

July  
2018

## GOSPEL COMMENTARIES

1 July [13th Sunday in Ordinary Time]

Mk 5:21-43

*When Jesus had crossed in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him.*

*Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."*

*While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly.*

*When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. 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). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.*

This is an example of Mark's 'sandwiching': in the middle of one incident he places another. It gives remarkable pace to his story.

What is all the hurrying about? Jesus is hurrying to save the life of a little girl, and he heals a sick woman on the way. The first reading began, "Death was not God's doing, he takes no pleasure in the extinction of the living." So Jesus is doing God's work; he heals and he restores to life.

Watch how he does it. There is great gentleness and warmth in these two stories. The speed and the pressure of expectations didn't make him impersonal or mechanical, as it does many busy people. His affectionate expression to the little girl, "Talitha kum!", is retained in his own language, Aramaic. The New Testament is written in Greek, but the writers kept just a few phrases in Jesus' own language:

*maranatha*, and *Abba* and *Talitha kum*. Terms of affection translate poorly, because they are more than their dictionary meaning: they are warm words. (I remember an ancient woman in my village who used to address everyone as *a leanbh*, 'child'.)

Likewise, when the lady wanted a cure and touched his cloak rather than face him, he said, "Who touched me?" He didn't want her cure to be anonymous; he wanted to speak to her and heal her, not just relieve her symptoms.

"Who touched me?" These are words to break through the stoutest walls of anonymity. There is a kind of frigid atmosphere when people don't know one another. If they have to exchange words they use the minimum number usually: "Excuse me!" "Thank you!" "Goodbye!" There is seldom any real warmth in them, and the smile (if any) that goes with them looks a bit stiff. But "who touched me?" breaks through all that. We can be spontaneous with our friends because we know how they will react; but we don't know how strangers might react, so we play safe; in a sense we hide ourselves. The woman in the story wanted contact with Jesus, and at the same time she wanted the security of anonymity. So in the press of the crowd she touched the hem of his cloak; she wanted an anonymous cure. It is still very much with us today. We are drawn to anything that promises us a cure. You could make a list of them, from the more sensible to the less! What is missing in many of them is a Who to touch you: what we really need is a Son of God with fire of compassion in his eyes, who looks for you saying, "Who touched me?" Or "talitha kumi!" Or even "a leanbh!"

2 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 something fascinating 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. Better to take one real step, even a short one, than to fantasise about going to the ends of the earth.

"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!*

3 July [St Thomas, apostle]

Jn 20:24-29

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

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

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

He invites us as he invited Thomas to "put your finger here and see my hands; stretch out your hand and put it into my side." Everything has to come back at last to experience. "Today," wrote St Bernard of Clairvaux in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, "we read the book of experience." That sentence might have been written this morning. We need to be reassured that our experience, however painful or discouraging, has the power to bring us to Christ. Most of us know the wounds of Christ first-hand. Information and theoretical knowledge are not enough. St Paul didn't say, "We have reflected at length on the death of Jesus." He wrote, "We went down into the tomb with him, and joined him in death" (Rom 6:4). "We are now dying with him on his cross, in his pains and Passion," wrote Julian of Norwich in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, "and when we deliberately remain on that same cross, holding on to the very end, with his help and grace, then suddenly we shall see his expression change and we shall be with him in heaven. Without a moment's break we shall pass from one state the other – and we shall all be brought into joy."

4 July

Mt 8:23-27

*And when he 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?"*

In Mark's account of this incident Jesus reproached 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.

Does it always have to be that way? Must we have faith first?

Language is tidy: words and phrases line up like polite people in a queue. But in real life things are much more mixed up; things happen together, like people rushing in. Faith doesn't simply come first; it comes along with everything else that is happening. Mark's account is just as valid as Matthew's.

The Gospel is telling us: When you feel your boat is about to sink don't sit around waiting for faith. Do what needs to be done, and faith will be given to you. Douglas Hyde (not the Irish president of that name, but the author of *I Believed*, published in 1950) 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 around 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.

5 July  
Mt 9:1-8

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

Fergus Kerr OP wrote a highly significant book entitled *Theology after Wittgenstein* (first published in 1986), in which he 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 the 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 had this to say: "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 (4<sup>th</sup> century) 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 amazing that a portion of the world shaped in large measure by the Christian faith we should ever have been tempted to divide body and spirit. But that is what we inherited and passed on.

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. No life of the body. Just one soul. And the appeal to fear rather than 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.

6 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 6<sup>th</sup>-century writer took it that Matthew left his affairs in disorder, a thing that greatly impressed that writer: it must be particularly difficult for someone who deals with figures to leave them unbalanced. Do we have to balance our books before we set out on the Gospel path?

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

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



7 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 (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 that probably 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.

8 July [14th Sunday in Ordinary Time]

Mk 6:1-6

*Jesus came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offence at him.*

*Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching.*

Mark never attempts to smooth the edges of the story. "When Jesus noticed it he was very angry," he wrote (10:13), describing Jesus' reaction when the disciples tried to stop children from coming near him. Matthew and Luke smooth it over, simply writing "Jesus then said...." But it works both ways: Mark may show an angrier Jesus in that passage, but he also shows him to be more affectionate than the other Gospel writers do. "He took the children in his arms and laying his hands on them, blessed them" (10:16). Matthew only says "Jesus laid his hands on them and went his way" (19:15), and in Luke's version there is no contact at all: "He called the children to him and said..." (18:16). Mark's Jesus is more emotional, he shows his feelings more.

Another example of Mark's bluntness: he wrote that James and John asked to be seated at Jesus' right hand in the Kingdom (10:37), but Matthew said it was their *mother* who asked this question! (20:23). It is obvious, when you look carefully, that Mark is more accurate. Matthew calls Jesus "the carpenter's son" (13:55), as if to distance him from manual work. But in today's reading Mark reports people as saying simply, "This is the carpenter surely!"

"We must face the fact," wrote George Bernard Shaw, "that all society is based upon intolerance." He may have been overstating the case, but the test is whether the hat fits. Brinsley MacNamara's novel *The Valley of the Squinting Windows* exposed the bitter cruelty of village morality. The smaller the society, the more controlling this narrow spirit. "Beneath the charm of the rural town or village, there often lurks a lethal intolerance." People who have known you all your life see you as the child you were, even when you are a middle-aged man or woman. They see where you came from and they remember all your youthful mistakes. If they are villagers they also want to make sure you are not getting above yourself; "who does he think he is?" Nazareth was such a place.

The terrible fact is that it works! It tied Jesus' hands: "he could work no miracles there," wrote Mark. Matthew says, "He did not work many miracles there" (13:58), making it look more like a decision on Jesus' part. Mark's version is more gutsy and tragic, and it makes you think more. It is a frightful thought that we have the ability to prevent miracles, to tie the Lord's hands.... How many miracles have I prevented in my life? Or this week? Why are my wife and children so quiet? Are they sinking into despair? Or have I a way of making my husband feel so bad that everything he might do or say is condemned in advance? God prevent that I should be a miracle-stopper!

9 July

Mt 9:18-26

*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.

10 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...."

11 July [St Benedict]

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.”

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."

13 July

Mt 10:16-23

*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!"



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).

"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."

15 July [15th Sunday in Ordinary Time]

Mk 6:7-13

*Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them."*

*So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.*

When Jews of old were about to enter the Temple they had to leave their sandals, staff and money girdle outside. Perhaps this was in Jesus' mind when he told the disciples to take nothing for the journey. The world is a kind of Temple of God.

The details of what they were to leave behind differ from gospel to gospel. "No staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money - not even an extra tunic" (Luke 9:3). "No gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff" (Matthew 10:10-11). But Mark's account allows them a staff and sandals. Mark's is the earliest gospel. Why did the later ones make the conditions stricter? It has been suggested that it may have been due to a comparison in the matter of poverty with the 1<sup>st</sup>-century Cynic itinerant preachers, who went about on bare feet.

Today a 'cynical' person is someone who is disenchanted with everything, more or less. The original Cynics were followers of a philosophical school (founded in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC) that viewed all human civilisation as artificial and rather contemptible. They believed we should return to a natural life, self-sufficient and free of wealth and luxury. Hence their bare feet and simple lifestyle. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century St Dominic found himself in a similar situation. The Albigensians, an Eastern sect that regarded material reality as evil, were being very successful, particularly in the south of France, because people were impressed with their ascetic way of life, which compared favourably with the vanity and luxury of the Catholic clergy. The Albigensians went about on bare feet. Dominic realised that the Gospel could not be preached from horseback (luxury transport in those days), so he took to the roads on bare feet, like the Albigensians themselves. But when he approached a town he would put on his sandals, in case he was taken for an Albigensian!

Today we see that the Gospel cannot be preached from a Mercedes or a Porsche. Some of the most impressive religious groups have been ones that returned to poverty and simplicity of life, such as the Congregation founded by Charles de Foucault. The call to "take nothing for the journey" is as resonant today as it was in the time of the first disciples of Jesus.

16 July

Mt 10:34—11:1

*“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.

Mt 11:20-24

*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!

18 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 is 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.

19 July

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.

20 July

Mt 12:1-8

*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.

Mt 12:14-21

*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!'"

22 July [16th Sunday in Ordinary Time]



Mk 6:30-34

*The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.*

*Now many saw them going and recognised them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.*

Mark's gospel leaves an impression of breathless haste; it is like a child telling a story. Many sentences begin with "And"; he often uses phrases like "straight away", "and immediately"; he uses the 'historic present' ("Jesus says to them," not said), which gives a feeling of urgency. The Old Testament took thousands of years to unfold, but the New Testament unfolded in just a couple of years. There is an urgency about the gospels – Mark's in particular – that makes it quite clear they are not just for reading; they are for doing.

Mark's source was Peter, who had always been at the centre of the action himself; so this is a special glimpse into the Twelve's first hectic experience of pastoral work. Today's reading is the second time in Mark's gospel that the disciples are too busy even to eat (the other reference is 3:20). When they tried to get away to place where they could rest, they found more work waiting for them there. This is exhausting even to read about; it sounds just like the present age.

It is interesting that Jesus did not insist on the day-off they had planned together. Instead "he set himself to teach them (the crowd) at some length." The needs of the crowd came first; he was not forming the Twelve into an élite whose needs took precedence over everything. They were running the risk of burn-out, but it must be a risk worth running.

The crowd, Jesus said, were "like sheep without a shepherd." He once told a parable about a hundred sheep, one of which was lost; the shepherd left the ninety-nine and went in search of the one that was lost (Lk 15:4; Mt 18:12). To go in search of someone who is lost is to be a little lost yourself, in the sense that you have to go away from your familiar circle and into strange places. Because we are all, to different degrees, unsure of ourselves we like to stay with the familiar. That is more reassuring because it is where we find our identity. A parish can become a place where the ninety-nine are lost, while the priest looks after the one who isn't lost. But that is another way of being lost; in fact it is worse than the other because it does not come from an adventurous spirit; quite the opposite. Shepherds can themselves be lost, even while appearing to be at the centre of things.

Sheep nibble themselves astray: they keep their heads down, just as we tend to keep our heads glued to our jobs – until we look up and realise we don't know where we are. It would be a very good thing to stop and rest, as Jesus said. When we look at it rightly, there is only one Shepherd, and every one of us is the lost sheep.

Mt 12:38-42

*Some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Jesus, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here! The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!"*

"Aaron threw down his staff before Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake" (Exodus 7:10). There has always been a keen demand for miracles. In the time of Jesus there was a belief that the Messianic Age would be heralded in with a shower of them, as in the time of Moses and Aaron. Rabbi Eliezer was said to have made rivers flow backwards....

The demand is just as keen today as then. Isn't the world wonderful enough as it is, without any contortions? Oscar Wilde, tongue in cheek, said of the Niagara Falls, "The wonder would be if the water *didn't* fall!" It is about entertainment and spectacle, and the unspoken assumption is that the ordinary world is flat, with no depth, no power to bring the mind to God.

The demand for miracles and wonders is the mysticism of extraverts – or rather, it is the point from which extraverts begin. Everything has to be 'out there': apparitions, messages, strange occurrences and coincidences.... Highly rational people are often the most readily convinced by these. This is puzzling until you hit the key word: extravert. For a highly rational person a 'miracle' is new data in the lab. It was the highly rationalistic theologies that depended most heavily on them. Meanwhile there is a whole world untouched: the world of self-deception, projection, wishful thinking.... But that is outside the frame of rationality, so it is not acknowledged: it is not 'objective', so it is merely 'irrational'. When it is acknowledged at all, it is seen only as *wilful* self-deception. But it is far more potent when it is not wilful. That is a place where the extravert person does not want to look.

"No sign will be given to this wicked generation," Jesus said, "but the sign of Jonah!" Matthew interpreted this very fancifully, comparing the "three days and three nights" that Jesus was to spend in the tomb (factually inaccurate) with the three days and nights that Jonah spent in the whale's belly. Luke does not make this comparison (11:29-32). The sign to the Ninevites was Jonah himself and his preaching. Applying this to himself, Jesus was saying, "You are seeking a sign – I, and my preaching, am God's sign!"

24 July

Mt 12:46-50

*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."

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 13:10-17

*The disciples came and asked Jesus, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: 'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn – and I would heal them.' But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.*

There are art books that superimpose a network of geometric shapes on a painting in an effort to 'explain' it. The more complex they are, the less credible. It is the same with all explanations. "I wish he would explain his explanations," someone said of a philosopher. Jesus did very little explaining. He preferred to leave his parables there to do their work by themselves. You don't have to cut open a seed (in fact you had better not) in order to explain it before putting it in the ground. It grows better if you don't explain it that way! In spiritual matters, too, explanations generally have done more harm than good. When something is explained (the word means 'flattened out') we lose interest in it; it loses its power to move us or challenge us or take us beyond a certain ingrained rationalism.

There is no problem about leaving things unexplained. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century St Irenaeus wrote: "Why should we complain if... we are able by the grace of God to explain some things [in Scripture], while we must leave others in the hands of God, and that not only in the present world, but also in the world to come, so that God should forever teach, and we should forever learn?"

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century Julian of Norwich wrote that God revealed to her "a great thing which was to come.... But what the deed would be was kept secret from me.... I saw hidden in God an exalted and wonderful mystery, which he will make plain and we shall know in heaven."

27 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.

28 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).

Jn 6:1-15

*After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples.*

*Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. Jesus. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.*

*When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."*

*When Jesus realised that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*

In this story everything is on a huge scale. Even the setting for the story is immense: it is the first mention of Jesus crossing the sea of Galilee. At the far side is a wide space where "a huge crowd" can gather. Jesus feeds the thousands; they not only have plenty, they have twelve baskets of bread left over.

It all speaks to us about immensity, about *abundance*: not the kind of abundance that comes from careful gathering and accounting (the people had come with no food); still less the kind that comes from defrauding one's neighbours; but the abundance of God's providence. "Lifting up his eyes, he saw the crowd..." (verse 5). It seems he wants us too to lift up our eyes, and not to live our lives by addition and subtraction when he is able to multiply goodness towards us.

Contrasted with the immensity of everything in that scene is the poverty of resources: five barley loaves and two fish to feed thousands of people. Why this sharp contrast?

Miracles seem to happen in situations of scarcity rather than plenty. Why? Because where there is plenty there is no need of miracles! Where there is plenty you don't have to struggle, you don't have to come up against realities too painfully, you ease your way through everything with a cheque-book. But in the story they had almost nothing. There were only five loaves to feed thousands; and they were *barley* loaves. This was the cheapest kind of bread; in fact barley was really considered animal-feed. It is only the very poor who would eat barley loaves. To be poor is to have no resources. That can have one of two effects: it can turn people in on themselves, filling them with resentment and self-pity; or it can turn them outwards to a real experience of God's Providence. Poverty can break people's spirit, that is why it is so urgent to fight against it. But equally, or more so, riches can destroy the human spirit, muffling it against reality and against God. Here is a rule of thumb: if you want a miracle, give something away, to make room for it.

Sitting on the ground is also a symbol of poverty and even powerlessness. We don't often sit on the ground nowadays, and hardly ever at Mass, but when we are at Mass we are those disciples in John 6, sitting on the ground (figuratively), in humility and simplicity, sharing our poverty and (because of it) sharing the Lord's gift.



In John's gospel there is no account of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. Instead, Jesus washed the disciples' feet, and said, equivalently, "Do this in memory of me." It is another kind of communion. Without that communion which is the service of others, the communion of the Eucharist is robbed of its fruit in one's life.

Disciples in every century have continued to recognise him in service of others and in "the breaking of bread."

Mt 13:31-35

*Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."*

*He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."*

*Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world."*

Jesus was not a politician. A politician promises a great future – and has to explain later why it didn't happen. "I've seen the future, and it works!" said Lincoln Steffens after a visit to the Soviet Union in 1919. It was a claim that no one could disprove, since no one else had seen it; nor had he, really. He mustn't have seen the present either, which was staring him in the face. Later on, even though he was not a politician, he had to backtrack. The Gospel is news about what is present here and now. "The kingdom of God is among you," Jesus said.

The kingdom is present in a hidden unspectacular way, like seeds. The mustard seed is not actually the smallest of seeds, but proverbially it stood for the smallest thing. Seeds disappear into the ground and die. Yeast, too, is invisible when mixed into the batch. Elsewhere Jesus spoke of salt – which, like yeast, becomes invisible. In the Gospel, all spectacles are for God to perform in the end-time. Jesus' way is the way of humility and love. He was not the expected kind of Messiah come to baptise the wicked in fire and overthrow nations. "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 smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory" (Mt 12:19-20). Instead of seeking to consolidate power and win votes he went about healing sick and tormented people. Nothing spectacular.

The logic of the Gospel is not straightforward logic. It is the logic of paradox: the first is the last, the weak is the strong, the greatest is the least, the poorest is the richest, the weakest is the strongest, the lost is the saved, the lowest is the highest, to die is to live.... In a word, the ok are not ok, and there's more hope for us not-ok people than we dare imagine.

31 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.