

May
2018

GOSPEL COMMENTARIES

1 May [St Joseph the Worker]

Mt 13:54-58

Jesus came to his hometown and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?" And they took offence at him.

But Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honour except in their own country and in their own house." And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.

In this reading, Matthew's gospel calls Jesus "the carpenter's son" (verse 55), but Mark's gospel simply calls him "the carpenter" (6:3). Mark never polishes the surface of the Gospel story, as the others do. Jesus was a carpenter, of course, as well as being the son of a carpenter. Otherwise, what was he doing for thirty years? We need to celebrate Jesus the worker as well as Joseph the worker.

In the past, manual work was referred to as "servile work". It was forbidden on Sundays. If you were an accountant you could spend all your Sundays accounting, but if you were a farmer, for example, or a carpenter, you had to remain idle. 'Servile' comes from the Latin 'servilis', meaning 'of a slave'. 'Servile work' means 'the work of slaves'. This disdain of manual work is certainly not from the Gospel – Jesus himself was a carpenter, or rather a builder, a *tehton* (Mk 6:3). It is from class-conscious societies that expected manual workers to be 'servile' not only in their work but in their manners. It is tragic that this was ever allowed to infect Christian practice.

When pope Pius XII in 1955 established May 1 as the commemoration of St Joseph the Worker, it was an attempt to steal the fire of the Communist celebration. It was a late move, because in many countries the working classes had already been lost to the Church.

We could honour St Joseph today by consciously seeing our manual work as a way of meditation, and a way of sanctification. Redemption is through the body: every one of the Sacraments makes this evident.

2 May

Jn 15:1-8

Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

Does society exist for the benefit of its members (as Herbert Spencer believed), or the members for the benefit of society? If you say the first, you seem to be setting the stage for complete individualism; but if you say the second are you not sponsoring fascism? So which is it going to be?

We spontaneously assume that questions are perfectly clear and correctly put, and that only answers can be true or false. (This assumption may have something to do with our early schooling.) But there can be false questions, and the question above is surely false. It is like asking whether your head is for the benefit of your body, or your body for the benefit of your head. In a living organism everything is for the benefit of everything else. The question assumes a false opposition.

St Paul said Jesus is the head of his body, the Church; he is the head, we the bodily members (see Col 1:18; Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:13; Eph 4:25). We cannot be divided from the head and retain any life at all. Nor can a member separated from the body remain alive. A living body is an organism, not a collection of parts. We have to be careful about the images we use to describe the Church. False separations creep in subtly. The image in today's reading is even more striking than Paul's: a vine and its branches. Unlike a tree, where you can distinguish clearly between trunk and branches, the vine is just all branches! "I am the vine and you are the branches": the vine *is* the branches!

3 May [Sts Philip and James, apostles]

Jn 14:6-14

Jesus said, "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.'

Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.'

Philip put words on the deepest and the universal human aspiration: to see God. In ancient times Moses said to God (Exod 33:18ff), "Show me your glory, I beg you." And God replied, "I will let all my splendour pass in front of you... but you cannot see my face. Human beings cannot see me and live.... You must stand on the rock and when my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with my hand while I pass by. Then I will take my hand away and you shall see the back of me; but my face is not to be seen."

But now in a new age, Jesus says to Philip, "Whoever sees me sees the Father." Jesus is the face of God turned to us. We see God in him, to the very limit of our seeing. In John's gospel, Philip was the first person to whom Jesus said, "Follow me!" (Jn 1:45). It was somehow appropriate that it should be to Philip that Jesus made this profound revelation.

James, the other apostle whose feast is today, was kin to Jesus. He may well have been among the members of the family who didn't believe in him (Jn 7:5, "his brothers spoke like this because they didn't believe in him"). But, if so, he changed radically: James appears in Acts as the leader of the Christians in Jerusalem.

4 May

Jn 15:12-17

Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

A wicked man, about to die, meets an angel at the gates to Hell. The angel says to him: "It is enough for you to have done one good thing in your life, and that will save you. Think hard." The man remembers that once, as he was walking through a forest, he saw a spider in his path and detoured so as not to step on it. The angel smiles and a spider web comes down from the sky, allowing the man to ascend to Paradise. Others among the condemned take advantage of the web, and begin to make the climb. But the man turns on them and begins to push them off, fearing that the web will break. At that moment, it breaks, and the man is once again returned to Hell. "What a pity," he hears the angel say. "Your concern with yourself turned the only good thing you ever did into evil."

Jeanne Guyon, the 17th-century French mystic, wrote: "Those in the highest state of religious experience desire nothing except that God may be glorified in them by the accomplishment of His holy will. Nor is it inconsistent with this, that saintly people possess that natural love which exists in the form of self-love. But their natural love, which in its proper measure is innocent love, is so absorbed in the love of God, that it ceases, for the most part, to be a distinct object of consciousness; and practically and truly they may be said to love themselves in and for God. Adam, in his state of innocence, loved himself, considered as the image of God and living for God. So that we may either say, that he loved God in himself, or that he loved himself in and for God. And it is because saintly people, extending their affections beyond their own limit, love their neighbour on the same principle of loving, namely, in and for God, that they may be said to love their neighbours as themselves. It does not follow that just because our self-love is lost in the love of God, that we are to take no care and to exercise no watch over ourselves. None will be so seriously and constantly watchful over themselves as those who love themselves in and for God alone."

[See this month's 'Wisdom Line', where St Bernard of Clairvaux makes the same point as Jeanne-Marie Guyon.]

The ego requires fight if it is to exist. If it is not fighting it cannot exist. So even when there is no one there to fight with, you fight with someone in your mind. The ego isn't in you; it is *between* you and another. It is nothing in you. In real love there is no ego, because there is no fight. Yet are lovers not often fighting? Yes. Their being longs for love, their egos long for fight; so they do both, by turns.

5 May

Jn 15:18-21

Jesus said, "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, "Servants are not greater than their master." If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me."

There must be some dividend in hate; otherwise why would so many people invest so much time and energy in such a destructive passion? There is some secret satisfaction in hatred.

There's nothing in this world so sweet as love,

And next to love the sweetest thing is hate. (Longfellow)

When you love, you lose yourself in some sense; you forget yourself, you take leave of the ego. But hatred strengthens the ego by strengthening the sense of separation. In a word, you feel you really exist when you hate; and perhaps this is the secret dividend. And there is an illusion of being equal to the thing you hate. It is a caricature of the equality in love. If you hate an individual, you appear to be that individual's equal. If you hate a whole class of people, you are almost an archetype.

Love needs to understand hatred if it is to escape its contagion. Much of its work consists in dismantling structures of hatred. That means dismantling the ego, and that is dangerous work.

6 May [6th Sunday of Easter]

Jn 15:9-17

Jesus said, 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.'

How can you be *commanded* to love? Surely love has to be a free response, not an obligation. You can be commanded to obey, but how can you be commanded to love? How could Jesus say, "This is my commandment, that you love one another?"

Meister Eckhart threw a clear light on this conundrum. He said, "When I am thirsty, the drink commands me; when I am hungry, the food commands me. And God does the same [when God commands me to love]." In other words, the command to love is not a command that is laid on us from the outside; it is an inner command, an inner urgency placed in our very being by God – like hunger and thirst; or, you might say, like the urgency that an acorn has to develop into an oak tree. It is not something alien, it is totally our own, and yet it is totally from God – because God is totally our own, "more ours," said Tauler, "than anything else we own." If God is totally ours, then God's commands are totally ours.

Probably most of us grew up with the belief that God was somewhere else, not here; that heaven was a place where God lived far away. Any communication from such a God would be an intrusion from the outside. Certainly we also said that God was everywhere, but these two thoughts may never have overlapped or touched each other at all. If we also had the wrong kind of fear of God, we may then have imagined God everywhere in the way that a controlling headmaster is 'everywhere' in the school – meaning that no matter what you did, he found out about it.

Our thoughts and feelings about God are always in need of a great deal of healing. This should be happening naturally, through the grace of God, in the course of our daily life; but prayer and meditation are the favoured place for it to happen. There the experience of the day is sifted without interference and comes around slowly into the right perspective. We can confidently hope to be able to enjoy our faith. Meister Eckhart again: "If anyone commands me to do that which is pleasant, which avails me or on which my bliss depends, that is exceedingly sweet to me."

Joy is very close to the heart of our faith. Jesus "rejoiced in the Holy Spirit" (Luke 10:21), and wants to draw us into his own joy (John 15:11). Paul mentions joy as a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). St Thomas Aquinas wrote, "Since the enjoyment of God... surpasses the power of all creatures, it follows that this complete and perfect joy does not enter into us but rather we enter into it. 'Enter into the joy of your Lord' (Matthew 25.21)."

7 May

Jn 15:26—16:4

Jesus said, "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning. I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me. But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them. "I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you."

'We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,' wrote Paul (1 Cor 1:23). What Christians proclaim is an *event* that has taken place, not a religious system or simply a 'message'. "The New Testament," said a scholar, "is neither a collection of thoughtful essays nor an attempt to construct a system of ethics. It bears witness to a unique history, and it discovers the truth *in* the history." Paul once tried the way of sweet reason (Acts 17), but people only laughed at him. It may have been at that moment that he found his own voice. From that point on he would proclaim "Christ and him crucified," the event that was the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

This is why eyewitness and testimony are crucial. Philosophical arguments and theories, while they may propose faith to you, can never bring you there. Some people are hindered rather than helped by them. A scholarly lady said to a confrère of mine, "It was Aquinas's proofs for the existence of God that brought me into the Church." "I'm happy for you," replied my friend, "they almost drove me out of it." Philosophical arguments, by their very nature, express skepticism and chosen limits to what one is prepared to accept. In some periods of history there was a wide streak of rationalism in theology that alienated many and boxed up the faith in a suffocating system. Large traces of this still exist. The faith is not plausible, and any account of it that makes it so is throwing away the kernel of it. There is nothing plausible about existence, or the world, or God, or the Incarnation, or the death of Jesus, or his resurrection.... What we proclaim is not a plausible account of life, a 'philosophy for the millions,' made palatable by striking images and stories, but a series of extraordinary events: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

"You are witnesses of these things," said Jesus (Luke 28:48). This was spoken to "the eleven and their companions." But ultimately it is spoken to every disciple. We are to witness what the Spirit, the 'Advocate', has witnessed to us in our hearts and in our lives, among the community of believers. We are to speak from experience.

8 May

Jn 16:5-11

Jesus said: "Now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned."

Here Jesus sounds more like a visitor than someone who took on our nature and became one of us forever. 'It is to your advantage that I go away.' We have to try to understand how it is to our advantage. "If I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you," he added. Rather than clarifying it, however, this makes it more obscure. How could 'the continued presence of Jesus' (which is what the Advocate or Paraclete means in John's gospel) hinder the coming of the Spirit, the Paraclete?

In John's gospel, the Paraclete *is* the continued presence of Jesus. Henceforth it is through the Spirit that we know Jesus. The Spirit, the 'Advocate', he said, "will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (Jn 14:26). Jesus is withdrawing his visible presence, but his Spirit remains with us.

"It is to your advantage that I go away," he said. How is it an advantage? We must make some attempt to understand this. If we assemble a few ordinary experiences we may find an approach to it.

Every teacher, sooner or later, has to stand back. If a teacher stays at your side forever, there are important things you never learn: independence, mental courage, an inner vigour that can only come from taking your own risks.... In other words, you have to learn from your own experience, and that is what a good teacher always sends you back to in the end. Parents, too, have to learn to stand back. The children of parents with very strong personalities are often passive and weak. Whenever you see a powerful leader, look at what his leadership is doing to his followers. He may think he is "strengthening the brethren," but this is exactly the blind spot of the extravert. Jesus has the wisdom to trust us, even though we make mistakes. He wants to inspire us from within, not to control us from without.

This Spirit, Jesus said, "will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment." Richard Rohr's comment on this: "What you thought was sin was only your own guilt, what you thought was righteousness was self-righteousness, what you thought was justice was only your instinct for vengeance." These distinctions can only be learned from the inside.

9 May

Jn 16:12-15

Jesus said: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

Someone said hindsight is always 20/20. But hindsight is what you don't have at the time.

In simple matters of fact hindsight is a simple thing: you can see within the hour that you backed the wrong horse – or within seconds that you said the wrong thing. But in deeper matters, hindsight is a slow process of realisation. The Holy Spirit gives hindsight on Jesus. This is the Spirit working in us, the patient inner teacher, opening our minds slowly to the light that has long since come into the world. The Spirit guides us (*hodegeo*) along the way; it is Jesus who is the way (*hodos*) itself – indeed the truth itself (Jn 14:6).

"The Spirit will guide you into all truth," that is, all the truth about God. The Son has revealed the Father, and now the Spirit will reveal the Father by revealing the Son. We are being attracted by the Spirit into the inner life of God.

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." The disciples to whom these words were addressed had the best of excuses for not having hindsight: the event had not taken place yet. The event was the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. They could not possibly have understood him at that time, except as a remarkable man.

When disciples of any age consider Jesus without the guidance of the Spirit, that is what they find: a remarkable man. There were so many boring things written in the 19th century about the 'moral excellence' of Jesus.... This would only get him a place among the Pharisees. It is the Spirit alone that can draw us into the mind of Jesus.

10 May

Jn 16:16-20 [Ascension: see May 13]

Jesus said: 'A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.' Then some of his disciples said to one another, 'What does he mean by saying to us, "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me"; and "Because I am going to the Father"?' They said, 'What does he mean by this "a little while"? We do not know what he is talking about.'

Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, 'Are you discussing among yourselves what I meant when I said, "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me"? Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy.'

The word for 'a little while' (*mikron*) is used seven times in this brief passage. Something is about to happen soon, but they don't know what. This is the way to be scared. They can tell that it has something to do with death: the word here for 'mourn' is a word that is used for grief at a death.

"You will have sorrow, but your sorrow will *turn into* joy." He did not say it would be *replaced* by joy, but that it would *turn into* joy. Joy will not come by repressing sorrow but by allowing it to be transformed.

If I repress sorrow it does not go away; it is still there, working in me like a silent cancer, sapping my vitality from within. And my 'joy' will have a quality of desperation; it will only be a mask for fear, like whistling in the dark. I will be in the impossible situation of someone trying to run away from himself. It is only by looking into the heart of sorrow that I can find real joy. This contradicts common sense, but that is what you expect from the Gospel.

The Resurrection happened in the tomb. This death-and-resurrection event, which we call the Paschal Mystery, is the heart of our faith, and if the heart isn't beating, the body is dead. We have a lot of cheap knowledge: knowledge that has not been bought at the full price of experience. It is easy to sign up to a list of beliefs; it is as easy as saying ok. But everyone knows only one or two things really. We know the dying and rising of Christ to the extent that our own life is being shaped by it, no more, no less. The disciples made an honest admission, "We don't know what he is talking about." That is always the first step in understanding: to understand how little we know.

11 May

Jn 16:20-23

Jesus said: "Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you."

In the Irish language there are two different verbs for 'ask'. If you are asking a question, the word is 'fiafraím'; if you are asking for anything else (help, for example), it is 'iarraim'. It is the same with the final verse of today's reading. Two different Greek verbs are translated as 'ask'. One, 'erotao', is used for asking questions; the other, 'aiteo', usually refers to petitions. It is not as watertight a distinction as in Irish, but the idea is the same.

'On that day you will ask (erotao) nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask (aiteo) anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.' Paraphrasing this we could say, "When you see me again you won't be full of questions, you will be *doing* something: you will be interceding with the Father in my presence." Any teacher in any school will tell you how quickly a religion class disintegrates into a debate, and further into a shouting match. It is much easier to talk about something than to take it to heart or to do it. Talking is often a substitute for doing.

A 19th-century British Prime Minister, William Lamb, once famously remarked, on hearing an evangelical sermon, "Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade the sphere of private life." One way to avoid the challenge of religion is to keep it out there in the public sphere, along with ceremonies like the Changing of the Guard. Another very successful way, paradoxically, is just the opposite, and it seems to be the preferred one today: make it so private that you no more need to give an account of it than you do of your blood-pressure or your digestion.

But the Faith is something you *do* in the first place, and afterwards talk about if you must. "I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day." An adherence to the Faith that is not also an adherence to prayer – Liturgy and informal prayer – and to service of others, is only talk. Oscar Wilde said that talking was the only form of exercise he ever took. Spoken like a Christian!

12 May

Jn 16:23-28

Jesus said, "On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete. 'I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father. On that day you will ask in my name. I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father."

"On that day" (that is, 'when you see me again', after the resurrection) "if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you." He is saying that our prayer should be addressed to the Father, but "in my name", that is, in the *presence* of Jesus. This is the pattern of prayer in the Liturgy. The Eucharistic prayer is invariably addressed to the Father, "through him (Jesus), with him and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit." All our prayer has the pattern of the Trinity stamped on it.

This does not mean that we should never pray to anyone but the Father. In the Catholic tradition we feel free to pray to Jesus, Mary and the saints, but always in the full knowledge that the Father is the ultimate destination of all prayer – just as all streams, even the raindrops running down your window pane, are making their way to the sea.

'Ask the Father,' Jesus said. If you put the emphasis on the word 'ask', you get words in different languages like *pray, pregare, prier, beten, be* – all of which mean 'ask'. But one of the Irish words for prayer is '*paidir*', which comes from the Latin '*Pater noster*' (Our Father). The focus is firmly on the Father.

I once met an elderly lady in the Philippines who made it her apostolate to spread devotion to the Father. Everyone else, she said, has promoters and devotees of all kinds, "but the poor Father is totally neglected already!"

13 May [Ascension] [7th Sunday of Easter: further down this page]

Mk 16:15-20

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

So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

Mark's gospel gives no detail at all about the Ascension: just a matter-of-fact statement that Jesus "was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God." It is like a description of someone who went upstairs to sit in his favourite chair. Is there still some trace in us of that childhood notion of heaven as the spacious upper storey of the world? It seems there is, because some people were surprised a few years ago when pope John Paul II said heaven was not a place. Only material objects can be said to be in place. Christ's glorified body after his Resurrection was not subject to material conditions: for example, he did not need to knock on the door nor use a key to enter the room where the frightened disciples had hidden themselves; instead "he came and stood among them" (Luke 24:36; John 20:19,26). At the Ascension he disappeared, or as Luke says, "he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven" (Luke 24:51). To say he ascended into heaven means that he returned to the Father. He came from the Father and now returned to the Father. This is the easiest way to say it; it avoids all spatial words. This is how Jesus himself says it in John's gospel: "I am going to the Father" (14:12, 28; 16:10, 17, 28). We could also say that heaven is 'God's dimension', as someone put it – if that helps. Matthew, being Jewish, did not like to use the name of God (out of respect), so where the other gospel-writers more commonly say 'Kingdom of God' he says 'Kingdom of heaven'. (I saw a modern book by a rabbi who consistently wrote G-d for God.) But we can just say: Jesus came from the Father and returned to the Father.

We are to resist the temptation to think only of loss. This must have been the temptation of those first disciples when Jesus withdrew from their sight. "Why are you people from Galilee standing here looking into the sky?" (1st reading of today's Mass). The sequel says they returned to the city. Life goes on. From now on he will be closer to them than the eye can see.

7th Sunday of Easter

Jn 17:11-19

Jesus said, 'Now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in

themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.'

The theme of conflict between the Christian disciple and the world is very clear in this passage. Raymond Brown remarked that a passage such as this has "a message for an era that becomes naively optimistic about changing the world or even about affirming its values without change." The 'world' in this case is not, of course, the natural world of mountains, rivers, trees... but all the worldly forces that are antagonistic to the Kingdom of God (and even to the natural world).

"If people only knew with what lack of wisdom the world is governed!" someone said long ago. Today most people do know. When greed masquerades as ideology, there are people who are willing and able to point it out. When crowds of people protest at stolen elections the world sees it (or some version of it) on TV. Today it is harder to hide than it has ever been. This is true at the individual level too. Anyone who has ever had a moment's clear insight into their own dark side knows that we cannot afford to be naive about the struggle to live a Christian life.

The 'world' isn't only out there; it is within us. We have within us all the powers of resistance to the Gospel. Unless I have had a clear insight into the snake-pit at the bottom of my soul, and look into that pit where fear and aggression are the same; unless I have observed how I hiss and spit when I am really cornered; and unless I see how I cover it all over with a veneer of politeness, I will not be fit to combat the evil around me. We also know about projection today: I am eager to fight evil out there because I don't have the courage or honesty to look at the evil within me. And I make the world look really bad so that my ego will look correspondingly good.

This is not to privatise evil. Don't worry: there are billions of other egos out there!

"They do not belong to the world," Jesus said. This ego-world is not our true nature, it is not our true identity. It is a divisive spirit, and the source of all divisiveness. The ego exists always in opposition. Since it is false, it cannot establish itself except in opposition to something else. But Jesus prayed to the Father for us: "that they may be one as we are one."

14 May [St Matthias, apostle]

Jn 15:9-17

Jesus said, 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.'

Matthias might seem to have arrived when it was all over. After the Ascension he was chosen by lot to fill the place left by Judas's defection. Peter made a speech: "One of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us – one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection....' And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles" (Acts 1:15-26).

It might seem that he arrived late, but in fact he was part of it from the very beginning of Jesus' public life till the end; however, he is not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament. He played second fiddle – a vital position. And just as he came from obscurity he vanished into it again. There was an apocryphal tradition that he preached the Gospel in Ethiopia, but it cannot be substantiated. And there is a lost apocryphal Gospel of Matthias, mentioned by Origen and other early Christian writers.

It would be interesting to know more, but when you have said that someone was a disciple of Jesus you have said the essential thing.

15 May

Jn 17:1-11

Jesus looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.'

“Now I am no longer in the world” (verse 11). Yet, a few verses later he will say, “I say these things while I am still in the world.” He is and isn't in the world; he is present and yet somehow he already seems far away. He is speaking in an in-between time.

What he said was heart-warming, but also mind-numbing. He was speaking of the relationships between the Father, the Son and the Spirit, and of the disciples within this divine mystery. It is the language of love: “you in me”, and “I in you,” and “they will be one in us,” and “they were yours and you gave them to me,” and “the words you gave me,” and “I have given them,” etc. A short time before, the disciples were assuring him that they understood him perfectly. This would certainly remove any remaining false clarity.

Clarity can become an idol. It can become a substitute for the truth. We have to struggle so hard through the dark forest that when we see the first clearing we imagine it must be our destination. I knew a meditation teacher who always used a particular phrase when he talked about meditation. The phrase was: “dark to the mind, luminous to the heart.” False clarity tries to get a “fix” on something, and is little interested in pursuing it any further. It is usually an expression of the will to control: I want to know my bearings exactly so that my mind will not be stretched. False or premature clarity is a great enemy of the truth, because it looks like the truth but isn't. Confusion only looks like confusion: there's a truthfulness about it, and the truth may set me free. But false clarity will leave me pacing around inside a small space for the rest of my life. The mind is good at putting up fences and protecting them; it is the heart that strikes out beyond them.

16 May

Jn 17:11-19

Jesus said, 'Now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.'

"Many *believed in his name*" (Jn 2:23); "They have not *believed in the name...*" (Jn 3:18). These are common expressions in the gospel. They occur in today's reading, "Keep them in your name," and "I kept them safe in your name."

What is there to believe in a name? A name is only a word. Is our faith just a belief in a set of words? On TV haven't we too often seen frenzied mobs, shouting slogans, claiming to be defenders of their faith? What are we defending when we defend our faith? Words? Could someone die for a few words?

St Thomas Aquinas wrote, "The act of faith is not directed to the formulation but to the reality." We don't believe in the Creed, we believe in God.

In the language of the Scriptures, the name is equivalent to the person, or the *presence* of the person. The Jewish practice of calling God 'The Name' appears to have been imitated in early Christian references to Jesus. "They rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of the Name" (Acts 5:41).

In today's reading then, Jesus is saying, "I kept them safe in your Presence... Holy Father, keep them in your Presence."

When you make the sign of the cross you could equally well say: "In the *presence* of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

17 May

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.'

"That they may all be one." That each may live somehow beyond the ego.... The ego wants above all to be separate and independent, but on its own terms. When it suits it to merge itself it will do that too. There are many lower mergings of the self: fascism, mob violence, alcohol and drugs, addictions and compulsions of all kinds.... These offer a kind of forgetfulness, assuaging the pain of isolation. And so the isolated ego swings between these extremes, each extreme driving it back to the opposite extreme with increasing force. That is the life of the ego when it is in full command. When this is translated into society, and popular culture glorifies it, how can society be other than violent and self-destructive?

Love is a higher merging of the self: a merging that is not a flight but a reaching out. It is the only thing that will save us. Other creatures have the safeguard of healthy natural instincts that are not twisted by a crazy intelligence. But we are at our own mercy. Learning to love now means learning to survive.

18 May

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."

There are several words for 'love' in Greek. 'Philein' means to love someone as a friend; 'agapan' means to love someone in the distinctive New Testament sense: to love them unselfishly, unconditionally, creatively, in the way that Jesus loved. 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.

In English translation the difference does not appear, but it is there in the original Greek. Peter was not able to rise to heroic love, *agapè*, but he could manage friendship. "You know I love you," he replied to Jesus (using the word 'philein').

Do we have to say he failed the test? No. Friendship is a deep mystery in itself; "I have called you friends," Jesus said (Jn 15:15). It is the best rehearsal for *agapè*.

But it is not without difficulties. Goethe once said that when our friends are with us we don't think the same of them as when they are absent. This, he said, is because "absent friends are yourself, and they exist only in your head; whereas the friends who are present have individualities of their own." This is a sharp insight into the brittleness of friendship: it can be infiltrated and even swallowed up by the ego. I may love my friends only so long as they love me and agree with me and support my self-image. "No medicine is more valuable than a friend," said St Aelred of Rievaulx. But what if my friend makes a diagnosis that doesn't flatter me?

Perhaps it comes to this: I must be aware how subtly and quickly the ego begins to deny the independent existence of the other person, turning him or her into a function of myself. I must realise: it is the other person's *difference* from me that will teach me and challenge me and drive me out of my ego-trance. But at that point, friendship is already turning into *agapè*.

19 May

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?" he had said, "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.

20 May [Pentecost Sunday]

Jn 20:19-23

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

A French writer describes the human spirit as “the unassailable, unchangeable, indestructible core, the keen point of the soul which alone can approach the Absolute and unite itself with the Divinity” (Jacqueline Kelen, *La Faim de l'Âme*). This idea of spirit as a hard inner core is widespread, even among people from whom you would expect better. Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), in his famous book *Walden*, gave this account of why he went to live in a hut in the woods: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life ... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms." Such aggressive verbs! - *to front, to suck out, to put to rout, to cut, to drive, to reduce...* All this tough talk about a hard inner core is somehow unconvincing. People who are sure of their strength don't talk or write like that. It is more defiant than descriptive.

The word 'spirit' means breath. This does not suggest a hard aggressive core but a soft give and take. St Peter, who was probably much tougher than Thoreau, could use gentle language to describe that 'inner core': "the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit" (1 Peter 3:4). It matters a great deal how we describe our inner being; it matters not only for our self-understanding but also for our understanding of God. We are the primary image of God, and if we have a hard mechanical sense of ourselves, our image of God will be similarly hard and separate. It may well match the image of God in, say, Sheehan's *Apologetics* long ago, but it has nothing to do with the Father of Jesus Christ. St Paul, who was even tougher than Peter, could write, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God" (Eph 4:30). The Spirit of God is gentle, which does not mean weak. Real strength is always gentle. One moment's experience of God's Spirit is enough to do away with all talk of an indestructible inner core attempting to "approach the Absolute and unite itself with the Divinity" – as if we could do such a thing by our own heroic efforts.

By way of relief, read these lines by Jessica Powers on today's feast of Pentecost:

*That was the day when Fire came down from heaven,
inaugurating the first spring of love.*

*Blood melted in the frozen veins, and even
the least bird sang in the mind's inmost grove.*

21 May
Mk 9:14-29

When the whole crowd saw Jesus, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?' Someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.'

He answered them, 'You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.'

And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.' Jesus said to him, 'If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'

When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!' After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, 'He is dead.' But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.

When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?' He said to them, 'This kind can come out only through prayer.'

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

What happens when there is no 'if'? "All things are possible for one who believes." 'Belief' isn't a matter of calculating the odds and finding them to be satisfactory. The word 'trust' would translate it better. The great tragedy of misunderstanding at the Reformation, people now see, was that this was missed. *Fiducia*, trust, was an essential part of faith for Martin Luther. For Catholics, *fiducia* was bracketed under the virtue of hope rather than under faith. What Luther meant by faith included what Catholics meant by hope. With hindsight we can say: it doesn't matter how you draw the lines between faith, hope, and love. They are three aspects of the religious spirit; it might even be better if we were to write them as a single word – faithhopelove.

"I do believe, help my unbelief," said the man in today's reading. Is that a contradiction? Perhaps yes if you were to take belief as isolated from *fiducia*, trust.

There's a yes or no quality about pure belief, but there are many degrees of trust; in fact trust is all about degrees. By trusting you learn how to trust, and by trusting again you learn to trust more. Belief (or faith as we prefer to call it) doesn't just lie changeless in the mind; it grows out of itself. That's how every living thing grows.

22 May

Mk 9:30-37

[Jesus and his disciples] went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.'

But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

St Augustine wrote: "Observe a tree, how it first reaches downwards so that it may then shoot upwards. It sinks its roots deep into the ground so that its top may reach towards the skies. Is it not from humility that it endeavours to grow? But without humility it will not reach higher. You want to grow up into the air without roots. That is not growth, but collapse."

The disciples of Jesus had not yet reached this awareness. They were not above squabbling about rank, a weakness that has hexed the clergy ever since. In this passage it says "they" were discussing; we can guess that James and John were in the thick of it, because in the very next chapter these two are asking for the best places in his Kingdom (10:35). It is the ego, the false self, that looks for promotion; the real self, the self that comes every moment from the hand of God, doesn't need it or look for it. "If you are in love with precedence and high honour," said St John Chrysostom, "pursue the humblest things, pursue being the least regarded of all, pursue being the lowliest of all, pursue being the smallest of all, pursue placing yourselves behind others."

Religion often brings out the worst in people: hypocrisy, fanaticism, and cruelty. Seeking preferment is not as serious a fault as these, but it is the next on the list. Jesus wanted on this occasion to be alone with the disciples, in peace and quiet, to give them a new teaching: about humility and suffering. This is the hardest lesson of all, and one that no one wants to hear, even though every mortal being is a sufferer. Jesus himself was to drain the cup of suffering to the dregs. "God had one son on earth without sin, but never one without suffering," wrote St Augustine. This made the disciples' squabbling for position look very shallow indeed. "What were you arguing about?" he asked. "They said nothing..." because they were ashamed. They suppressed their argument for the moment, and it looked as if the argument was over.

But no, it would break out again later. By their very obtuseness they are teaching us something – just as a slow learner sometimes helps the whole class by slowing down the teacher.

23 May

Mk 9:38-40

John said to Jesus, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.'

“Whoever is not against us is for us.” The same thing is repeated in Luke 9:50. But on another occasions he said the contrary: “whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (Lk 11:23; Mt 12:30). To make the difference clearer, put it this way: *a)* the person who is neutral is on our side; and *b)* the person who is neutral is *not* on our side. These are contrary statements, and we must try to find out how the two could be true together.

Could it be that sometimes we need to hear one, and sometimes the other? There are times when we are just hanging on by our fingernails; in those times we need to hear that despite our weaknesses we are with the Lord. There are other times when we feel smug and self-satisfied, and in those moments we need to be told: shake yourself up, you're on the wrong side of the line!

24 May

Mk 9:41-50

Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'

"Hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched." This is a direct quotation from Isaiah 66:24. It is a terrifying image. It actually referred to a rubbish dump outside Jerusalem. There was a reason why it was a rubbish dump: it had been something worse before. 'Gehenna' is another version of the word 'Hinnom', a valley just beside the city of Jerusalem. It was the valley in which Ahaz had set up pagan forms of worship: fire and human sacrifice. "He burnt incense in the valley of Hinnom, and burnt his children in the fire" (2 Chronicles 28:3). The later reaction to this was horror. Jeremiah cursed the valley (7:32; 19:6f). It was declared unclean, and it became a rubbish dump. Worms bred on the refuse, and the parts of it that had been set on fire smouldered continually, as rubbish dumps do. It became an image of hell.

Remember, this is poetry! "If your hand, if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off!" Jesus spoke like a poet, not like a lawyer or a judge. If you want images of hell look into your own nightmares, which are poetry too: terrible poetry. Think of the worst that could happen to you. Make it an image of the loss of God.

25 May

Mk 10:1-12

Jesus left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them.

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." 'For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

In the time of Jesus, the Jewish ideal of marriage was the highest imaginable. "The very altar sheds tears when a man divorces the wife of his youth." But in practice, divorce was extremely easy to obtain. Everything hung on the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1, where it was laid down that a man could divorce his wife if he found in her "some impropriety." The Shammai school of thought held that this referred only to adultery. But the Hillel school held that even the spoiling of a dish of food was grounds for divorce, or talking to a strange man, or criticising her in-laws, or if she spoke too loudly.... Rabbi Akiba even said that if a man found a woman who was fairer in his eyes than his wife, he could be granted a divorce.

Quite clearly, then, when Jesus took a strict line on divorce, he was putting right a grave injustice against women.

There is an intriguing piece of dialogue between Moses and God in Exodus 3:13f. Moses says to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you."'

In Hebrew, verbs are not clearly divided into past, present and future tenses as in modern languages; and I have seen this translated as "I will be who I will be." God was not just giving a name, like an identity tag; God was making a promise. It is as if God said, 'I will always be there for you, no matter what happens.'

In the marriage ceremony people say something like this to each other. They are speaking God's kind of language, where every word is also a promise.

26 May

Mk 10:13-16

People were bringing little children to Jesus in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.'

And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

It started in the 19th century, but it was only in the 20th that the Western world really romanticised childhood. Only then did we begin to believe that a child was something superior to an adult: that he/she had a greater measure of innocence, virtue, and even wisdom than the average adult. To all the ages that went before, that belief would have seemed very bizarre indeed.

The world in the time of Jesus (and not only then) believed that a child was a deficient adult, a nobody who knew nothing, had nothing, and was nothing: an extension of the parents with no rights of its own. So when Jesus said you must be like children to enter the kingdom (presence) of God, he meant you must be a nobody, a nothing....

Does this canonise ignorance and inexperience? Like St Paul we are allowed to make appropriate distinctions. "Brothers and sisters," he wrote, "do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults" (1 Cor 14:20). To be childlike is not the same as being childish. Childlike qualities are simplicity, trust, openness, hope... so many of the qualities needed for living a spiritual life. The French mystic Jeanne-Marie Guyon (1648 – 1717) wrote, 'The simple ones, so far from being incapable of [spiritual] perfection, are, by their docility, innocence, and humility, peculiarly adapted and qualified for its attainment... they are less employed in speculation and less tenacious of their own opinions... they submit more freely to the teachings of the Divine Spirit: whereas others, who are blinded by self-sufficiency and enslaved by prejudice, give great resistance to the operations of Grace.'

27 May [Trinity Sunday]

Mt 28:16-20

The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

"Who can understand the Trinity?" wrote St Augustine in the 5th century. "Rare are the persons who, when they speak of it, also know what they speak of...." Then with all due qualifications and apologies, he suggests a way that might throw a little light on it. Look at yourself, he says; you see that you *exist* and that you have a *mind* and a *will*. These are three dimensions of your reality, and yet you are one. You are a kind of trinity: three in one and one in three. It is just an image, for as he said, "Who can in any way express it plainly? Who can in any way rashly make a pronouncement about it?"

It is only an image, yes, but it has this advantage: that it is taken from personal life, and not from mathematics. Sometimes people have seen the mystery of the Trinity as a piece of impossible mathematics in which 1×3 is still 1. St John, like Augustine, looked in personal life for analogies of the Trinity. He wrote, 'Whoever does not *love* does not know God, for God is love' (1 Jn 4:8). This is a profoundly challenging statement. If I don't live in love I don't know God. A little further on John wrote, 'God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them' (1Jn 4:16). I may be the most learned theologian in the world, I may have hundreds of ideas for the betterment of the Church and society, I may be working like a slave to implement these ideas; but if I am not living in love it is wasted effort.

Let's extend the personal image a little further, to *groups* of persons trying to live together. 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 group. The other is opposite but equally painful: a loss of identification with the community. 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. Now try to think again about the Trinity. The Father is eternally the Father. He never has been and never will be the Son or the Spirit. Likewise the other Persons. Each is eternally a unique Person. There is no suffocation. And yet they are so much one that we have to say there is only one God. The doctrine of the Trinity shows us that the inner life of

God is a community – the only perfect community. Such a life we all aspire to, such a life we long for in all our dreams and waking: full presence to others without being diminished or disrespected in any way, a joyful pouring out of our lives for others, such that it makes us fully who we are ourselves.

Deep down, our longing for such a community is our longing for God. All our struggle to achieve it is our struggle for God, and all the pain and frustration we experience on the way is redeemed and given meaning by that transcendent Community that is God.

28 May

Mk 10:17-27

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother."' He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'

When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he asked Jesus. Having done well for himself in this life, he wants to know how he can be equally successful in the next. At first Jesus gave him the expected answer: he quoted the commandments to him. This was about the only occasion in the gospels when Jesus gave someone the expected answer: it was an answer that the young man would have known already. "You know the commandments..." The man replied, "Master, I have kept all these from my earliest days." This declaration must have made him feel that he was the brightest light around. But he had said it to the wrong person. He was confident that he could stand before God on his own merit: he had *kept* all the commandments since childhood. His self-assurance – even self-congratulation – is identical to that of the Pharisees.

Immediately Jesus drew him further on and challenged him to a new way of life. We are used to hearing this story, and therefore most of its impact is lost on us. In the time of Jesus wealth was generally seen as a guarantee of God's blessing (as well as of social status). But Jesus told him, "Go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor... then come, follow me." This was too much, and the man went away sad. He was no longer the brightest light; he would be remembered forever as the only one in the gospels who refused a direct call from Jesus.

But if Jesus is now saying that wealth is no guarantee of God's favour, then how can you know how you stand with God? He repeated what he had said, even adding emphasis. No one could remain unclear about his teaching: wealth, and the *false sense of security* that comes with it, can destroy your relationship with God.

Two opposing visions of life come face to face in this story. It is a head-on collision, but strangely there are no fireworks as in the clashes with the Pharisees. Mark's gospel even makes the encounter an affectionate one: "Jesus looked steadily at him *and loved him*, and said..." (Matthew and Luke write simply, "Jesus answered..."). All three gospels say that the rich man became "sad." He was indeed a conscientious man, and was not trying to discredit Jesus in the style of the Pharisees. He was a follower of traditional beliefs (incidentally, Matthew alone calls him "young"); and he seems like a man who had taken in what Jesus said, even though he did not feel able to follow it.

Some commentators suggested that the eye of the needle was a small gate at the entrance to Jerusalem called the "Needle's Eye Gate." But this clearly blunts the force of his statement. A camel could conceivably get through such a gate, but Jesus is asserting the *impossibility* of a rich man entering the Kingdom of God. When the disciples heard this they were understandably puzzled. They came from the same tradition as the rich young man. "In that case," they said, "who can be saved?" Jesus' reply is the key to the whole episode: "For men it is impossible, but not for God." We cannot pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Only God can spring us from the trap of our imagined self-sufficiency. It is not by our own resources, whether spiritual or material, that we come into God's Presence, but by God's own gift.

29 May

Mk 10:28-31

Peter began to say to Jesus, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

In Matthew's account Peter's question is more blatant: "Look, we have left everything and followed you. *What then will we have?*" (Mark does not have this second part.) Should we recoil from all self-interest? The 'gospel of wealth' folks would find Peter's question quite normal. Isn't it true that we stand in need of everything? Is it 'selfish' to expect God to reward us for our efforts? And what of our endless talk about 'eternal reward'?

St Bernard of Clairvaux in the 12th century shed a very clear light on this topic: "God is not loved without reward, even though God should be loved without *thought* of reward. True charity cannot be empty, but it does not *seek* profit, 'for it does not seek its own benefit' (1 Cor 13:5). It is an affection, not a contract. It is not given or received by agreement. It is given freely; it makes us spontaneous. True love is content. It has its reward in what it loves. For if you seek to love something, but really love it for the sake of something else, you actually love what you are pursuing as your real end, not that which is a means to it." Two centuries later, Meister Eckhart made the same point. Speaking about people who want to gain something from religion, Meister Eckhart said, "They love God for the sake of something else that is not God," and he went so far as to compare them to Judas. He also said, "Some people want to love God as they love a cow. You love a cow for her milk and her cheese and your own profit. That is what all those people do who love God for outward wealth or inward consolation - and they do not truly love God, they love their own profit."

What all these people seem to be telling us is to avoid the commercial spirit in our faith. That is a very counter-cultural thing to do, because the commercial spirit enters everywhere now. We are not to make a business of religion: God is not our business, we are God's business.

30 May

Mk 10:32-45

The disciples were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.'

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?' They replied, 'We are able.'

Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptised, you will be baptised; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognise as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

Jesus is going deliberately towards his Passion and death. It is easy to imagine that procession: Jesus striding ahead, the disciples following in a daze, and the crowd bewildered. Normal prudence would urge us to avoid suffering and death – to go in the opposite direction. But this scene is telling us something about the wisdom of the cross, which is foolishness in terms of human wisdom.

James and John picked a bad moment. The silliness of their question stands out all the more clearly because of the gravity of the moment. They are looking for preferment. Mark's is the earliest of the gospels, and it has none of the polish that the others have; it is blunt in several revealing ways. Matthew's gospel (20:20) edits the story and has their *mother* make the embarrassing request! But he forgot to adjust the rest of the story accordingly. For example, he has Jesus replying in the *plural*, not the

singular; and he forgot to delete the words about the others becoming angry with the brothers. If it had been their mother who made the request, the others would have been sorry for the brothers or embarrassed for them, but certainly not angry with them. Why the cover-up? These two were to become great apostles; with Peter they were the inner group. Yet we see how crass they were in this passage. It gives us all some hope!

Look at the others, the ones who were angry with the “Sons of Thunder” for wanting preferment. If you are angry you are involved somehow; you too are in the running. If the others were not also thinking just like the Sons of Thunder, they would not be angry with them, they would simply pity them; they would take them aside and have a brotherly chat with them. But they were angry, they were in no way different from them – except that they were cleverer, less forthright. It is always instructive to look with clear sight at our anger. It always has something to tell us.

31 May [Visitation]

Lk 1:39-56

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt 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 leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

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

When the Roman emperor Nero saw his immense palace, the *domus aurea*, finally completed, he said, “Ah, at last a house fit for a man!” Many who are less extreme than he (there have been very few who were more) would still think of human life as consisting in some degree of success, power, recognition....

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

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

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

1 June

Mk 11:11-26

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve. On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.

And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city. In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. Then Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses."

It was not the season for figs. Wasn't it unreasonable to expect to find them? Ephrem the Syrian (4th century) is here to explain. "If Jesus had sought fruit from it at the appropriate time," he wrote, "no one would have known that there was a figurative meaning embedded here. Instead of the literal fig tree, therefore, he showed that it was *Jerusalem* that he was reproaching." Other ancient writers agreed. St Augustine: "What terrible thing had the poor tree done simply in not bearing fruit? Could the tree reasonably be faulted for its fruitlessness? No. But *human beings* who by their own free will decide not to bear fruit – that is a different matter." Gregory the Great: "The figs which the Lord had sought were the fruit of the synagogue, which had the leaves of the Law, but not the fruit of works." The fig tree stands there at the beginning and at the

end of the episode in the temple. It is meant to symbolise the barrenness of the Temple cult.

Those ancient writers had the power of symbolic thinking. Today we tend to be more literal. For example, the philosopher Bertrand Russell, in *Why I am not a Christian*, took exception to the withering of the fig tree; it was not a gentlemanly thing for Jesus to do, he said. That literal fig tree and the Temple are ancient history, and we could continue to focus on them 'out there', as if they had no significance except as objects of study. But the Gospel is always for *us* and for *now*. It requires a leap of imagination to see that. See Cyril of Jerusalem make the leap: "Let it not come about that it should happen *to us* what happened to the barren fig tree in the Gospel. Let not Jesus come in these days and utter the same curse upon the fruitless."

Meister Eckhart in the 14th century pursued it into more detail: "Who are they who bought and sold [in the Temple], and who are they still...? See, those are all merchants who, while avoiding mortal sin and wishing to be virtuous, do good works to the glory of God, such as fasts, vigils, prayers and the rest, all kind of good works, but they do them *in order that* our Lord may give them something in return, or that God may do something they wish for. All these are merchants. That is plain to see, for they want to give one things in exchange for another, and so to barter with our Lord."

2 June

Mk 11:27-33

As Jesus was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him and said, "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?" Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of Jn come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me."

They argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'Of human origin'?" - they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet. So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

I know a funny man whose last line in every argument (no matter what the subject) is: "Yes, but not in the South." He uses it so often that we know by now that it is comedy, and that he just means to say that he has tired of the argument. Jesus' reply in today's reading sounds a bit like that.

It is very clear that the group of men who approached Jesus were an official deputation from the Sanhedrin. "The chief priests, the scribes and the elders" were the three component sections of the Sanhedrin, the supreme religious authority of the Jews. They questioned his authority to teach. When authorities are quick to question people's authority, it is often because their own authority is the uppermost thing in their minds. Jesus had innate authority, but theirs was borrowed: that is why they felt so threatened. The weaker a man is, the more he will insist on his authority and privileges. Jesus was in no way intimidated by them, though they had power of life and death over him, as they proved in the sequel. He seems rather to have been bored by them. They had failed to make a connection with him. St Augustine: "They said, 'We do not know.' And because they had shut themselves up against him, by asserting that they did not know what they knew, the Lord did not open up to them because they did not knock. For it has been said, 'Knock and it will be opened to you.' But they not only had not knocked that it might be opened, but by their denial they barricaded the door against themselves. Then the Lord said to them, 'Neither do I tell you by what authority I do these things.'"

3 June [Body and Blood of Christ]

Mk 14:12-16, 22-26

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to Jesus, 'Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?' So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, "The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?" He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.'

So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal. While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'

There is a very precious early Christian document called the *Didachè*, discovered in its entirety only in 1873, though Christian writers through the ages always knew of its existence, and had passages from it that had been quoted by ancient writers. It was written sometime between the years 50 and 100, and so it is even earlier than some of the New Testament. 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 the many years since that time, they have got on with lots of things while I slept. And I have to admit that I'm not very repentant about it. 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 seeds that a farmer scatters in his field and that grow even when he is 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 during the early years of our lives. 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 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. [See this month's 'Wisdom Line' on this website for a passage in which Julian calls Jesus 'mother'.]

On this feast of the Body and Blood of the Lord let's not be too grown up to let the visceral images of the Eucharist play around our minds.

4 June

Mk 12:1-12

Jesus began to speak [to the chief priests, the scribes and the elders] in parables. 'A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watch-tower; 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.

*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. (Psalm 80: 9,10)*

Israel was the vine, a special object of God's care. (See Isaiah 5:2-7, on which Jesus based the parable in today's reading.) Jesus once identified himself as the true vine (John 15:1ff); he was the best of Israel, God's beloved. But in this parable he is identified not as the vine but as the son and heir to the vineyard. 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!

5 June

Mk 12:13-17

Some Pharisees and some Herodians tried to trap Jesus 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.

6 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 is 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.

7 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.

At last a man with a fairly honest question! It was a much debated question among rabbis: "Which is the greatest commandment?" 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, "Well spoken, Master!" It was like a teacher saying, "Good boy!" He sounded more like an examiner than a questioner. But he was better than the ones we saw yesterday and the previous day. "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.

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 many religions and 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. I know a few people from whom I would run a mile if they threatened to love me as they loved themselves. Our self-love is not be a reliable guide to how we should love one another. His love for us, and not our love, is the measure of love.