1 July
Mt 8:18-22
When Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. A scribe then approached and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Another of his disciples said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

There is a great fascination about wanderers. While the rest of us hang around a few familiar places, hugging the walls, these free spirits wander wherever their fancy takes them. We would love to have the freedom of the tramp under the bridge, but the price of it is the surrender of security. We would love to have both - freedom and security - but they are incompatible. We don't want to join the free spirits, but our imagination goes with them. We become restless in an ineffectual way, like farmyard chickens in the migrating season.

"Leave the dead to bury their dead." It sounds heartless. But we mustn't be too literal; Jesus spoke a poetic language. There is a sad history of unimaginative literal interpretation of the Scriptures. In this case, surely, the man's father was not dead, but perhaps elderly; and the man was asking if he could wait till after his father's death. No, said Jesus, come now! Postponement becomes a habit: after his father's death he would find another reason for delay, and another….

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

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

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

Mark has Jesus reproach the disciples after the calming of the storm for their lack of faith (4:35-41). But Matthew (whose version you read on this page) has him reproach them before the miracle. This is telling us that at least some faith must precede a miracle. It is consistent with Matthew’s general account. Take for example the scene with the blind men. “Jesus said to them, ‘Do you believe that I am able to do this?’ They said to him, ‘Yes, Lord.’ Then he touched their eyes and said, ‘According to your faith let it be done to you’” (9:28-29); or the scene where the woman had touched the hem of his garment; “your faith has saved you,” he told her. Have faith, and then something will happen – not the other way around.

Or perhaps the other way around, as in Mark. Douglas Hyde (not the Irish president of that name, but the author of I Believed: The Autobiography of a Former British Communist) described his first fumbling steps to faith. He had observed a girl praying in church, had seen the light in her face; and he forced himself to go through the exact motions. “When I was sure no one was about I went, almost hang-dog fashion, down the aisle as she had done. Down to the front, round to the left, put some coins in the box, lit a candle, knelt on the stool – and tried to pray.... The candle spluttered and flickered, growing shorter and shorter but no words came.” Instead, gradually, faith in God dawned on him, replacing his faith in militant Communism. This tells us: do the seemingly impossible thing and something greater than you planned will happen.

Language is schematic: before and after seem like clear-cut separate compartments. But faith isn’t logic, and like life itself it spreads out beyond our tidy mental plots. It takes Matthew and Mark together to remind us that it works any way it wants.
3 July [St Thomas, apostle]

Jn 20:24-29

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

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

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

He invites us as he invited Thomas to "put your finger here and see my hands; stretch out your hand and put it into my side." Everything has to come back at last to experience. "Today," wrote St Bernard of Clairvaux in the 12th century, "we read the book of experience." That sentence might have been written this morning. We need to be reassured that our experience, however painful or discouraging, has the power to bring us to Christ. Most of us know the wounds of Christ first-hand. I talked with a woman who lives, you could say, in the side of Christ. Many have lived there, throughout the ages. "We are now dying with him on his cross, in his pains and Passion," wrote Julian of Norwich in the 14th century, "and when we deliberately remain on that same cross, holding on to the very end, with his help and grace, then suddenly we shall see his expression change and we shall be with him in heaven. Without a moment's break we shall pass from one state the other – and we shall all be brought into joy."
After getting into a boat Jesus crossed the water and came to his own town. And just then some people were carrying a paralysed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.’ Then some of the scribes said to themselves, ‘This man is blaspheming.’ But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, ‘Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, “Your sins are forgiven”, or to say, “Stand up and walk”? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—he then said to the paralytic—‘Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.’ And he stood up and went to his home. When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings.

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

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

1. “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic....” He did not enquire about the paralytic’s own faith. Peter Chrysologus (380 – 450 AD) had this to say about this verse: “God does not inquire into the wants of those who are deliriously ill.... A doctor does not inquire into or examine the wishes of such a patient.” The point, I think, is that we are always a community of faith. For about four centuries now the western world has laboured under philosophies that are profoundly individualistic; all meaning is thought to repose in the individual rather than in the society or even the family. It was on this basis that the theory of Limbo (only recently disowned by the Church) was constructed. Even new-born babies, dying at birth or soon after, were thought to be on their own before God; the faith of their parents had no bearing on their destiny, and they could not be buried in consecrated ground. This, even though St Paul, writing about marriage between believers and unbelievers, had written: “The unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy” (1 Cor 7:14). We need not imagine that we have entirely cast off the individualistic mindset.

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

The two great divides were expressed together in a leaflet that was handed out at a parish mission in my childhood. On it were written the words: “Remember, man, thou hast but one soul to save. And after that, the judgment.” (There were no women in the world in those days!) There is no mention of community; and there was no life of the body. There was just one soul. And the appeal was to fear, not to love. It was a far cry from St Paul’s teaching that we are the body of Christ and members of one another: see Col 1:18; Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:13). Pius XII attempted to reinvigorate this teaching in 1943 in an encyclical letter entitled *Mystici Corporis*. “The unbroken tradition of the Fathers from the earliest times,” he wrote, “teaches that the Divine Redeemer and the Church which is His Body form but one mystical person, that is to say, the whole Christ.” We still have much need for healing at these two sick places of the soul.
5 July
Mt 9:9-13

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

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

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

Business people tend to be hard-headed, and perhaps his conversion took a little longer. St John Chrysostom suggested that “Matthew was not called at the same time as Peter and John and the others because he was still in a hardened state.” Whatever the case, he was called from his tax business to follow Jesus. It was a call from one way of thinking to another. It was a call from security into insecurity, from wealth to poverty, from power to powerlessness. He was called to follow Jesus, the Wisdom of God. He was not asked to make a donation from the profits of his business, but to follow in person.
6 July
Mt 9:14-17

The disciples of John came to Jesus, saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘The wedding-guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.’

I heard that some famous dietician says to weight-watchers, “It isn't what you eat, it is why you eat it.” He urges them to identify that ‘why’. That is what powers you towards the biscuit tin, he tells them – or the cookie-jar if you live across the water. Unless you can switch off the power at its source, your whole life will be a war of attrition with cookies.

A good idea pops up in more places than one; it connects different things in our life. ‘Not what but why’ is a good idea for any part of our life. It throws light equally on eating and on fasting – pursuits that appear opposite.

I wonder why John the Baptist’s disciples were fasting. They were followers of a very ascetical leader, and I suppose that had a quenching effect on their appetite. But from the way they asked Jesus’ disciples about fasting, it appears that they also felt rather superior. “It is likely that the disciples of John the Baptist were thinking highly of themselves,” wrote St John Chrysostom (c. 347 AD – 407), “and because of this Jesus put down this inflated conceit through what he said.” What do you think? I don’t believe that Jesus would engage in such tit-for-tat. It would make him no better than those conceited disciples. And besides, he told them why his disciples were not fasting: they were not fasting because it was not a time of preparation but a season for joy. They were not preparing for his coming; they were celebrating it.

But to get back to the fasters. St Jerome (347 AD – 420), who knew a lot about fasting, wrote, “What Jesus is saying is this: ‘Until a person has been reborn – putting aside the old person, and putting on the new – he or she cannot fast aright.’” The ego, the old self, is the problem; it will use even fasting as a way of fattening itself. Unless we have some inkling of our own Christ-nature our fasting and all our efforts will be expressions of ego.
7 July [14th Sunday in Ordinary time]
Lk 10:1-12, 17-20

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.’ I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town. The seventy returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!’ He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

A great spiritual teacher gave this advice to one of her students: “Confess your hidden faults. Approach what you find repulsive. Help those you think you cannot help. Anything you are attached to, let it go. Go to places that scare you.” That should be enough to scare the wits out of anyone - and a very good thing too! There is nothing so repulsive as the ‘missionary’ who has developed the style of a persuasive salesman. It is a good thing to go out trembling. Among other things, it shows humility and respect.

Every follower of Christ is called to proclaim the Kingdom of God. Even reluctant followers. To the man who was making excuses for not following, Jesus said, “Go and proclaim the Kingdom of God” (Lk 9:60). A little earlier Luke had described the sending out of the Twelve. But the instructions Jesus gave to the Twelve (in chapter 9) and to the Seventy-Two (in chapter 10) are practically the same. From this we are to understand that every Christian is an apostle - a word that means ‘sent’. If you feel like a lamb among wolves, that's the way you should expect to feel: it is written in the gospels.

You could say that in our time the parable of the lost sheep is reversed: there is one lone sheep in the sheepfold and the ninety-nine are lost. Moreover, most of the shepherds spend their time looking after the one sheep. There is a feeling of security about this, but it is fed by fear, not by faith. Not many of the shepherds are going to places that scare them. The last betrayal is when they attack anyone who does.

What sort of qualifications do you need for going out to others? Do you need a diploma in catechetics? No. Not one of the Seventy-Two had a diploma of any kind - nor any of the Twelve. Jesus himself had no diplomas or degrees. But what you have to have is love. If you love genuinely, you are a missionary: you are going out of yourself. If you go out to even one stranger you are, in a way, going out “to the whole world.” And if you go out to an enemy, you are standing on the highest peak of the Christian life.

But what do I say, what do I do? Here is a word of advice from Dorothy Day, who co-founded the Catholic Worker movement: “We do what we can, and the whole field of all the Works of Mercy is open to us. There is a saying, ‘Do what you are doing.’ If you are a student, study, prepare, in order to give to others, and keep alive in yourself the vision of a new social order. All work, whether building, increasing food production, running credit unions, working in factories which produce for true human needs, working the smallest of industries, the
handicrafts - all these things come under the heading of the Works of Mercy, which are the opposite of the works of war.”
While Jesus was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, ‘My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.’ And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples.

Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, ‘If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.’ Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, ‘Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.’ And instantly the woman was made well.

When Jesus came to the leader’s house and saw the flute-players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, ‘Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.’ And they laughed at him.

But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district.

John Chrysostom’s comment on this: “It is possible that the man was overstating the misfortune. It is the habit among people who are in need to exaggerate their personal problems. They do this to get a more effective response.” There are days when it is not easy to love St John Chrysostom. Here he sounds rather too rational, like the demythologisers. These were modern scholars who thought that if you scraped off all the wonder and the poetry (the ‘myths’, they called it) of the Scriptures you would find the truth hiding underneath. But what if the truth lies also in the wonder and the poetry? God is a poet – a word that means ‘a maker’; and Jesus thought and spoke like a poet, not in the least like a logician.

(If we wanted to argue with John Chrysostom we could say that Jesus still saved the little girl’s life, because prompt burial was the normal procedure: on the evening of the same day, at the latest. He saved her from being buried alive.)

What does that urge remind you of – that urge to get hold of the truth as if it were a kernel hiding behind the colour and personality and detail of the text? Isn’t it quite like the urge the woman had to steal a healing from Jesus? She wanted an anonymous healing, private and impersonal, business-like. But he cut through the anonymity. “Who touched me?” he said. These are words to break through the strongest walls of anonymity. He wanted to be a friend to her, not just an anonymous benefactor. Likewise, we need to approach the Scriptures in an open manner, not like investigative journalists.

Mark’s gospel has more human touches than the others. Though his gospel is only 60% the length of Matthew’s, Mark gives more than twice the amount of space to the healing of the little girl. Matthew’s account (above) is rather unemotional: “He went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up.” But Mark says, “He took her by the hand and said to her, ‘Talitha kum’, which means, ‘Little girl, get up!’ And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age)” (Mark 5:41-42). The gospels are full of humanity – which is what you would expect. The truth lies right there in plain view, not hiding underneath.
9 July  
Mt 9:32-38  
A demoniac who was mute was brought to Jesus. And when the demon had been cast out, the one who had been mute spoke; and the crowds were amazed and said, ‘Never has anything like this been seen in Israel.’ But the Pharisees said, ‘By the ruler of the demons he casts out the demons.’  
Then 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.’

St John Chrysostom wrote: “People who stop doing good because of accusations show that their good deeds have been done to impress others. But if for God's sake you do good to your fellow-servants, you will not stop doing good whatever they do.” Doing things to impress others used to be called ‘human respect’. It was badly named, because there is no real respect involved at all, neither for oneself nor for others. In Catholic spirituality many things were named in very misleading ways because they were only half translated from Latin. The word ‘respect’ here was just a bad translation of ‘respicere’, which means ‘to look back’. In this context it means checking to see how your performance is going down with the audience. A better translation today might be ‘seeking to impress’ or ‘seeking celebrity’. It is clear on every page of the gospels that Jesus was entirely free of it.

When they could find nothing to criticise in what Jesus did, they tried to dig down and discredit his motivation. This has a very modern ring to it. “He drives away demons with the help of the prince of demons.” It is what you might call ‘the explanation from below’. Some modern psychologies also offers explanations ‘from below’. We live in a culture of suspicion, in which higher motives are usually interpreted as hypocrisy. It is a seductive way of looking: it explains away goodness, and so it gives me permission to wallow where I am; it even makes wallowing look commendably honest.

There is also the ‘explanation from above’. That too has its dangers. There is the case of the history student who gave ‘God’s will’ as the explanation of everything that happened in the past.

It all makes us think: what are we doing when we look for explanations? What part of our mind or being are we trying to satisfy? And what do we do with explanations when we get them? In truth: nothing! We pass on to something else.

Jesus ignored the jibe about Beelzebul. That's undoubtedly the best thing to do with explanations, especially explanations ‘from below’. Trying to counter them only robs us of our power. I love the way the narrative just continues, “Then Jesus went about all the towns and villages....”
July
Mt 10:1-7

Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, 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.”’

Jesus picked twelve followers. Straightforward? Not when commentators get at it. When we read the early commentators on the Scriptures we have the feeling that they were discovering in every word and syllable the significances they themselves had hidden there (as Oscar Wilde remarked in another context). Here is a sample of what they did with the number 12. Remigius wrote, “The number twelve is a perfect number, being made up of the number six, which has perfection because it is formed of its own parts – one, two, three – multiplied into one another; and the number six when doubled amounts to twelve.” Someone else added, “And this doubling seems to have some reference to the two precepts of charity, or to the two Testaments.” But the real impresario was Tertullian (155 AD – 222). “This number twelve,” he wrote, “is typified by many things in the Old Testament; by the twelve sons of Jacob, by the twelve princes of the children of Israel, by the twelve running springs in Helim, by the twelve stones in Aaron's breastplate, by the twelve loaves of the shew-bread, by the twelve spies sent by Moses, by the twelve stones of which the altar was made, by the twelve stones taken out of Jordan, by the twelve oxen which bare the brazen sea. Also in the New Testament, by the twelve stars in the bride's crown, by the twelve foundations of Jerusalem which John saw, and her twelve gates.”

When Chrysostom sees the list of apostles he looks instantly for the order of precedence (from the earliest times this has been the chief sport of the clergy). “Let us observe the order of the list of disciples from the beginning…. Do you note that he does not arrange them according to their dignity? For John seems to me to be greater, not only than the others but even than his brother.” This is precisely what the disciples were squabbling about when Jesus shut them up (Mt 20:17-26). St. Jerome (c. 347 AD – 420) has a more worthwhile point to make: “The other Evangelists put Matthew before Thomas, and they do not add the words ‘the tax collector’ to his name, so as not to appear to throw scorn upon the Evangelist by bringing up his former life. But writing of himself he puts Thomas first, and styles himself ‘the tax collector.’” Matthew's gospel, he was suggesting, does credit to Matthew himself by showing him in a truthful and unflattering light. That is certainly in the Christian spirit.

Some things from the past make sense to us, others not at all. It would be very pretentious to imagine that we are capable of understanding everything in the past – and sitting in judgment on it. That would be an out-and-out lack of humility. So what do we do with things we don't understand? Well, what do we normally do? If we find a book on, say, microbiology we don't feel obliged to burn it, or to say that it is nonsense. We nod reverentially and pass on. When I tried to read my niece's doctoral thesis in that field I failed to find even one sentence, or part of a sentence, that I could understand. Let it be! as the Beatles recommended. What do we do with Remigius and Tertullian and their number games? Let them be!

But strange to say, unlike biology to the uninitiated, something can still come through the strangeness of an ancient Christian text. We focus on what we find strange – their number play, for example – but for them it was more than number play. It was a kind of frame in which they set what they wanted to say. For example, the Venerable Bede (c. 673 AD – 735) wrote: “The number twelve, which is made up of three multiplied by four, denotes that through the four quarters of the world the apostles were to preach the faith of the holy Trinity.”
11 July
Mt 10:7-15
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. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for labourers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town.

Money, a bag, an extra shirt…. These things are for my future needs. Luggage is always for the future. In the present it is only a burden; but we carry the burden for the sake of the future. To carry luggage is to live, to some degree, in the future. The same is true of money: my hunger may be satisfied now, but I take money with me so that I can satisfy it again tomorrow.

It is a severe criticism to be told that you are living in the past. But strangely we think it is the highest praise to be told that you are living in the future. It is hard to see why we make such a difference between them, for one is just as unreal as the other. I knew a businessman who always went about with a ballpoint pen in his mouth, so involved was he with his work. But even in his home he still carried that pen in his mouth! Some of us cheat ourselves of life by living in the past; the rest of us do it by living in the future. (I exaggerate, I know.) Many people almost kill themselves amassing wealth; even in their old age they still want to be turning a profit. It is an endless deferral of life. But the Gospel challenges us to face it now or never.

No sandals, no staff in the hand; in other words, nothing on your feet, nothing in your hands – just you, a mere human being, with no protections. Many years ago I was enthusing one day to an old priest about new hi-fi and video equipment that we were just beginning to use in youth retreats, he said, “There’s no substitute for a human being up there bleeding.”
See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

There are lots of animals in this reading: sheep, wolves, snakes and doves. Where did snakes get their reputation for cleverness? It was in the Book of Genesis. “Now the serpent was craftier than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made” (3:1). “The serpent beguiled me, and I ate,” said Eve (3:13). Never since that time have they shown any signs of an ability to plan a strategy; they just react in the moment like every other animal. And they are all the better for it.…

We associate intelligence with the ability to plan. We are impressed by planning, even when the objective is silly. Many things in life require planning, but it can become a compulsive habit. If I feel I have to plan everything, it means that I don’t trust myself to react correctly in some future situation. But what makes me think I can do it better now, before the situation has even arisen? How should I know what to say to some people when I haven’t even seen them yet? When I do meet them I will just repeat the things I had planned before. In this way, compulsive planning ensures that I will always live in the past – which is surely very ironic. I try to live in the future before it comes, and I find myself living in the past when it does come. Intelligence isn’t old hat; it is always new. We have to trust the intelligence that is in us; to distrust it is to undermine it.

“When the hour comes, you will be given what you are to say.” Not before. The things that are very alive – love, intelligence, faith – don’t keep till tomorrow; they are for now. You cannot prepare for the suddenness of a wolf’s attack except by being alert. That word ‘alertness’ is probably much closer to the essence of intelligence – and of faith too – than ‘planning’. Jesus kept saying, “Stay awake!”
13 July
Mt 10:24-33
A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

Three times in this passage, Jesus tells them not to be afraid. “Fear,” someone said, “is the love that's due to gods and princes.” But if our love of God is really only a form a fear, then we would love the devil more than God if we came to fear him more.

It is true that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is called “fear of the Lord.” But this ‘fear of the Lord’ has nothing to do with fear in the ordinary sense of the word. Theologians distinguished between ‘filial fear’ and ‘servile fear’. Fear of the Lord is the former, a feeling of awe and reverence before the ultimate mystery. Jesus kept saying, “Don't be afraid!” (Mt 14:28; 17:7; 28: 5,10; Lk 5:10; etc.). And St John wrote, “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 Jn 4:18). God asks for our love, not our fear. It is said that those who love to be feared, fear to be loved. How could God love to be feared, or fear to be loved? “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8, 16).

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“Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.” The fruit is the plain truth about the tree, and everyone can not only see it but test it and taste it for themselves. Likewise, human action. Everything becomes visible sooner or later. The word 'depth' can hold us too much in thrall. When we talk too much about depth we give ourselves the impression that it is a whole inner separate world, sufficient unto itself. Wittgenstein, one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century, said once, “The depth is on the surface!” He, of all people, could not be accused of superficiality. There is a very radical truth here: the depth and the surface are one, the inside and the outside are one. There is an early Christian writing (end of the 1st century) attributed to St Clement of Rome. Quoting the apocryphal Gospel of the Egyptians, 'Clement' writes: “When the Lord himself was asked by someone when his kingdom would come, he said: ‘When the two shall be one, and the outside as the inside....’ By ‘the outside as the inside’ he means this: that the inside is the soul, and the outside is the body.”
Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"

The Good Samaritan

Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

He said, "The one who showed him mercy."

Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Here is one of the earliest interpretations of this story about the Good Samaritan. The writer was Origen of Alexandria (c. 185 AD - c. 254): "The man who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho is Adam. Jerusalem is Paradise. Jericho is this world. The thieves are the forces of the enemy. The priest is the Law. The Levite is the prophets. The Samaritan is Christ. The wounds are disobedience. The horse is the body of Christ. The inn that is open to all who wish to enter is the Church. The two denarii are the Father and the Son. The inn-keeper is the pastor of the flock, whose duty is to care. The Samaritan’s promise to return indicates the Saviour’s Second Coming.” Origen was the father of the ‘Allegorical Method’, and this is an example of it at full tilt. It may seem rather strained at times, but it represented a determination that the Scriptures would not remain dead on the page but would come alive in the present.

An even earlier writer, Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 AD - c. 215), also sees the Samaritan as Jesus: "Who can this neighbour be but the Saviour himself? Who but he has had pity on us as we lay almost dead from the dark forces of this world, with so many wounds, so many fears and passions, so much anger, so much sorrow, so much deception, so many deceptive pleasures? Jesus alone can heal these wounds."

Left to ourselves we might have interpreted this story in a purely moralistic way: here was a good model for us of practical charity. But by putting this reading with others that are directly about Jesus himself, the Liturgy holds this ancient interpretation before us. The first thing about the Good Samaritan is that “he came near,” while the priest and the Levite “passed by on the other side.” In Jesus, the divine Person, the Word, came near to us, took on our flesh and lived among us. This is the only possible connection with the first reading: “The Word is very near to you.” Likewise the second reading is about God coming near us in Jesus: “He is the image of the invisible God.”

In the moralistic interpretation of this story the Good Samaritan would be oneself. We would see ourselves called to reach into our inner resources and produce the goods from there; we would be on the giving end. But in this deeper interpretation the Good Samaritan is Jesus, and we are the traveller fallen among robbers; we are on the receiving end. God in Christ has reached out to us. Leo the Great (pope from 440 - 461) said, “Christ is the hand of God's mercy stretched out to us.”
We are told to “Go and do likewise.” But we are told this at the end of the story, not at the beginning. By the end of the story we have seen what our real resource is: it is not ourselves and our ambiguous generosity, it is God's bounty in Christ.

There is nothing so humiliating as to be the object of cold charity: the skimmed milk of human kindness. I had to share space for a number of years with an 18th-century fresco that showed some saint dispensing charity to beggars. He looked much more fixed in his role than the beggars did in theirs. I often wondered what he would do if there were no beggars. He needed them more than they needed him. Their luck might change, and one day they might feed themselves. Then he wouldn't know who he was. Charity always has a sick twist in it if it doesn't flow out through us from the heart of God.
“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities.

St John Chrysostom wrote, “This more than anything is peace: when the disease is removed. This is peace: when the cancer is cut away.” Today’s gospel reading is one of those ‘terrible’ passages of the New Testament. Why is the Prince of Peace telling us that he has not come to bring peace but the sword?

Clearly, there are wrong kinds of peace – or rather situations that look peaceful on the outside but are full of injustice within. An appearance of peace is not peace; it may be exactly the opposite. There are people who crush life all around them and call it restoring peace. The Prince of Peace has not come to bless violence and oppression that have been so successful that the powerless have no resistance left. Look at public bodies and at business companies, certainly, but don’t forget to look at your own family too. Why are your wife and children so quiet? Are they sinking into despair? Or have you a way of making your husband feel so bad that everything he might do or say is condemned even before he says or does it?

A word about the even more terrible statement: “The one who prefers father or mother to me is not worthy of me.” The word ‘prefer’ comes from Latin praeferre, ‘to place before’. We should not place other people before Christ. It would not be fair to them, it would be too much for them, and they could not bear it. Only Christ is able to be Christ.
Jesus began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.

If the stars came out only one night in a hundred years the whole human race would look up. Some astronomers believe that eventually no stars will be visible to the naked eye because they will all be too distant from one another. So take a good look! Familiarity breeds blindness.

Tyre, Sidon and Sodom (sample cases of wickedness) would have opened their eyes, Jesus says, but God's people took Jesus' "deeds of power" for granted. This is why the Gospel has to be proclaimed to the whole world: no one can tell who is going to hear it and who is not going to hear it. Like every lover, the God of Surprises sends unexpected gifts, or leaves them hidden in unexpected places.

Nazareth was the most unexpected place of all. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (Jn 1:46). When Jesus was born, pagan astrologers came from afar to do him homage, but his own country-man, Herod, tried to kill him.

It was appropriate then that when he grew to be a man he had an eye for the unexpected. He praised the faith of a Roman pagan centurion (Mt 8:10) and a Canaanite pagan woman (Mt 15:28); he told an expert on Jewish law to imitate the behaviour of a pagan Samaritan (Lk 10:37); he befriended the outcasts of society, tax-collectors and sinners. Almost everything he did was unexpected: the authorities could hardly fail to see him. But when they did they determined to kill him.

Full sensory equipment is no guarantee that we will see or hear what is right in front of us; or see and hear aright. Jesus often used the expression, "anyone who has ears to hear" (Mt 11:15; Mk 4:9, 23; 7:16; Lk 8:8; 14:35). Today we are so bombarded with sights and sounds that we have to filter out most of what strikes our senses. Dangerous times!
17 July
Mt 11:25-27
Jesus said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.’

We advise children to “tell the truth and shame the devil.” Like a lot of advice, it seems to be mainly for giving away. But we could use some of that advice ourselves: most of the truth in the world is told by young children. Not far into our lives we begin to take sides on things, and then goodbye truth! To enter the kingdom of God we have to become like children again, Jesus said (Mt 18:3). ‘Infant’ comes from the Latin ‘in-fans’: non-speaking. Language helps us distinguish things, and very soon distinction becomes separation, which then turns into opposition. Potentially the most destructive opposition is between ‘I’ and ‘not-I’. In English, ‘I’ is the most frequently used pronoun; and it is written in upper case – “like God!” a Mandarin speaker once said to me. (It it also a stand-alone word, since English is not an inflected language.) Language can seduce me into believing that I am somehow divided from everything else, and that everything in the world opposes me…. Then I spend my life mentally protecting and defending this first person singular - who in reality would not last five minutes if left without such ‘non-I’ things as oxygen, water, shelter…. 

The ‘little ones’ Jesus spoke of were not just children but the humble, the helpless, the heavy-burdened, those who were ready to hear what he was saying: disciples. They are the ones who know their need of God and of everything that God gives. This knowledge may not look like knowledge at all: it can adduce no subtle arguments, no book-learning; but it is, wrote St Paul, “a wisdom that none of the masters of this age have ever known” (1 Cor. 2:8). It is the wisdom of God incarnate in Jesus.
Mt 11:28-30

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Commenting on this, St Augustine wrote, “If you wish to reach high, then begin at the lowest level. If you are trying to construct some mighty tall edifice, begin with the foundation. This is humility. However great the mass of the building you may wish to design or erect, the taller the building is to be, the deeper you will have to dig the foundation…. So then, you see even a building is low before it is high and the tower is raised only after humiliation.” In another place he wrote, “God accepts offerings only from the altar of humility.” When St Bernard of Clairvaux was asked what the four cardinal virtues were, he replied “humility, humility, humility, and humility.”

This is just another way of describing a life that is, even to small degree, free of the stubborn clutches of the ego. Even when it disguises itself (and perhaps especially then), the ego is incapable of humility. It has been called “the original lie.” It is a false identity, and therefore every morsel of truth has the capacity to undermine it. It has to be constantly on the alert. Humility, on the other hand, is just the unadorned truth. It is not about belittling oneself or hiding in a corner. It is about letting the plain truth be seen.

This isn’t easy, as everyone knows. We all take cover, to some extent. In the Confessions St Augustine described this tendency to hide: “In its abject shame the mind loves to lie concealed, yet it wishes that nothing should be concealed from it.” It is a perfect picture of the ego. Think of the whole world watching ‘Big Brother’. But when everything is out, he said, the situation will be exactly the reverse: “It will not be able to conceal itself from the truth, but the truth will remain hidden from it.”

My yoke is easy, my burden is light. Humility is much easier to carry than its opposite. The word humility comes from ‘humus’, meaning the ground. Think of the connotations of the word ‘ground’. It suggests rest, security, foundation, reality, source…. There is no security in the ego; to cling to it is to miss your footing.
Jesus went through the cornfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, ‘Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath.’ He said to them, ‘Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice”, you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.’

Cyril of Alexandria (375 – 444) made the wry remark: “When nothing great or noble is happening the Pharisees remain quiet. But when they see people being healed they are deeply offended.” They were more interested in the appearances of religion than in its substance. But we shouldn’t let them have all the free publicity; we too are in the picture. Since the substance of religion is so subtle and deep, it is no surprise that we are often like them, concentrating on what is obvious and shallow.

Jesus seemed to say his own behaviour was excusable because great people in the past had done similar things. “Have you not read what David did…?” John Chrysostom (344/354 – 407) rushes in to the rescue. He doesn’t want us to think that this was how Jesus’ mind worked: excusing himself from blame “by noting that someone else committed the same offence,” or thinking that David’s law-breaking should become a rule for everyone. No, he said, “Jesus was not satisfied with such reasoning. Instead, he said something much more radical: that the deed itself in this case was no sin at all…! For here the Giver of the law was overriding the law.”

Clearly, there was nothing obvious or shallow about this. Laws are designed to be very clear and obvious. That fully satisfies the needs of some people. But there is the matter of spirit. Laws are always trying to substitute for spirit; they try to cover every aspect of life – to go into every nook and cranny and to legislate for every possible human situation. But human life is simply too multitudinous for that. We need spirit, or rather the Spirit, to guide us wisely. The Lord of the Sabbath is the one who is able to give us the Spirit.
The Pharisees went out and conspired against Jesus, how to destroy him. When Jesus became aware of this, he departed. Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them, and he ordered them not to make him known. This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

‘Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.
He will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smouldering wick
until he brings justice to victory.
And in his name the Gentiles will hope.’

Yesterday’s discussion about law continues today. St John Chrysostom (349 AD – 407) said, “It is not as an adversary that Christ transcends the law, as if he were an enemy of the Lawgiver, but as though he were of one mind with the Lawgiver and held to the very same purposes.”

The meaning of this condensed sentence of Chrysostom’s is delightfully illustrated by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s Little Prince.

The Little Prince finds himself on a planet where there is nothing at all, except a king seated on his throne. He was a very imperious one, “for what he fundamentally insisted upon was that his authority should be respected. He tolerated no disobedience. He was an absolute monarch. But, because he was a very good man, he made his orders reasonable.

‘If I ordered a general,’ he would say, by way of example, ‘if I ordered a general to change himself into a sea bird, and if the general did not obey me, that would not be the fault of the general. It would be my fault....’

‘Sire,’ said the little prince, ‘over what do you rule?’

‘Over everything,” said the king, with magnificent simplicity.

‘Over everything?’ The king made a gesture, which took in his planet, the other planets, and all the stars.... For his rule was not only absolute: it was also universal.

‘And the stars obey you?’

‘Certainly they do,’ the king said. ‘They obey instantly. I do not permit insubordination....’

‘I should like to see a sunset.... Do me that kindness.... Order the sun to set.’

‘One must require from each one the duty which each one can perform,’ the king went on.

‘Accepted authority rests first of all on reason.... I have the right to require obedience because my orders are reasonable.”

‘Then my sunset?’ the little prince reminded him: for he never forgot a question once he had asked it.

‘You shall have your sunset. I shall command it. But, according to my science of government, I shall wait until conditions are favourable.’

‘When will that be?’ inquired the little prince.

‘Hum! Hum!’ replied the king; and before saying anything else he consulted a bulky almanac. ‘Hum! Hum! That will be about – about – that will be this evening about twenty minutes to eight. And you will see how well I am obeyed!”
21 July [16th Sunday in Ordinary time]
Lk 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Many people are now familiar with the work of Andrei Rublev (c.1360 - c.1430), the great Russian icon painter, and in particular with his 'Old Testament Trinity': picturing the three angels welcomed by Abraham (Genesis 18). Christians see this scene as a prefiguring of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. This icon is also called 'Welcome to the Stranger'. Anyone praying with this icon for any length of time will feel that the invitation is somehow mutual: the three figures are inviting you to sit at table with them; you are invited into the life of God.

In the gospel reading, Jesus is welcomed into the house of Martha and Mary. The link between the two readings is hospitality. Like the three Genesis figures, Jesus is a wanderer, a pilgrim; and he is invited into the house. (The disciples on the road to Emmaus also met him as a wanderer, and invited him in: see Luke 24.)

The two sisters' style of hospitality is very different: Mary just sits in his presence, Martha wants to have everything right for him. Mary gives him nothing but her attention, Martha gives him everything except her attention.

He was usually surrounded by crowds: sometimes the bustle was so great that the disciples hardly had time to eat (Mark 6:31). But now the sisters had him all to themselves and could question him and listen to him without interruptions, away from the din of controversy. It was not a moment to be missed. But Martha missed it, through her very eagerness to have everything right for him.

It is a familiar story: you hear versions of it from wives, sometimes from husbands, very often from young people, especially teenagers. There is a recognised type called 'compulsive helpers', who don't consider what you want but what they want for you. Of course no one knows how much of this applies to Martha, but it applies to people you and I know. This type of person needs to be needed, so they hover, meddle, and control; they want others to depend on them; they are generous, but they expect a return for what they do for you; they sacrifice themselves, but you hear all about it; they are good at making people feel guilty, and they have a knack of making others look small and helpless. What they fear most of all is that they might not be needed, so any show of independence from you brings out the worst in them. Meanwhile they are peculiarly blind to their own motivation, and they feel overlooked and victimised by others. They need to be needed - but more fundamentally they need to be loved.

In John 11:5 it is down in black and white that "Jesus loved Martha," and her sister Mary and brother Lazarus. He knew what remedy to apply. And no doubt he saw her strengths. The story of Martha and Mary comes directly after the story of the Good Samaritan (last Sunday's gospel reading). This should make it clear that Jesus valued active service and not only contemplation.

In the past there was an unfortunate tendency in the Church to see monastic contemplative life as a "higher" form of the Christian life. Every form of the Christian life is beset with its own problems. The ego is able to burrow in anywhere, and the contemplative ego is no better than the active, and frequently worse. In a situation of crisis both Martha and Mary looked very
different from the way they look in this peaceful scene. Their ‘high’ and ‘low’ stations were reversed. The crisis was their brother’s death. There Martha shines; she went out to meet the Lord where he was to be met, and had a profound conversation with him, while “Mary stayed sitting in her house.” You can take her ‘house’ to mean her inner self. The besetting problem with contemplatives is that they can come to love their own interiority above all else: above their neighbour, and even above the Lord. There is no hospitality there, but a terrible staleness; and this is the ego’s trademark. For you never know where hospitality will take you.

Let me tell you, that to approach the stranger
Is to invite the unexpected, release a new force,
Or let the genie out of the bottle.
It is to start a train of events
Beyond your control… (T.S. Eliot)
Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’

When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Mary Magdalene is so called because she came from a village in Galilee called Magdala. She experienced some profound healing at the hands of Jesus; the gospels tell us he cast out seven demons from her (Mk 16:9; Lk 8:2). (Illnesses were thought to be caused by demonic infestation - the popular belief was that the air was thick with them, like bugs today.) She helped him in his work and was a witness to his crucifixion.

It was customary for many centuries to identify her with the sinful woman of Lk 7:36-50, but this woman is not named and modern scholars agree that there is no basis for the identification. The fiction began with Ephraim the Syrian in the 4th century and was reinforced by Pope Gregory the Great in the 6th. The ‘seven demons’ were then taken to refer to the seven deadly sins: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. Most people get by on just a couple of them, but Mary was thought to be hooked on all seven.

In John’s gospel, Mary Magdalene is the only woman at the tomb (in Matthew’s there are two, in Mark’s three, and in Luke’s an indeterminate number). They were the first to know of the Resurrection of Jesus. They were sent to tell the news to the brothers. The word ‘apostle’ comes from the Greek apostellein, ‘to send’. Therefore the first apostles of the distinctive Christian proclamation of the Resurrection were women. Indeed, Mary Magdalene is traditionally known as “the apostle to the apostles,” apostola apostolorum. She is a patroness of the Dominican Order, which is called the Order of Preachers, and for this reason many Dominican houses are called ‘St Magdalene’s’. She could also be seen as the patroness of all the women who have preached the Gospel in countless ways throughout the Christian centuries.
While Jesus was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, ‘Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’ But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’

Commenting on a similar passage (Luke 11:27) Meister Eckhart said, "The one who hears my word and keeps it is more blessed than the womb that bore me and the breasts that I sucked'. If I had said this and if it were my word, that that person is more blessed who hears God's word and keeps it than Mary is by giving birth and being Christ's bodily mother—I repeat, if I had said this, people would be surprised. But Christ himself has said it, and therefore we must believe him that it is the truth, for Christ is the Truth." And in another place, "I say that if Mary had not first borne God spiritually, he would never have been born of her physically.... It is more worth to God to be born spiritually of the individual virgin or good soul, than that he was physically born of Mary."

Some may think, ‘Could this apparent put-down of Mary be right or good?’

First of all, it is not a put-down of Mary but a raising up of the disciples. Eckhart continues: “The whole of Christendom pays our Lady great honour and respect because she is the bodily mother of Christ, and that is right and proper. Holy Christendom prays to her for grace which she is able to obtain, and that is right. And if holy Christendom pays her such honour, as indeed is fitting, nevertheless holy Christendom should pay even greater honour and glory to those who hear God's word and keep it, for they are even more blessed than our Lady is through being the bodily mother of Christ, as Christ himself has told us. All that honour, and immeasurably more, is accorded to those who hear God's word and keep it."

If you are still unhappy, read what St Augustine has to say. “It is greater for Mary to have been a disciple of Christ than to have been the mother of Christ.... Mary was therefore blessed because, even before she gave birth, she bore the Master in her womb. ... Mary is holy and Mary is blessed, but the Church is greater than the Virgin Mary. And why? Because Mary is a part of the Church, a holy limb, an extraordinary limb, an outstanding limb, but she is only a limb of the whole body. If she is but a part of the whole body, greater indeed is the body than a limb. Christ is the head, and Christ is the entire head and body.”
Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

Every living thing begins from a seed. The word of God is sown in the heart like a seed.

Let’s follow this metaphor of seed a little way. Many seeds require a resting period after falling from the parent plant before they are able to germinate into new plants. Chemical changes take place during this period, making the seed ready for germination. Germination does not take place unless the seed finds itself in a favourable environment. The conditions of a favourable environment are adequate water and oxygen, and a suitable temperature. When these conditions are not present, the seed is prepared to wait….and wait. Seeds found in the excavations at Pompeii, dating from 79 AD, grew when they were placed in the right conditions by scientists.

After Paul had a spiritual experience on the road to Damascus he went off to Arabia. “I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia....” (Gal 1:17-18). This, we can suppose, was a kind of resting period during which the new seed of faith developed to its next stage in him. Then after three years he went up to Jerusalem to visit Peter, and stayed with him fifteen days. After this brief period of germination, his faith was a vigorous plant. He was rich soil and the plant so vigorous that he was able to survive the harshest conditions. Just how harsh these were he described in 2 Cor. 11:24-28.

If our hearts are not soft soil, but hard and stony, the seed of faith lies dormant forever.
25 July [St James, apostle]
Mt 20:20-28

The mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favour of him. And he said to her, ‘What do you want?’ She said to him, ‘Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.’ But Jesus answered, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?’ They said to him, ‘We are able.’ He said to them, ‘You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.’

When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’

James, the brother of John, is an apostle we know very little about. It is clear that he had a leading position among the twelve. In every list of the apostles he is in the first three; and he was the first apostle to be martyred. Yet, with one exception, he is never mentioned apart from his brother John. The one exception is when his martyrdom is recounted in Acts 12:2.

James and John were fishermen, sons of Zebedee. They seem to have been typical impulsive and quick-tempered Galileans, for they were nicknamed ‘Boanerges’, “sons of thunder” (Mk 3:17). They were ambitious men who wanted an assurance that they would have big jobs in the Kingdom (Mk 10:35-45).

That is all that is known of James the Apostle. He was not the author of the Letter of James. There is a legend that he went to Spain and preached the Gospel there; he is the patron saint of that country. There is a popular pilgrimage to his tomb in the city of Santiago de Compostela. It was named Europe’s Premier Cultural Itinerary by the Council of Europe in 1987 and is also listed on the Unesco World Heritage register. The Camino begins in Roncesvalles, on the French border, and covers 783 km to the Atlantic coast. Many pilgrims walk part of it, but sturdy ones walk the whole way, which takes about a month.

It was suggested that the name of the shrine of Compostela may be a corruption of Giacomo Postolo (James the Apostle). To this day there is an image of the Virgin Mary in Saragossa, before which a hundred lamps are kept forever burning, for the legend is that Mary appeared to James there to strengthen him and encourage him in his work.
26 July
Mt 13:18-23
‘Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.’

This passage is generally regarded by scholars not as words of Jesus but as an interpretation by the earliest Christian community. It was not Jesus’ way to explain parables. In fact explaining a story is like explaining a joke: it only flattens it. The parables don’t need explanation – unless it be to fill in some historical facts that have become obscured by the passage of time. But we can meditate on them, as those early Christians did, and all Christians through the ages.

The meditation of those early Christians reflects their experience, of course. Their interpretation shows that they had experience of those four kinds of listening to the word: the three fruitless ones and the one fruitful. So has the Church in every age, and so have we today.

Every one of us is a crowd – especially today when we are mobbed by so many voices coming at us through the airwaves. In the Christian Community Bible translation, the demoniac said, “My name is Mob, for we are many” (Mk 5:9). In our individual selves perhaps we can distinguish all four kinds of hearers – or days when we are one of them in particular….

Here comes the mob: 1. My heart is just a public path with no interiority at all, nowhere to “abide”. I am full of restless activity, so that I never really see anyone or face anything. I am constantly ‘transmitting’, so that I can never hear what others are trying to tell me. 2. My heart is a hard, stony place. I have little or no feeling for anyone who is not “one of us”, and I am wary of anyone who comes near me, in case they make demands I don't want to meet. 3. My heart is choked by the dissipation of modern life. I can't sit without turning on the TV or picking up something to read. My life is a series of disconnected events, with no vision, no direction, no passion. 4. There are occasional unguarded moments when the seed of the word falls into good soil. These are the moments to live for.
27 July  
Mt 13:24-30  
"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

Most people dislike living in a mess: we have an instinct to clean up the place. The more tidy-minded we are, the more trouble we will have with messy rooms, messy organisation, messy thinking, messy feelings….  

I'm sure no one but a pig would want to live in a pigsty, but if tidiness is the most important and solemn rule in a home, it creates an unreal atmosphere for children. “Cleanliness is next to….?” asked the teacher. “Next to impossible,” said the grubby little boy. We have to learn to live with mess, because life is messy. If it is suppressed it will come out later, and possibly in some other area, like human relationships….  

There was a book some years ago entitled *I'm OK, You're OK*, by Thomas A Harris. It listed all the logically possible combinations of attitudes to self and others: 1. I'm ok, you're ok; 2. I'm ok, you're not ok; 3. I'm not ok, you're ok; and 4. I'm not ok, you're not ok. Someone gave a copy to Thich Nhat Hahn, the Buddhist monk who has a centre in the Dordogne area in the south of France. Next morning when asked for his opinion of the book he said, "It's ok! But it would be better if there was another category: I'm not ok, you're not ok, and that's ok!" This is much closer to the Christian spirit.  

The Church is messy: not in its ideal, but in actual experience. There are Christians who are unable to live with this, and who become angry with everyone who is different from themselves. This is to begin at the wrong point. The real beginning is one's own conversion, not that of others. When I begin at the wrong point my religion becomes a crusade, a search for a 'pure race'. Certainly, faith is not just my own business, but if I am converted I will go to others with the Good News, not with a critical and hypocritical spirit.  

The spirit of Jesus says, Leave the weeds; leave them for God to sort out at harvest-time – in other words, leave them forever. "Who are you to give a verdict on your neighbour?" (James 4:12).
Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread: for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 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!"

The version of the Our Father that we are used to is from Matthew's gospel, but today's reading gives us Luke's version. You notice that it is shorter. In place of Matthew's 'Our Father in heaven,' Luke says simply, 'Father'. That longer phrase is so characteristic of Matthew's writing style (he uses it twenty times in his gospel, but Luke never) that it is seen as entirely his own and not Jesus'. Jesus probably said simply, 'Father'.

It seems to us a strange request: "Lord, teach us to pray." Jews prayed every day since childhood. Why would they ask him now to teach them to pray? The meaning of it seems to be this: they were asking him for a distinctive prayer as his disciples. John's disciples had a special kind of prayer, but Jesus' disciples apparently did not. In answer to their request he taught them the Our Father. This makes it very special: it is not just any prayer; it is a distinctively Christian prayer.

But look now: there is no mention in it of any of the Christian mysteries! There is no mention of Jesus, nor of his passion, death and resurrection, there is no mention of the Trinity.... What sense can we make of this?

I remember standing some years ago at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, surrounded by Jews. It is a great privilege to stand there beside them, at the only remaining part of the Temple which was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70. I thought of Jesus, a Jew, as I stood there groping in my mind for words. There is no mention of him in his own prayer, the Our Father. I realised that any Jewish person at that Wailing Wall could pray the words of the Our Father and not find them the least bit strange. Jesus was among his own people. But how then can the Our Father be a Christian disciple's prayer?

Some time later it came to me: if there is no mention of Jesus, his life, death or resurrection, nor of any of the Christian mysteries, it is because this was his own prayer. In prayer he was seized by a single awareness: the Father; he was not thinking about himself. When we pray the Our Father we are not praying to him, but with him; we are praying his prayer. We are so close to him that we cannot see him; like him, we see only the Father. We are, as it were, inside his head, looking out through his eyes: seeing the Father, and seeing the world as he sees it. We are totally identified with him – we are indeed his disciples. We are praying through him. All our prayers end with the phrase, "through Our Lord Jesus Christ...." At the end of the Eucharistic Prayer we say, "Through him, with him, in him...."
If Jesus sometimes seems absent it is because he is everywhere. He has drawn the whole world into his heart. As usual the poet puts it better. Jessica Powers found him in everything, or in her phrase, “in his ubiquity.”

   I went into the Christmas cave;
   there was no Child upon the straw.
   the ox and ass were all I saw.
   I sought his stable where He gave
   His goodness in the guise of bread.
   Emptiness came to me instead ....
   I found Him (and the world is wide)
   Dear in His warm ubiquity.
   Where heart beat, there was Christ for me.
29 July [St Martha]

Jn 11:19-27

Many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.’

A little beyond the end of today’s reading there is the shortest verse in the Bible. It is John 11:35, and it says simply, “Jesus wept.” It shows sensitivity in the people who first divided the Scriptures into chapters and verses. They could easily have put these words with the following line; it would even have been logical: the following line is, “So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’” It was a wise and sensitive decision. When someone weeps you just have to give them time to weep. Weeping may be saying a lot, but it is not language, and it doesn’t require an answer or an explanation. There are two occasions in the gospel when Jesus told people not to weep (Luke 7:13; 8:52). On both occasions there was an error of fact: the persons being mourned were not dead. But in today’s story there is no doubt about Lazarus being dead. So Jesus wept. He did not take death lightly. He is sometimes made to seem a sort of magician who “leaped up on the third day.” If we make little of death we make little of the resurrection.

Nor can we make little of Martha. She is not playing second fiddle to Mary (especially not in this passage). With Peter’s, hers is the most explicit confession of Jesus as Messiah – which is the whole purpose for which the gospel was written (John 20:30f). A scholar says that this points to the prominent role women like Martha played in the early Church.
30 July
Mt 13:36-43
Jesus left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, ‘Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.’ He answered, ‘The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

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

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

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

This thought doesn’t make evil any less evil, or less painful to its victims. But if we don’t spend all our time wondering why there is so much evil in the world, we may have a little left over for wondering why there is so much good.
31 July  
Mt 13:44-46

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

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

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

Contemplation is silent presence. Even there – or I should say especially there – we discover our compulsion to fill every space with words and readymade feelings. It is a way of trying to stay in control. "I am master of all I explain," someone said. What a pity that the words 'meditation' and 'contemplation' are pale Latin words, just as pale as 'explanation'! Think of some chunky Anglo-Saxon word for it. Thomas Merton did: he dropped these words and began to use the word 'wisdom'. 
1 August
Mt 13:47-53
"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

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

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

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

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

I had a multitude of professors in my youth who went to great pains to show how the new was caused by the old. But if the new is caused by the old, then there is nothing new. (This conclusion probably gave them some kind of reassurance.) When light comes into a dark room you don't say that the light is caused by the darkness. Instead there was an opening and the light came in. Sifting the past is moving things around so that new light can shine through them.
2 August
Mt 13:54-58

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

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

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

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

We don’t get the impression that Jesus was bitterly disappointed or angry about his treatment
in his home town. Perhaps he expected it. In Luke's account he even seemed to provoke it.
We start out in life with our ego-dream: we expect everyone to love us as much as our mothers
did. When we discover that the world isn’t like that we become bitter and disillusioned; and so
begins the rollercoaster of emotions. If we had no expectations, but also no bitterness, we
would be free of two major traps on the path of discipleship.
Mt 14:1-12

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

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

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

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

When a politician says to a religious leader, “Stay in your own spiritual world and leave the real world to me,” or “Leave science to the scientists,” he is saying that religion has nothing to say on any question that he chooses to call ‘political’ or ‘scientific’. Would he also say, “Leave medicine to the doctors,” silencing everyone else on questions such as abortion, euthanasia, etc.? Or leave wars to the military? Or financial affairs to bankers? Religion has something to say to everyone, and more than a little to say to politicians. Scientists and doctors have all endured long years of arduous study; but politicians, like auctioneers, have no specific training for their job. Nobody should be intimidated by them. There is the witness of countless brave people, from John the Baptist to Oscar Romero.
4 August [18th Sunday in Ordinary time]
Lk 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

The vision of Ecclesiastes (also known as Qoheleth the Preacher) in the first reading is a particularly bleak one. It still appeals greatly to people with a pessimistic turn of mind. "I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing of the wind" (1:14). Scholars say it represents an era of crisis in biblical history, a period of self-questioning; and that through it came a deepening of the spirit. If so, then we can hope that the same may be true of our own times.

No one can deny that there is truth in what Qoheleth says. We all give ourselves (and others) a lot of agony about words and thoughts, privileges and possessions and appearances.... We are capable of ruining our health, our peace of mind and the peace of our homes for nothing. "Vanity of vanities!"

Jesus takes up this theme in the gospel reading, expressing it typically as a story. But there is a difference. Qoheleth says the rich man is foolish because he “must leave all to someone who has not worked for it.” In other words, he is foolish to have worked, because he cannot enjoy all the fruits of it himself. Jesus said the rich man is foolish because he does not “amass for God,” or “make himself rich in the sight of God,” or “build up treasure in heaven.” These expressions meant almsgiving (see Luke 12:33; 16:9).

Though these two seem similar in ways, they are worlds apart. Qoheleth’s is a self-centred world that has become disillusioned with itself, but which doesn’t even consider the possibility of unselfishness. It is doubly bleak. The world of Jesus is a world of spontaneous self-giving. These two worlds are still in existence, and still competing for our minds and hearts.

How does one calculate one’s wealth? Usually we calculate it by checking how much we have, but the saints tell us we should calculate it by checking how much we have given away. The psychology of possession is full of contradictions. If you collect a million euro, are you happy then? The chances are that you are not; the collecting has done something to you, it has captured your mind and imagination; you want to continue collecting; you have become a collector, just warming to the task. So you try to collect another million and another... you will never finish collecting. What is it all about? What is it for? What are you adding to yourself? You are adding zeros! What is the difference between one million and ten million? Just another zero. What a way to cheat oneself! - so much work for zero! Instead be a giver, the Gospel tells us. Know the joy of giving. This you will know only by doing it, not by thinking about it.

With greed, there are no winners. The greedy are damaging not only themselves but others. To picture the imbalance of wealth in the world, imagine the world as a village of 100 people, with all the existing population ratios remaining the same. It would look like this. There would be 57 Asians, 21 Europeans, 14 from the Western Hemisphere, and 8 Africans. 52 of the villagers would be female, 48 male. 70 would be non-white, 30 white. 6 individuals would own
59% of the entire village's wealth. 80 people would be living in substandard housing, 70 would be unable to read, 50 would suffer from malnutrition, 1 would have a college education, and 1 would own a computer.

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

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

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

Jesus did not say, “I will feed them.” He said, ‘You feed them.” Miracles don’t leave us passive; we have to provide some material, however inadequate. When Moses said he wanted a sign to take with him, God said, ‘What is that in your hand?” He worked on that (Exodus 4:1-3). A widow needed financial help. Elisha asked what she had in her house. She replied that she had only a small amount of oil. He told her to borrow jars into which to pour the oil and then multiplied it until all the jars were full (2 Kings 4:1-7). In today’s reading Jesus asked them to bring him the loaves and fish. We have to bring something to the table.
6 August [Transfiguration]
Lk 9:28-36

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

In all three liturgical cycles we have the strange story of the Transfiguration on the second Sunday of Lent. What does it mean? The second reading is a kind of echo of this gospel reading, and perhaps it gives us a key to open up its meaning for us. The Lord, St Paul writes, "will transfigure these wretched bodies of ours into copies of his glorious body." The Transfiguration, then—whatever we discover it to mean—is not only about Jesus but about us. It is to make some discernible difference to us today.

There was the everyday Jesus who was well known to his friends; and then there was the moment when they scarcely recognised him, so transformed—transfigured—was he. Divinity shone through him, revealing depths that they had never imagined. Can this happen only to Jesus? When the little girl was asked what a saint was, she replied (thinking of the stained glass windows in the church), "A person who lets the light through." Lovely—but is it only an image? Can it also be a reality? Could you and I let the light through? We are probably far too aware of our wretchedness to think thoughts like that. But it is just these "wretched bodies of ours" that are the material of transfiguration, according to St Paul.

In a beautiful poem called The sunrise ruby, Jelaluddin Rumi (1207-1273) the Sufi mystic, imagines a girl asking her beloved,

'Do you love me or yourself more?
Really, tell the absolute truth.'
He says, 'There's nothing left of me.
I'm like a ruby held up to the sunrise.
Is it still a stone, or a world
made of redness? It has no resistance
to sunlight.'

There it is: in one way it is a stone, but in another it is a world of redness. This gives some impression of what transfiguration might mean. When you are completely absorbed and self-forgetful as you look at the sea, or at a sunset, or the night sky, or a tree, you are still yourself, of course; but you are also more than yourself. At any rate you are a kind of larger self, and not the small self that thinks before speaking, and counts money, and always looks after its own interests.

But we would like to hear what Christian mystics have to say about it. Johann Tauler (1300-1361) wrote the following:

"God fires the spirit with a spark from the divine abyss. By the strength of this supernatural help the soul, enlightened and purified, is drawn out of itself into a unique and ineffable state of pure intent toward God….This complete turning of the soul toward God is beyond all understanding and feeling; it is a thing of wonder and defies imagination….In this state the soul, purified and enlightened, sinks into the divine darkness, into a tranquil silence and inconceivable union. It is absorbed in God, and now all equality and inequality disappear.
In this abyss the soul loses itself, and knows nothing of God or of itself, of likeness to Him or of difference from Him, or of anything whatsoever. It is immersed in the unity of God and has lost all sense of distinctions."

 Sadly, this aspect of the Christian faith is not as familiar to many as it could be. We have learnt to settle for less. Most people believe that the best things are not for them. But we are all called to deep enlightenment and union with God. Does this mean that we are to be somehow unreal and up-in-the-air? Hardly. Tauler and the people of his time had to be intensely practical. But his words live for centuries beyond the time he uttered them, because he was in touch with the living heart of our Faith. It is he, and the likes of him, who will lead us to the heart of God.
7 August
Mt 15:21-28

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

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

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