November
2019

GOSPEL COMMENTARIES

1 November [All Saints]
Mt 5:1-12
When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

If the Sermon on the Mount is a summary of all Christian teaching, the Beatitudes are a summary of the Sermon on the Mount. Here, then, if anywhere, we have the essence of the Gospel. If you went to school around the same time that I did, you can still remember (we had to memorise them) the forty Catechism questions and answers on the Ten Commandments. Yes, there were forty: What is commanded, and what is forbidden by each of the ten; then a parallel set: What else is commanded and what else is forbidden by each of them. But we were never told what was commanded or forbidden or even recommended by the eight Beatitudes. The Ten Commandments are basic rules of morality, but the Beatitudes are a measure of how far beyond this the Gospel calls us.

The morality of the Ten Commandments is a morality that can be measured: it is possible to say exactly where you are with them, ticking the ones you broke and the degree of the breach. Christians may come to believe that they have no sin just because they haven't been in breach of the Commandments. But the morality of the Beatitudes is harder to quantify: how poor in spirit are you? How meek, gentle, merciful…? You can never say “I’ve reached it!” You can never be self-righteous. And you can never even begin to think that you are better than another – because you can't compare.
2 November [All Souls]

Jn 6:37-40

*Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me: that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father: that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."

“Everything that the Father gives me will come to me.” What can this statement mean? One way of groping for its meaning is to see how I would have to change it if I were to apply it to myself. Everything that the Father gives me does not come to me — because I resist it, or disregard it, or neglect it…. God gives me physical health, but I damage it in many ways. God gives me freedom, but I make myself a slave of habit or even addiction. God gives me intelligence and imagination, but I use them for selfish advantage…. No, almost everything that the Father gives me is twisted by the way I receive it — if I consent to receive it at all.

But everything that the Father gives to Jesus he receives fully; he will never disown it, because he is completely vulnerable to God, he does not live from his ego, he is completely transparent. What does the Father give him? He gives us into his hands. We have been “drawn by the Father,” John says, a little further on (verse 44); and “no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father” (verse 65). We could not be in safer hands. We are safer in his hands than in our own: more faithful, more hopeful, more loving — freer in every way, if we can identify with his vulnerability to God and his transparency.

On this day we remember “all souls,” all who have died. They have passed beyond our sight, they have gone into the invisible, they have something of the transparency of Jesus. Our judgments follow them to the grave, but they have been given for safe keeping to Jesus who received them from his Father, the Father who judges no one (Jn 5:22). The Father who “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4) does not abandon them when their world has fallen apart.
3 November [31st Sunday in Ordinary time]
Lk 19:1-10
He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Luke is the specialist in showing the value of poverty and the evils of wealth. He has more to say on the subject than any of the other gospel writers. Even before the birth of Jesus, he has Mary praising God for having “filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (1:53). He shows us Jesus born in poverty, “and laid in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (2:7). In his version of the Beatitudes, Jesus says, “Blessed are you who are poor” (6:20), not “blessed are the poor in spirit,” as in Matthew 5:3. And then, to make sure we don’t miss the point, he adds, “Woe to you who are rich” (6:24). He alone tells the parable of the rich man who had so much that he had to build bigger barns (12:16-20). He alone tells the story of the rich man feasting sumptuously while Lazarus sat begging at his door (16:19-31). With Matthew and Mark, he tells the story of the rich young man (18:18-23), and Jesus’ saying that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.

The stage is set for Zacchaeus the wealthy tax collector. Tax collectors were among the most despised people in the society. The tax system itself ensured that. Their wages were the shekels they could extort from their own people over and above what they collected for the occupying Roman powers. Zacchaeus was “a chief tax collector,” one of the best at his job. Everything that Luke has written about wealth prepares us for a fierce confrontation between Jesus and Zacchaeus. What we hear instead is an invitation to dinner.

On other occasions when Jesus consorted with “tax collectors and sinners,” it was the Pharisees who complained. But on this occasion “all who saw it began to grumble and said, ‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.’” All, even his own followers.

Where are we to situate ourselves in this scene? It comes natural to us to place the Pharisees among the ‘baddies’, thereby placing ourselves among the ‘goodies’. But in this case we are inescapably included in the ‘all’.

It’s a trick of the mind to divide the world into camps. It provides an opportunity to place ourselves on the high ground (that’s why we do it). But this time it is impossible. God’s mercy doesn’t follow the contours of the land as we map it. It doesn’t restrict itself to the narrow channels that we construct leading (surprise!) to our own door. It floods out everywhere. We see this happening in the behaviour of Jesus.

It would be a useful exercise to make a top-ten list of villains: criminals, terrorists, financiers, politicians from the other side, a few industrialists…. In your imagination sit down with them, one by one, in the company of Jesus, and see how the conversation goes….
Jesus said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Some people retain a high opinion of their own importance to the very end. "What a great artist dies here!" said Nero as he prepared to commit suicide – *qualis artifex pereo!* The French philosopher Auguste Comte had an equally high opinion of himself: "What an irreparable loss!" he said on realising that his end was near. But these were exceptions, really. Because of age and defeat (and wisdom, let it be said), the ego has normally modified its claims by the time death approaches. Worldly honour works for us only for as long as we are worldly; as soon as we begin to lose our footing in this world we see how empty worldly honour is. We "wither into the truth" as Yeats put it.

Jesus warned his disciples against worldly honour, and there have always been many who took his warning to heart. There are perfect examples in the New Testament: Jesus called John the Baptist the greatest man who ever lived; but John was great because he was able to be little: "He [Jesus] must increase, I must decrease," are the words John’s gospel attributes to him (3:30). Mary the mother of Jesus is the most celebrated example; she was great because she saw her own littleness: "[God] looks on his servant in her lowliness" (Lk 1:48). It is the distinctive logic of the gospel: the first shall be last, the last first. Rank and preferment and promotion are the polar opposite of the teaching of Jesus.

Humility is an important theme in Luke’s gospel: 1:52-53; 6:21, 25; 10:15; 18:14, etc. This was in total contrast to the pagan Roman world of his time. "Humble things befit the humble," wrote Horace, *parvum parva decent.* But Luke says, "[God] casts the mighty from their thrones and raises up the lowly; God fills the starving with good things, sends the rich away empty" (1:52-53). Sometimes the disciples of Jesus are spiritually closer to Horace than they are to him. There was failure – even in the early days – to grasp this teaching of Jesus: read, for example, 1 Cor 11:17-22; Phil 2:1-11; James 2:1-5; 4:6; 5:1-6. And things got steadily worse as the centuries rolled on. Today, once again, there are cardinals who have taken to strutting like princes and with stunning irony scolding us about secularism.

For Nietzsche, Christian morality was a perfect example of a slave morality driven by resentment of the strong. But Max Scheler disagreed, seeing the Christian saint as driven by strength and nobility, not by resentment (or rather 'ressentiment'; they both used the French word). It takes greatness to become little, strength to become weak, wisdom to embrace the folly of the Cross.
One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to Jesus, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” Then Jesus said to him, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’

So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ And the slave said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’ Then the master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.’

We are still at the same meal (see yesterday’s reading), and the atmosphere is tense. So someone tries to lighten it up a little, exclaiming gallantly, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” But Jesus tells a story, the point of which is, in effect, that there will be surprises in the kingdom of God. (He wasn’t always easy company.)

In the story, people began to make excuses for not coming to the party. They are not the most convincing excuses in the world. Why was that first one in such a hurry to check out his new field? Surely he had checked it out before he bought it. The second one had bought five oxen. Most ancient landowners had only one or two, so this was like saying, “I must take my Ferrari for a run.” The third one said he was just married and therefore couldn’t come. Ancient husbands were far from hen-pecked, so it wasn’t that his wife had refused him permission. The law allowed a newly married man to be free from certain obligations, such as military service (Deut 20:7; 24:5); but going to a party wouldn’t spoil his honeymoon. Besides, he had already accepted the invitation. Obviously he just didn’t want to bother.

If you really want to do something, you always find time and opportunity to do it. If you don’t want to do it, one excuse is as good as another. To excuse yourself is to accuse yourself, say the French, a clever race of people: qui s’excuse s’accuse. Some of us spend a great part of the day making excuses. We even make excuses to ourselves, incredibly expecting ourselves to believe them. It would be interesting to study them as a kind of literary genre. They are a catalogue of dishonesty. An honest failure is a fine thing, but dishonesty has nothing to be said for it. So in Jesus’ story, the master sent out for some honest failures: “the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.” When there was still room, he sent out for more – from the highways and the byways.

We can appreciate that the “leader of the Pharisees”, who had invited Jesus to dinner, didn’t enjoy his dinner very much that day; and we can see him wondering which character in the story was himself. We may well wonder – because the story is about us too.
6 November
Lk 14:25-33

Large crowds were travelling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

Hate father and mother? Hate life itself? This is a deeply puzzling statement, and we have to look carefully at it. A scholar writes, "The Semitic mind [Jesus was a Semite] commonly associated opposing pairs of words, without distinguishing intermediate shades of meaning. 'To hate' could signify 'to love less.'" (He gives examples of this usage: Gen 29:31; Deut 21:15; Mt 5:43; Jn 12:25.) Many modern translations of these and similar passages substitute some other word for 'hate'. So the strange verse is not telling us to hate our fathers and mothers, but rather not to give them precedence over the Lord.

Are Christians extremists, then? Yes, if you mean that we are asked to take the most important thing in the world and put ourselves wholly behind it. Moderation doesn't mean never going to any extreme; it means not going to false extremes. There is no limit to the effort we are to put into living the Christian life. You couldn't imagine St Paul, who said, "Fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience," saying instead, "Do take a little interest in what's going on in the Church, holding onto a bit of faith if you can!" Other creatures put everything they have into what they do. I remember having a close view of a bird singing. What energy he put into it! He was singing, body and soul; there was nothing in him that wasn't singing. He wasn't singing because it was expected of him, nor because he wanted to be popular, nor because he was drunk…. He was singing, pure and simple. I was made aware immediately of how I hang back in the very act of doing things, how I put only part of myself into what I do. This is more or less what we call 'normal'. How hard it is to be pure and simple! Every creature can be our teacher.

When we were very young children we lived fully. We put everything we had into everything we did. We didn't think about ourselves. If someone put a mirror in front of us we wouldn't even recognise ourselves. But soon the fatal limiting begins. We begin to be self-conscious and to worry about ourselves; we begin to have a distinctive character. It is a kind of armour around one; the more character you have, the more you are limited. You sometimes meet an adult who is unable to be part of anything and whom nothing can please. But there is a kind of infinity about a small child: everything is welcome, everything is possible.

So when we meet Jesus, who is very like a child, we think he's an extremist. No, he's just alive. That's what makes him different from the rest of us.

Being alive, he breathes. He receives deeply and gives deeply. "The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands" (Jn 3:35). And "I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (Jn 15:15). It was this same Jesus who said to us, "Give up everything!"

I have met other child-like people too. A Japanese Zen Master, who had little English, was giving instruction in meditation. He just said, "Sit there, and give up everything!"
Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Luke specialises in lost property. His gospel is peopled with waifs and strays, some of whom we met a few days ago: the people "from the highways and byways." The present chapter consists of three parables on the theme of lost-and-found. There is the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (the prodigal).

These parables were inspired by the Pharisees' objection to his friendship with sinners. The Pharisees gave no evidence of any joy in their lives, but in all three of Jesus' parables there is joy and celebration. Those Pharisees try to make you believe that religion is a kind of elevated boredom. Many Christians are remarkably like them; they take the joy out of religion, leaving it dull and uninspiring. A great deal of Christian preaching is like flat beer.

It is the drama of loss and recovery that sparks joy in each of the parables. If there is no joy for me, it is probably because I have never felt lost. And if I have never felt lost, that is proof that I have never attempted to go anywhere. I have made no personal journey; instead I have just followed suit; I have been a good boy or girl all my life. I am the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Yes, the prodigal son behaved very badly; and no, I am not worse than he is. I really am good. But if you could speak of 'bad goodness', that would describe me. I am good in a way that equates goodness with playing safe, never risking getting spattered in trying to help another. The Pharisees said that you became ritually unclean if you walked two steps of the road with a sinner. You won't catch any of them going after a person who is lost. They have never risked being lost themselves. They wouldn't know what to do or say to a lost person. So they stay inside their own crippling definition of goodness and criticise anyone who isn't similarly crippled.

Better to be a bad Christian than a good Pharisee.
8 November
Lk 16:1-8
Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

This is a very puzzling parable, and it has been a problem from the beginning. What exactly did the manager do? Was the ‘squandering’ mentioned at the beginning a case of incompetence that he then attempted to cover up? If so, then the cover-up was the beginning of the dishonesty. Or was his squandering a case of dishonesty from the beginning? Nobody seems able to decide how to read this detail of the story.

Some commentators try to make sense of it as follows. Such managers had great liberty in the way they did their work. To pay themselves, they would lend out the owner’s property and charge high interest rates on it. What this steward cancelled may have been these interest rates. In other words he himself, not his master, was the loser. This would explain how the master could commend him and admire his shrewdness, but it doesn’t explain why he is described as ‘dishonest’ in the last verse. The argument is sure to go on.

At all events, the use of wealth is a major topic in Luke’s gospel, and this parable is unique to him. He is keenly aware of the power that wealth has to make fools of us: see the parable of the rich fool in 12:16-21 (“I will build bigger barns....” “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you.”), and the parable about the rich man and Lazarus in 16:19-31). Currencies fluctuate, but this seems to hold true for all time.

Jesus remarked that worldly people are more shrewd than people of the light (the disciples). We tend to be sharp when it comes to money, but slow and vague when it comes to matters of the spirit. Someone who is financially savvy is considered the very opposite of a fool. But Luke turns this precisely on its head.
The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

'St John Lateran' is a church in Rome, not a person. In the words carved in front, it is the "mother of all churches." It is the pope's official ecclesiastical seat in Rome (St Peter’s in the Vatican is not a cathedral), and the popes resided there for many centuries. It was the first Christian church building. The ground for it was donated by the Emperor Constantine early in the 4th century. It was rebuilt four or five times. The Vandals wrecked it in the 5th century, an earthquake did the same in the 9th, two fires destroyed it at different times in the 14th, and there was little left of the original when the interior was redone in the 17th. The statues that line the centre isle are so massive in scale that you feel like an ant as you walk there.

What are we doing as we make a fuss about a church building in Rome? We are thinking symbolically. A church – any church – is a symbol of a believing community, just as a house is a symbol of the self. Johann Tauler said, "We must go into our house, our souls..." We search for God there, and God searches for us. This is not usually a peaceful process: "God ransacks the house," Tauler said, "throwing aside one thing after another."

But churches all look so finished; the seeking and finding seem to be long over; there is nothing there to express the drama of the great search. Those massive statues in the Lateran basilica, especially, say nothing about searching; they are all about assertion. Too much assertion and emphasis can frighten away a seeker. We cannot be brow-beaten into faith; when we are, it is someone else’s belief we end up with, not our own. Then it is just that: belief, not faith. You can pick up and drop beliefs at will; they are like clothes that are in and out of fashion. But faith is something deeper and more difficult; it does not come cheap: it is God's gift, given freely, but it becomes ours only through our own search. God comes searching for us, Tauler said, as we search for God. God searches for us in all our ragged imperfection.
10 November [32nd Sunday in Ordinary time]

Lk 20:27-38

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her." Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

I knew a saintly old priest who was instructing a small group of adults for baptism. When a friend asked him how it was going, he said, 'Not well…. They have no questions.' If there are no questions there are no real doors opening. The person who exudes clarity and certainly about everything probably hasn’t dug very deep. Understanding doesn’t come cheap. And the simplest questions are the hardest of all. The German philosopher, Schopenhauer (1788-1860), was walking along a street in Dresden one day, seeking answers to questions that bothered him. Passing by a garden, he decided to sit down and look at the flowers. The owner was suspicious and called the police. A policeman arrived and asked him, ‘Who are you?’ Schopenhauer paused and said, ‘If you can help me find the answer to that question, I will be eternally grateful to you!'

Having said that, we have to recognise that there are also cheap questions. A question has the quality of the mind it comes from. It can come from idle or malicious curiosity, from vanity, cruelty, deception…the whole palette. The question these Sadducees asked Jesus in today’s reading was not an innocent question. They were not seeking an answer, they were seeking to trip him up. All of chapter 20 to that point was full of these treacherous questions: first the chief priests and scribes asked him by what authority he was teaching (2); then ‘they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor’ (20); then they asked him about paying tax to Caesar (22); and now, from the Sadducees, this mocking question about the resurrection.

It is worth while reading the whole chapter to see how brilliantly he despatched them all. He was not deceived by any of these questions. No doubt he saw the mind the questions were coming from. Luke often lets us know this, by adding a comment such as 'he knew what they were thinking' (6:8; 11:17).

Pharisees and Sadducees are often mentioned together in the gospels, but in their beliefs they could not be further apart. The Pharisees were a religious party with no political ambition; they believed in the resurrection, in angels, in spirits; they expected the coming of the Messiah. The Sadducees were few in number but wealthy; they were the governing class, willing to collaborate with the Roman Empire (the rich always collaborate with the powers-that-be); they were secular in outlook, and did not believe in the coming of any Messiah (who might upset the system); they did not believe in the next life, nor in the existence of angels or spirits.

When the Sadducees posed their question about the status (in the next life) of the woman who was married in this life to seven brothers, they were only making fun of the belief in a next life. No Rabbi had ever brought a ‘proof’ of it from the first five books of the Scriptures (the only ones that the Sadducees accepted). But in Jesus they met, for the first time, a Rabbi who did!
Read again from v. 37: “Moses himself showed it to be true...” (Moses was considered the author of the first five books).

And for good measure, Jesus threw in a reference to angels, knowing that they didn’t believe in them!
Jesus said to his disciples, "Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive." The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."

In the previous chapters Jesus faced those who were outside his immediate community – the crowds, the Scribes, the Pharisees – but now he faces his disciples. They will be the leaders of the new community, and he tells them they are not to be stumbling blocks to others. The "little ones" are not children but "the poor" of the Beatitudes (Lk 6:20-23): those who will be in the care of his disciples. In Matthew also the "little children" are adults, because "they believe in me" (Mt 18:5). Certainly Jesus had compared the true disciple to a child, but then he went on to talk not about children but about disciples.

The millstones in this passage, then, are for Church leaders who fail those in their charge. They are not to scandalise their flock. They are to have the courage to point out wrongdoing, but at the same time they are to be ready to forgive wrongdoing against themselves – even to forgive the same person "seven times" a day. That means endlessly. "How could we ever live up to that?" they seem to ask, "Lord increase our faith!"

And when the leaders have done all that, they are to say, "We are merely servants; we have done no more than our duty" (verse 10). It is no wonder that St Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471) wrote, "It is much safer to be in a subordinate position than in authority."
12 November
Lk 17:7-10

"Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

Church leaders are told not to expect gratitude. This may seem harsh, but in fact it is what sets them free. It is a truth for all of us, not just for people in authority.

If I expect gratitude I am automatically a beggar. Like a beggar I can't order or buy this thing I want; I can only sit and wait in hope that someone will give it to me. Like any beggar I could ask for it, but asking ruins this particular commodity. Gratitude that I have to ask for is not really gratitude.

Expect nothing and you won't be disappointed: that is what we have often been told. If you are taken for granted, that is a kind of compliment. We take most real things for granted: we don't thank the walls of our house for holding up the roof and keeping out the weather; we don't thank the trees or the rainclouds; we don't thank the well for the water: we turn our backs on it when we have satisfied our thirst.

Should children thank their parents? We are always saying they should, but that "should" makes beggars of their parents. Let them learn to say the polite thing to strangers, but don't imagine that they should pay you with that kind of small change. If their gratitude isn't spontaneous it is not gratitude at all.

There is tremendous freedom when we expect nothing. Because we expect nothing, we do what we do for the right motive: which is simply that it is the right thing to do. And when we finish doing it, we don't hang around like beggars waiting for the chance of a few coins. A rabbi said that the perfect kind of generosity was when the giver didn't know who was receiving and the receiver didn't know who was giving. Then the giver is not burdening the receiver with a debt of gratitude, and the receiver can see right through the giver (who is invisible) to God, the ultimate giver.
On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Lepers were outcasts, required by the law to stand at a distance from people (Leviticus 13:45f). But in the story of the Ten Lepers, shared misery had brought Jewish and Samaritan lepers together. There was deep religious hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Samaritans were heretics and foreigners in the eyes of the Jews, and their region a melting-pot of different cults and customs; Jews despised it as a blot on their country. Had those ten people not been lepers they would never have been found in one another's company.

Samaria was a very inconveniently situated blot: right in the middle of the country. So when Jews wanted to travel between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south, they had either to pass through Samaritan country or to skirt it. Things could be unpleasant for them if they passed through, but the journey was twice as long if they went around.

Doesn't everyone have Samaritan territory in the middle of his or her life? It is the part of your life that is a mess: where you are at your very weakest and worst, where your thoughts and motives are all mixed up and unclear, where you have never had peace and hardly dare to hope for it.

But Jesus didn't hesitate to go in there; and many of the heroes and heroines of his stories were Samaritans – the one leper who came back, the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan woman. There’s hope for us all.
14 November
Lk 17:20-25

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.” Then he said to the disciples, "The days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. They will say to you, 'Look there!' or 'Look here!' Do not go, do not set off in pursuit. For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. But first he must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation."

“The kingdom of God is among you,” or is it “The kingdom of God is within you”? Some translations still say ‘within’. The Greek word ‘entos’ means both ‘within’ and ‘among’. Today we may have a preference for ‘within’: it suggests interiority and privacy – in fact (if we take it far enough) a private God. But what is religion if it doesn’t have any interiority? It is no more than a theory about the world: a theory of everything (everything except the person holding the theory). So is it ‘within’ or ‘among’?

In this passage Jesus was speaking to Pharisees. On another occasion he had accused them of having no interiority at all: “You Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness” (Luke 11:39). So it is unlikely that he was telling them here that the kingdom of God was ‘within’ them.

Do we lose all sense of interiority if we translate ‘entos’ as ‘among’? No. ‘Among’ means ‘in your midst’. He was saying to the Pharisees: the kingdom of God is here in front of you, it is in me; but you don't see it. These words are for us too. The difference is that we have St Paul’s teaching about the body of Christ: we are members of Christ's body. So for us, ‘among you’ means ‘in the whole body of Christ’, of which he is the head and we the members. ‘Among you’ means ‘within you’, but the ‘you’ is the greater ‘you’, the vast ‘you’, the body of Christ, not your ego.

When we prefer interiority today we have to pay careful attention in case we are only cultivating and flattering our egos. We like privacy because we are invaded on so many sides, but there is no such thing as a private religion. One of the possible etymologies of the word ‘religion’ connects it with the Latin word religare, ‘to bind’. Religion binds or connects us to everything. Just as there is no such thing (according to Wittgenstein) as a truly private language, there is no private religion. If there were, what a sad old thing it would be!
15 November
Lk 17:26-37

Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking, and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed all of them. Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot: they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day that Lot left Sodom, it rained fire and sulfur from heaven and destroyed all of them – it will be like that on the day that the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, anyone on the housetop who has belongings in the house must not come down to take them away; and likewise anyone in the field must not turn back. Remember Lot’s wife. Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it. I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding meal together; one will be taken and the other left." Then they asked him, “Where, Lord?” He said to them, “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.”

“Just as it was in the days of Noah…. Just as it was in the days of Lot.” In both cases there was the sudden disruption of normal life, the unexpected calamity. “It will be like that,” he said, “on the day that the Son of Man is revealed.” This is Jesus talking about the end times (in Luke’s gospel he does so again in 21:5-38).

“On that day,” he said, there will be no time to go and sort things out. There will be no more time because time itself will be no more. There will be no time to collect your things from your home. Don’t look back, as Lot’s wife did, lingering after things you have to leave behind.

That will be the ultimate Now, the moment of consummation. In the meantime we are to live the Now that is given us at each moment. The advice is the same: don’t go back to the past, trying to salvage something from there, don’t even look back. Don’t look forward either, that’s how you postpone your life, endlessly deferring the things that could satisfy the heart, while longing for things that never could. Those deeper things are given you in the Now. It is not by day-dreaming that you come to the ultimate future, the consummation. It is by living the present; the present is the only road to the future. The Kingdom of God is already among us. Its consummation is unimaginable, but we live it already in the humblest and the most truthful of all moments: the Now.
Jesus told a parable about the need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, “Grant me justice against my opponent.” For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.” ’ And the Lord said, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’

I knew a devout old nun long ago, one of whose tasks was to teach arithmetic to 10-year-olds. The arithmetic book said something like this: A train carrying 155 passengers collided with another train carry 140 passengers. 20% of the passengers on the first train lost their lives, while 15% on the other train lost theirs. How many passengers died in the accident? “Oh dear me!” said the old nun, “God rest their poor souls! We’ll say a decade of the Rosary for them.” And they all knelt down there and then, and said a decade of the rosary for those unfortunate souls in the arithmetic book. It’s a true story.

Is prayer about taking numbers and words (all language) too seriously? Or not seriously enough: is it asking God, as someone said, to let two plus two equal five? When you pray are you telling God how to run the world, or how to improve it? Are you at least dropping broad hints?

Prayer makes no sense at all unless we see it where it arises: in the heart. Old Sr Lawrence was praying for all the dead. The ones in the arithmetic book, who were immortal in any case like arithmetic itself, were only reminders of the real dead. From the day she walked behind her mother’s coffin she could not be fooled about death. She carried the world in her heart, and everything reminded her of its piteous frailty. What could she do but bring it to the Father as Jesus did and as Christians have done since the beginning?

Luke’s gospel focuses intensely on the prayer of Jesus. He prayed before receiving the Spirit (3:21-22), he prayed all night before choosing the Twelve (6:12), he told two parables about prayer: today’s reading (18:1-8), and the parable about the importunate friend (11:5-13)....

There’s nothing sentimental about prayer in today’s reading. On the contrary, it is so far to the other side of the scale that it seems cold and merciless. For one thing, it is good to get rid of sentimentality. But notice too that Jesus is not comparing God to the merciless judge, he is contrasting them. He is not saying they are alike, but that they are unalike. It is the familiar idiom of the ‘how much more’. A good example of it is the other passage mentioned above: “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13).
When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them. "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

Like the dew on the mountain,
Like the foam on the river,
Like the bubble on the fountain,
Thou art gone, and for ever.

This kind of sad romanticism was very popular in the 19th century, and some examples have a high cringe factor: ‘Catch then, O catch the transient hour.’ Yet of course what they were saying is true. Life is transient, everything is passing away. They were rather different from us: they felt that life was always slipping away from them; we feel that we have to be forever trying to catch up with it. We are always desperately trying to keep abreast or to pass ourselves out. A million advertisers, with their excited voices, have had their effect: ‘Now!’ ‘New!’ ‘Latest!’ ‘Biggest!’…. We have become like dogs straining at the leash.

How can we think about end-times when we are always just beginning? How can we think about the world coming to an end when it hasn’t come into being yet? Yet that is what the Liturgy asks us to do this Sunday.

In reaction to the secular ideology of restless acquisition, many religious people make tradition and permanence the bedrock of their faith. Yet this too is odd; how can we be so dedicated to resisting change when the Scriptures say everything is destined for destruction?

The earliest Christians believed that the end of the world and the Second Coming were imminent. As the years went by and nothing happened they had to accommodate themselves to a longer wait. Peter had to find an answer to the ‘scoffers’ who said, ‘Where is the promise of his coming…? All things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!’ (2 Peter 3:4-5). Very cleverly he quoted Psalm (89):90:4, ‘To your eyes a thousand years / Are like yesterday, come and gone, / No more than a watch in the night.’ This may have given solace to the people of his own time, but it gave goose-pimples to the people of the year 1000 AD! They were quite certain that the end would come with the turn of the millennium; was it not written in 2 Peter 3:8 and Revelation 20:3? But again the end did not come.

Confident predictions of the end of the world have been made in almost every century since the first. The 19th and 20th centuries were especially rich in them. Various sects even gave a precise closing date: 21 March 1843, 22 October 1844, 27 June 1850…. The 20th century was even more fruitful than the 19th: 1914, 15, 18, 19, 20, 25, 41, 75 and 94. But we are still here!
Like the word of God, the earth seems to stand firm forever. The only things that pass away are the predictions of its end!

Everything within the whole is passing, but the whole is still here. Isn’t death final enough for those gloomy forecasters? Why do they want to bring down the house with them? As for the Scriptures, yes there was an apocalypse in the year 70 AD: the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and scattered the nation. But the world at large kept going. As for the Second Coming, it is an integral part of Christian belief: ‘Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.’ But no date is given. Hope is not the same as prediction.

The Liturgy celebrates a threefold coming of Christ: the historical birth in Bethlehem, his coming at the end of time, and in between, the birth of Christ in the soul (and in our world) in the present moment.

‘Not people die, but worlds die in them,’ wrote Yevtushenko. When you die the world ends, in a real sense. When a generation passes away, a world passes away. Is this a great horror story? Surely not. It is death that keeps us young! If it wasn’t for death we would go into a profound hibernation, mentally, spiritually and every way. We would become the horrible living-dead that Swift imagined in Gulliver’s Travels. Secretly, the world we are always trying to hold together is the ego: my skin, my security, my power, my money, my approval rating…. The profound religious tradition passed down to us is not a guarantor of any of these things. It is a promise of the unimaginable mercy of God that lies beyond them.
As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." Then he shouted, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has saved you." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, praised God.

Jesus is on the final stage of his fateful journey to Jerusalem, where, as he predicted, he would meet a cruel death. But there are two encouraging moments along the way. He meets a blind beggar whose faith shines brightly; and he meets Zacchaeus (tomorrow's reading).

The blind beggar stands in the strongest contrast to the rich ruler earlier in chapter 18. The beggar is physically blind but spiritually sighted, while the rich ruler is physically sighted but spiritually blind.

Earlier in chapter 18, people were bringing children to Jesus, but the disciples ordered them off. Jesus intervened. "Let the little children come to me and do not stop them," he said, "for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (verse 16). It is "such as these" who see deeply. The adult mind is often blinded by its own very light. This is easily seen today, when we so often identify faith with explanations and declarations and clarifications… all adding up to a kind of bleak rationalism. Far from moving mountains it can hardly move itself, so turgid and wordy it seems at times. What child could follow it? Yet there is something in a child’s way of seeing that is the key to the kingdom of God. "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly," wrote de Saint-Exupéry, in the voice of the little prince, "what is essential is invisible to the eye."
Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

The story of Zacchaeus is unique to Luke, as are also the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. Luke always has an eye for what is lost, and he sees even tax collectors in a good light (3:12; 7:29; 15:1; 18:10). Yet the situation is ambiguous, because Luke usually portrays the wealthy in a bad light. How will he classify Zacchaeus, who was both a tax collector and wealthy?

Zacchaeus was “a chief tax collector,” the essence of tax collector. They were despised by their own people, because the taxes they were extorting from them were going to the occupying forces, the Romans. Men of low stature are sometimes apt to be bossy, but there was something in Zacchaeus that remained open and questioning. Jesus responded to it immediately, and they ended up having a meal together. “Today salvation has come to this house,” Jesus said. Zacchaeus was a rich man who had made it through the eye of the needle.

“Today I must stay at your house… today salvation has come to this house.” It is an important word in Luke’s vocabulary (2:49; 4:43; 9:22; 13:16, 33; 15:32; 17:25; 22:37; 24:7, 26, 44), as it must have been, of course, in Jesus’. How is it, then, that Jesus seemed to be satisfied with Zacchaeus’s promises, his ‘tomorrow’. “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” It is interesting that in Greek these verbs are in the present tense. But many scholars (including the translators of this version, the NRSV) see their meaning as future. One scholar argues that a present tense would show Zacchaeus as a boaster, which would not have cut any ice with Jesus. And besides, it would be harder to understand the crowd's hostility if Zacchaeus had already mended his ways. It seems Zacchaeus was talking about what he was going to do. Why did Jesus accept this?

The point is that he was able to see Zacchaeus’s face (and his heart), which we are not able to do. The fundamental language is a person’s whole demeanour, and not just the words they use. Jesus saw that he was lost, but he also saw that he was open to being found.
20 November
Lk 19:11-28
Jesus went on to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately.

So he said, "A nobleman went to a distant country to get royal power for himself and then return. He summoned ten of his slaves, and gave them ten pounds, and said to them, 'Do business with these until I come back.' But the citizens of his country hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to rule over us.' When he returned, having received royal power, he ordered these slaves, to whom he had given the money, to be summoned so that he might find out what they had gained by trading. The first came forward and said, 'Lord, your pound has made ten more pounds.' He said to him, 'Well done, good slave! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of ten cities.' Then the second came, saying, 'Lord, your pound has made five pounds.' He said to him, 'And you, rule over five cities.' Then the other came, saying, 'Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow.' He said to him, 'I will judge you by your own words, you wicked slave! You knew, did you, that I was a harsh man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? Why then did you not put my money into the bank? Then when I returned, I could have collected it with interest.' He said to the bystanders, 'Take the pound from him and give it to the one who has ten pounds.' (And they said to him, 'Lord, he has ten pounds!') 'I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them – bring them here and slaughter them in my presence.'"

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

They are still on the road to Jerusalem, a journey whose significance Luke has built up carefully. Jesus is giving a teaching for the times to come, when he will no longer be with them. He tells the parable of the ruler who went abroad, leaving his servants to look after things. Its bearing is all too obvious.

The point of the story was: "To all those who have, more will be given." It sounds very unjust; it is just like the way the business world operates. How could spiritual practice be just like business practice? The business world deals with things, property, money. How could the same rules apply to inner realities, mind, spirit?

The blunt fact is that they do, but the significance is quite different. To the one who loves (for example), more love will become possible; to the one who uses the intelligence he or she has, more will be given; to the one who prays, more prayer will be possible. It is by using what is given to us that we become capable of more.

We often tell ourselves that in the spiritual life everything is gift, or grace. But to say no more would be to make it a purely passive thing. In reality we know that nothing deep or ‘inner’ can ever be given to us without our effort. You would love to give your knowledge of, say, a foreign language to someone you love, but it cannot be done without their labour. How much more your understanding, your wisdom, your experience? Even God’s gifts, poured out without measure, cannot really become mine unless I interiorise them myself. “Can I bring about my own enlightenment?” someone asked a wise man. “No more than you can make the sun to shine,” he replied. “But then, why do I have to work so hard with all these spiritual practices?” “To ensure that when the sun begins to shine you will not be asleep.”

(How do you read those last two lines of today’s reading? “As for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them – bring them here and slaughter them in my presence.” This verse is used by several Muslim commentators as proof that Jesus was a violent man. They ignore the fact that it was part of a story, a parable – not an order in real life, nor an
incitement. This is how a text is mangled when it is ripped out of its context. Christian fundamentalists take note; you often do the very same thing.)
As Jesus came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, ‘If you, even you, had only recognised on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognise the time of your visitation from God.’

The journey to Jerusalem is almost over. In the verse just before this reading, the people were singing and shouting for joy as they accompanied him. Suddenly a change of mood: Jesus himself is weeping. (Luke’s gospel is noted for these contrasts: the Beatitudes and the woes, the two in the Temple, the rich man and Lazarus….). Jesus lamented over Jerusalem. He wept. He did not weep because he hated cities. He wept because he loved. He had said “Blessed are those who weep.” His own life, as Origen noted, exhibited all the Beatitudes. Love is the right reason for most things. His words were almost entirely of quotations from Old Testament prophets: Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Hosea…. He was not the first to grieve over Jerusalem; nor was he the last.

Across the valley from the city of Jerusalem there is a little church called 'Dominus flevit', which means 'The Lord wept'. On the base of the altar there is a small mosaic showing a mother hen with her chicks. They are under her wings for protection, some of them peering out in the way that chicks do. It is the only representation I have ever of Jesus’ saying that he wished he could gather the people of Jerusalem to him in the way a hen gathers her chicks (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34). It is a motherly image, warm and protective. If you think it is too sentimental an image you can think of it as follows. We used to call the Church on earth “the Church militant,” a rather off-putting image, suggesting fundamentalist violence; but it meant to convey that we are struggling with sin, in other words, with ourselves. The trouble with us is that we find it all too easy to be militant against other people, but we are chickens when it comes to struggling with ourselves.

If you want to hear motherly things about God, you should go straight to Julian of Norwich (14th century). Here’s a sample: “I saw that God is to us everything that is good and comforting for our help. God is our clothing, who wraps and enfolds us for love, embraces us and shelters us, surrounds us for love, which is so tender that God will never desert us.”
22 November
Lk 19:45-48
Jesus entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there; and he said, "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer'; but you have made it a den of robbers." Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.

Now that Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem the leadership struggle begins. He is immediately in conflict with the authorities. They claim to be the rightful leaders of God's people, but Jesus denies this at every step. He could not have chosen a more symbolic way of doing it than by cleansing the Temple. It was this act that drove the authorities to take action against him.

The custom Jesus attacks is the selling of various items necessary for sacrifice: animals, wine, oil, salt, and doves. Money changers also took Roman and Greek coins and exchanged them for the half-shekel temple tax required by the Law (Exodus 30:11-14). The exchange had a built-in surcharge.

Luke does not go into the details of the physical attack but goes straight to Jesus' reason for the attack, "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer'; but you have made it a den of robbers." Matthew 21 and Mark 12 give the details. "He entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves." There were many synagogues but there was only one Temple. To imagine the impact we would have to think of someone entering the Vatican, overthrowing the tables of those who sold medals and religious pictures and statuettes, and going on to smash up the computers in the Vatican bank. What would happen? The Swiss Guard would try to swing into action with their ornamental weapons: their halberds, their double-headed axes, and their flame-bladed swords. However, they would be ably assisted by the vigilanza, a modern security/police corps. Reinforcements might be called in from the carabinieri, and the guardia di finanza. At the end of the day Jesus would have less success than he had in the Temple.

That Temple was levelled by the Romans in the year 70 AD. So does it matter to us? Yes. The Temple, Meister Eckhart said in a well-known passage, is now the human soul. "So like Himself has God made the human soul that nothing else in heaven or on earth, of all the splendid creatures that God has so joyously created, resembles God so much as the human soul. For this reason God wants this temple cleared, that He may dwell there." Given half a chance, Jesus is still capable of causing a great deal of trouble in the Temple. Have your halberds at the ready!
Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.” Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.” Then some of the scribes answered, “Teacher, you have spoken well.” For they no longer dared to ask him another question.

The Sadducees arrived with a trick question. At least they make us think about this topic.

There are two main approaches to the question of life beyond death: the philosophical and the religious.

In philosophical reflection the question is about the immortality of the soul. ‘Immortal’ means ‘undying’: the suggestion is that the human soul is such that it cannot die. In practice it is very hard to make an argument of this kind without indulging in some kind of human vanity or wishful thinking. Every day we see all forms of life passing away; it is hard to see why we should be the sole exception. Death, said a biologist, is the greatest invention: it keeps life forever young.

The other approach is quite different. The Scriptures speak of the resurrection of the dead, not of the immortality of the soul. In the world of the Scriptures the whole person falls into the power of death; and if there is any possibility of deliverance from this power, it is not established by arguments about the immortality of the soul but rather through belief that God will raise us up, as he raised Jesus. As the Liturgy says, “In him our hope of resurrection dawned.” Belief in the resurrection is a belief about God, not a belief about ourselves. Even in the case of Jesus, the Scriptures do not say that he “rose from the dead,” but that “God raised him from death” (see, for example, Acts 2:24).

In this matter, then, we Christians are not invited to rake through the ashes for a spark of hope, but to look up at the slopes where the sun is rising!
And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

In all four gospels Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" At that moment it was Pilate who was sitting on a throne of judgment, and Jesus was a manacled prisoner before him, totally at his mercy, and soon to be put to death. When Christians assert that Christ is king they are not associating him with secular images of power; it is absurd to imagine him lined up with, for example, Henry VIII or with any king we have ever seen or read about. Christians were persecuted by the Roman Empire for repeating that Christ was Lord and King, because this was taken to mean that he was looking for what Caesar had. But Jesus is the exact opposite of an earthly king. When the feast of Christ the King was added to the Church's calendar in 1925 it was to make a statement about the hollow pretensions of Mussolini, who at that time had been ruling Italy for three years, and about the rising power of Hitler's Nazi Party, and about all dictatorships.

The crown that Christ wears is a crown of thorns. To call Christ our king is a subversive declaration, as it was for the early Christians; it is to say that anyone who presumes to lead us must be prepared, like him, to wear a crown of thorns. It is to situate oneself in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets who declared that leaders must be shepherds of the people, caring for them, dealing wisely, and doing justice in the land. When Israel was about to chose its first king, God warned them through the prophet Samuel that a king would lord it over them, tax them harshly, and promote inequality and injustice. And that is what most of their kings did. We have to ask whether it is what the majority kings, emperors, and political leaders have done throughout history.

Christ is Emmanuel, a name that means "God-with-us". He journeys with his people, leading us through the wilderness of our life, into death and beyond. It was when he was hanging on the cross that he was recognised by the thief, who asked to be admitted into his kingdom. The 19th-century Danish sculptor Thorvaldsen made a clay model for a statue of Christ the King, the arms raised in triumph. But the weight of the soft clay was too much for the inner structure, and in the morning when he entered the studio he saw that the arms had sagged downwards. At first he was deeply disappointed, but when he looked at it again he saw that it now expressed something deeper than triumph; it expressed welcome and forgiveness.

The Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer at today's Mass describes Christ as wanting to present to his Father "an eternal and universal kingdom: a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love, and peace." We cannot but notice that the world is not really like that. That's the bad news. The good news is that there are seeds of this glory everywhere - and sometimes even fruit. Worldly kingdoms are built on power and wealth. But where we see forgiveness we are seeing the kingdom of God. Deep inside the black heart of the world at its worst, the seed of God's word is stirring with new life. "The kingdom of God is among you," Jesus said (Luke 17:21). But we are still very far from seeing the harvest, so we have to pray, "May your kingdom come!" (Matthew 6:10).
25 November  
Lk 21:1-4  
Jesus looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

The poor widow’s simplicity and generosity serves to highlight the opposite qualities in the religious authorities. In the verses just before this passage Jesus is lashing the religious authorities for “swallowing the property of widows, while making a show of lengthy prayers.” Just then, as if to illustrate what he said, along comes a poor widow to put money in the collection box. It was very little – two small coins – but it was “all she had to live on.” Common sense tells us that this passage is first and foremost a criticism of the Temple system and its wealth, but mostly it is given a pious interpretation, as if Jesus saw nothing but the widow’s generosity. A widow in that society was entirely without resources or protection. Of course he saw her generosity, and it is not belittled in the least. But he also saw that she was an example of the system’s capacity to exploit the poor.

Piety can be highly ambiguous. One of the most pious men I ever met ruined the lives of several members of his family. One of the bitterest women I ever met was a daily Mass-goer. Instead of facing the evil that I do, I indulge in a life of piety to prove to myself and the world that I’m a good person. But first comes justice, then piety. As Dr. Johnson famously said, “A scoundrel will beat you all in piety.”
When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them. "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

The Gospel of Thomas is an early Christian collection of 114 sayings of Jesus. It is seen as apocryphal – that is, not canonical Scripture. Here is no. 18. "The disciples said to Jesus: 'Tell us how our end shall be.' Jesus said: 'Have you then discovered the beginning, that you seek after the end? For where the beginning is, there shall the end be. Blessed are they who shall stand in the beginning, and they shall know the end and shall not taste death.'"

It serves at any rate to make us think about beginnings and endings. The beginning and the end are the same question, and it is a question that we can't think out fully, because it takes us beyond the beginning and the end. The end is always unthinkable – for while you are still there to think about it, it's not yet the end. Death is unthinkable. I don't mean that it's terrible, but only that it is unthinkable. We can say we are thinking about 'it', but that's not the real thing. That's why we tend to see others as mortal, but not ourselves really.... The beginning too is unthinkable. When Zen teachers ask you to show them your original face before you were born (or before your parents were born), they don't want or expect you to come up with a thought-out answer. They are trying to drive you to the end of thinking and beyond.

The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem was not like the destruction of a church building. There are countless churches but there was only one Temple. To destroy that Temple was to destroy the identity of the Jewish people. So when Jesus said, "The day is coming when there shall not be left one stone upon another of all that you now admire; all will be torn down," he was saying the unthinkable.

Also unthinkable is the new beginning that is Jesus himself. In him God is doing a new thing. Through him, that new thing is happening in us too. “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Next Sunday is the beginning of a new Liturgical year, so this is the final week of the old year: that's why we have such strange readings every day. The year is coming to an end. Anything coming to an end reminds us of our mortality. This is a week for meditating on the impermanence of all things. Because we do it with the Liturgy it is not a dreary or terrible subject; it is about life and death together – the inseparable mystery.
27 November  
Lk 21:12-19  
Jesus said, "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

Jesus is talking once again about end-times. Death, when it comes, is bound to be a new experience! We only die once, and no one can do it for us. "Don't worry in advance about what to answer," Jesus said. When a world is ending or when your own world is ending, how could you know in advance what to say? Death is unthinkable. What is thought-over is second-hand. Death will be new.

Let's see what the wise Francis Bacon (1561-1626) has to say about death. "Men fear death, as children fear to go in the dark; and as that natural fear in children is increased with tales, so is the other." Then he quotes a Latin author to the effect that the trappings of death are more frightening than death itself. "Groans, and convulsions, and a discoloured face, and friends with weeping, and blacks, and obsequies, and the like, show death terrible." But death itself is natural. The sweetest canticle, he said, is the Nunc dimittis: the prayer of ancient Simeon when he held the infant Jesus in his arms.

At last, all-powerful Master,  
You give leave to your servant  
To go in peace, according to your promise.  
For my eyes have seen your salvation  
Which you have prepared for all nations,  
The light to enlighten the Gentiles  
And give glory to Israel, your people. (Lk 2:29-32)

This canticle is part of the Church’s Night Prayer. It is full of peace and confidence; there’s not a dark thought in it.
28 November
Lk 21:20-28

“When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people; they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. ‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

The passage of time is the most human and pathetic of all mysteries. You have only to look back to see for yourself that everything turns to dust. “Not people die, but worlds die in them,” wrote the Russian poet Yevtushenko. Every day a world dies and a world is born. Equally. But if your eyes are always straining for the past, you will miss what is being born around you; you will see only death.

Yevtushenko’s own case is instructive. At the age of eight he wrote his first novel. Paper was scarce, so he wrote it between the lines of his grandmother’s copy of Das Kapital. The human reality creeps in everywhere, most often in a childish hand. And it is full of imagination. Poetry is not just antique words; it is the present too, so young, so fresh that it makes revolutionary tracts look old-fashioned. In this liturgical end-season we are experiencing the poetry of endings and new beginnings.
Jesus told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

When someone claims to be spiritually advanced, said the Sufi mystic Ahmed Al-‘Alawi, ask him or her about union with God. “See if his being reflects it. If he says God is distant, this is because he himself is far from God. But if he says God is near, count him most worthy.”

“The Kingdom of God is near,” Jesus said (Lk 21:31; Mt 3:2; 4:17; 10:7). It could not be nearer; it is among you, he said (see Nov. 13). It is present in him.

When there’s no distance there’s no room for rationalising or postponing, no room even for straight thinking. We set great store by thinking, and of course it is one aspect of the light that is in us. But there is deeper light that looks at first like darkness. It is the light the mystics speak of. Some verses from The Dark Night, the best known poem of St John of the Cross:

One dark night,
fired with love’s urgent longings
- ah, the sheer grace! -
I went out unseen,
my house being now all stilled.

In darkness, and secure,
by the secret ladder, disguised,
- ah, the sheer grace! -
in darkness and concealment,
my house being now all stilled.

On that glad night
in secret, for no one saw me,
nor did I look at anything
with no other light or guide
than the one that burned in my heart.

This guided me
more surely than the light of noon
to where he was awaiting me
- him I knew so well -
there in a place where no one appeared.

O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that has united
the Lover with his beloved,
transforming the beloved in her Lover....
As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

In the first three gospels Andrew is not mentioned except in lists of the Twelve. But in John’s gospel he appears three times, and in each case he is introducing other people to Jesus. First of all, his brother, Simon Peter. Then in John 6:8 he is bringing forward a boy with five loves and two fish. And in John 12:20-22 he is bringing some Greeks to Jesus. Meanwhile he himself managed to remain almost invisible.

In John’s gospel, Jesus first called this same Andrew, and Andrew introduced his brother Simon (Peter) to Jesus (1:40). Yet it was Peter, not Andrew, who came to be in the inner circle, “Peter, James and John.” Andrew is regularly described as “the brother of Simon Peter” (Matthew 10:2; Lk 6:14). Yet nowhere does he show any resentment about this.

It is rare enough to find people who are willing to be invisible, or to take the second place. How good it would be if the only thing that people could remember about you is that you brought people to Jesus!
1 December [1st Sunday of Advent – Year A]
Mt 24:37-44

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

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

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

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

Waiting… but not falling asleep; “Stay awake,” Jesus often said (Mt 24:42; 26:40; Mk 13:33; etc.). ‘Awake’ means attentive to what is happening – attentive to the present, not dreaming about the past or the future. This is the wisdom of the ages.

I chose a few short passages from early Christian writing (3rd, 4th, and 5th centuries) in deliberate contrast to the computer age. We won’t throw out our computers – I am using one to write this and you are using one to read it – but it may be helpful to dwell on ancient wisdom at the beginning of Advent.

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

John Chrysostom (4th century): “If ordinary persons knew when they were going to die, they would surely be striving earnestly at that hour. In order therefore that they may strive, not at that hour only, the Lord does not tell them the hour or day. He wants to keep them on their toes looking for it, that they may be always striving.”

And from the 5th century, the Incomplete Commentary on Matthew, a comment on the verse ‘If the head of the household had known the hour at which the thief would arrive.’ “The head of the household represents the human soul, the thief is the devil, the house is the body, the doors are the mouth and ears and the windows are the eyes. Like the thief who gains access through the doors and windows to despoil the householder, the devil also finds easy access to
the soul through the mouth, ears and eyes to take a person captive. This is why Jeremiah wrote, “For death entered through our windows.”
2 December
Mt 8:5-11

When Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, ‘Lord, my servant is lying at home paralysed, in terrible distress.’ And he said to him, ‘I will come and cure him.’ The centurion answered, ‘Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, “Go”, and he goes, and to another, “Come”, and he comes, and to my slave, “Do this”, and the slave does it.’ When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, ‘Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.”

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

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

Matthew makes it quite clear in today’s passage that discipleship demands a clean cut with religious, cultural and ethnic prejudices. He was a Jew writing for Jews, and he knew that hatred of the Romans would come natural to them – especially officers of the Roman army. This would be especially true after the destruction of the Temple and the scattering of the nation after the year 70. But Matthew goes even further and reminds his readers that Jesus even required them to love their enemies. “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Mt 5:44-45).

Some Christians with a militant turn of mind almost make hatred a measure of faith: you are a true believer if you show intense hatred towards people who are different or have different views and values. But this could not come from the gospel of Matthew.
Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.’

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

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

The kind of mind we venerate is the adult mind: especially that of the scientist, the investigator, the barrister, the journalist. These are logical, critical, suspicious, judgmental…. You can know a lot about theology with this kind of mind, but you cannot know God. Every disciple needs to learn again to see like a child; we must be like children, Jesus said, if we are to enter the Kingdom of God – which means the Presence of God. We have to become like children if we are to understand God’s newest deed – which is a Child.
Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, and went up the mountain, where he sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way." The disciples said to him, "Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?" Jesus asked them, "How many loaves have you?" They said, "Seven, and a few small fish." Then ordering the crowd to sit down on the ground, he took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all of them ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.

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

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

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

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

It is easy to imagine this story being told over and over again to a great variety of congregations from the earliest times, as they celebrated the Eucharist. They are our ancestors in the faith. Each time they heard the story (in the version we are reading today) they heard also that the disciples came bringing “the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others.” Those early Mass-goers could identify themselves with that. We are one with them in that, because in different ways we are all blind and deaf and maimed….
Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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