering of spiritual things.”
An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called a Nazorean.’

Christmas is a family feast. It is our family that makes and keeps us human. We were welded into it before we were born; it is our anchor in life. Except in extreme and exceptional cases, when we cut the connections with our families we maim them and we maim ourselves. They are our larger selves, and we have more in common with them than we realise. We even become more like them as we grow older.

But this is only one side of it. A Baptist scholar likes to provoke his audiences by announcing, “Jesus did not believe in family values!” This startles people, but it makes them look again at the Gospel. Yes, there is evidence of conflict in the early Church between Jesus’ family and his disciples. It would be natural for his family members to take over once he was gone. But his disciples resisted them. This dilemma was sorted out, but it is clear that during his life he called people away from family. His own family believed what people were saying about him: that he was mad. “His family… went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’” (Mark 3.21; see John 10:20). There is an even stronger text: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:26).

How are we to resolve this dilemma? Yes, Jesus defended the commandment to honour one’s father and mother (Mk 7:10-13), but he also stressed freedom from control by one’s family. (He was talking about adult disciples, not about children.) The family in oriental societies was all-embracing. Within the family the father was the decision-maker in every matter, even religious faith. For Jesus, the call to discipleship was not necessarily in conflict with family, but in case of conflict it had to take precedence over it. When we find tensions in our own families, it may be good to tell ourselves not to be too surprised at this. There has always been tension in families – even in the earliest Christian days.

There are two things, mainly, that people suffer from in families (and communities of every kind). One is a feeling of suffocation, of not being allowed to be themselves, of having no identity except that of the family. The other is opposite but equally painful: a loss of identification (of any but the most basic kind) with the family. Here the individuals circle around one another at a distance, like planets, and this leads to loneliness. These two are opposite poles: too much family and too little, suffocation and loneliness.

Putting these together, you could say this: a family needs to be like a nest – warm and protective; but it also needs to be open to a wider world. We all belong to an extended family. How far does our family extend? There seems to be no set boundary. Every time we extend a hand to a neighbour or a stranger we are extending our family. Jesus’ spiritual family is still extending itself through the world and through the ages.
30 December  
Lk 2:36-40

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Simeon (yesterday’s reading) and Anna are the two beautiful old people we meet every year at this time. How peaceful their presence is! We need them. They are grandparent figures. There’s an extraordinary poverty of wisdom on the subject of old age. Most of what the poets say on the subject is about living in the past, or being dulled in all the senses, or dreading death…. Sometimes this is tempered with a mellow stoicism:

“So mayest thou live; till, like ripe fruit, thou drop
Into thy mother's lap; or be with ease
Gathered, nor harshly plucked; for death mature:
This is Old Age.” (John Milton, 1608 - 1674)

But a few lines later the atmosphere is gloom once more:

“In thy blood will reign
A melancholy damp of cold and dry
To weigh thy spirits down, and last consume
The balm of life.”

Few people read Milton for pleasure now, but our attitudes have scarcely improved since Milton’s time. Old age and death are the test of our wisdom; they reveal where we really are when all our flights of fancy are over.

Simeon and Anna were among those known as “the Quiet of the Land.” These were people who had no big dream of victories for Israel, but who lived in quietness and prayer, waiting for God; Anna was eighty-four years old, the account says; yet her spirit seems bright and fresh. Far from being out of touch, she seems more in touch than anyone. “She came up to them at that very moment…. ” She lived in the Now, not in the past.
31 December
Jn 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

It is the last day of the year, but the gospel reading begins “In the beginning…. “ These words echo the opening words of the whole Bible, In the beginning God created heaven and earth. The first words of the story of redemption echo the first words of the story of creation. It is right that we are meditating on the beginning just as we end the year. Yesterday, Anna, though she was at the end of her life, was “looking forward,” not back. In the life of faith it is always the beginning. There are no dead ends for a Christian; the end is always the beginning of something immense.

A monk from Thomas Merton’s abbey visited our priory in Cork, and I apologised to him for the many steps as we climbed the flights of stairs. “There are many steps in Gethsemani abbey, too,” he replied. Then he added, “I count them as I climb…. This is how I count them: one, one, one….!” In the spiritual life it is always the beginning.

The Saviour is born! – not only in Bethlehem long ago, but now today in our world, in our hearts. That birth long ago, said Meister Eckhart, has this new birth as its purpose; he was born then so that he could be born now. The Light has come into the world; even darkness itself helps to announces it. In the northern hemisphere, Christmas comes in the very dead of the year when days are shortest and the sun seems to be abandoning the world. Then we celebrate the feast of the Unconquered Sun, the new Light, Christ, born today.

The Scriptures are deep beyond words, and I pray that I haven’t misused or trivialised them, or mangled them too badly. I feel nothing but gratitude for having been allowed to accompany you: we were like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, as he walked with us.