

March
2018

GOSPEL COMMENTARIES

1 March

Lk 16:19-31

Jesus said, 'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."'

Dives and Lazarus – Rich and Poor. We used to call the rich man Dives, but Jesus did not give any name to this character in his story: 'dives' is just the Latin word for 'rich': a translation of the Greek 'plousios'. The poor man does have a personal name, Lazarus. (As it happens, Jesus had a friend called Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary.) St Augustine wrote: "Jesus kept quiet about the rich man's name but gave the name of the poor man. The rich man's name was well known around, but God kept quiet about it. The other's name was lost in obscurity, but God spoke it. Please do not be surprised.... God kept quiet about the rich man's name, because he did not find it written in heaven. He spoke the poor man's name, because he found it written there, indeed he gave instructions for it to be written there."

The story tells us something about riches: the rich are inclined to define themselves by what they own, not by what they are. Riches can clog up your inner being, so that you do not know who you are. Then you look out from that place of not-knowing and you see other people, but you do not really see them; you only see what they own – or do not own. Others looked through the doorway and saw a poor man there; the rich man looked and saw nobody. That is the subtlety of this story: the rich man was neither cruel nor kind to Lazarus; Lazarus was invisible to him.

There is another rich man in the gospel – this time it was not a story but reality. When Jesus invited him to follow, "he went away sorrowful, because he was very rich" (Mt 19:22). There is nothing quite like wealth for closing the ears and the mind, for deadening the conscience. After a while it also closes the eyes, and like the rich man in the story we no longer see the poor. That rich young man is never heard of again in the New Testament. He might have become a greater apostle even than Peter or John. Sahajananda, from outside the Christian tradition, wrote this about him: "The young man became very sad because he was very rich. He identified himself with his riches.... Without them he had no existence. With these riches he could not enter into the kingdom because the door to the kingdom is narrow. Not narrow in the sense of space, but in the sense that *only the essential aspect of our being goes*

through it, all acquired things have to be left out.... This treasure can neither increase nor decrease. No thief can get there and no moth can cause its destruction.”

The story of the rich man and Lazarus is not focused on Lazarus but on the rich man. Focused on Lazarus it might mean: Put up with your lot now and you'll be happy in the next life; you'll even be able to watch the rich man suffering. But no, the focus is on the rich man. Jesus told this story to the rich, to their faces, as an accusation against them. He told it to the Pharisees, who as Luke said, “loved money” (16:14). It has the same import as Luke's version of the Beatitudes: “Alas for you who are rich!” (6:24).

2 March

Mt 21:33-43, 45-46

Jesus said, 'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.' Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.' When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realised that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

The vine was a symbol of Israel.

"You brought a vine out of Egypt;

To plant it you drove out the nations.

Before it you cleared the ground;

It took root and spread through the land." (Psalm 79)

So when Jesus tells this story about the vineyard he is really talking about his country and the people who ran it. They were well aware of this, "The chief priests and the Pharisees... realised that Jesus was referring to them." It wasn't a story to flatter them; instead it enraged them. That means that it frightened them – lying just behind anger there is always fear. They were frightened because he said they were going to lose power. They were religious leaders and he told them, "The kingdom of heaven will be taken from you and given to people who will yield a harvest." But they were not interested in harvest. (Switch now to another kind of harvest: grain; the point is the same.) Jesus referred to the people as harvest (Mt 9:37), but the Pharisees referred to them as chaff. They were not interested in people, because like every organisation they were interested only in themselves.

This is not just a story about a comfortable 'long ago'; it is for the Church of today. If we are not "producing the goods," others will. Many people, experiencing lack of community and spiritual support in their parishes, are looking to new religions and cults for support.

3 March

Lk 15:1-3, 11-32

All the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable: 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.' " So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.' "

This is probably the best-loved of all the parables of Jesus; yet it appears in only one gospel: Luke's. It can be read from the perspective of each of the characters: the younger son, the older son, and the father. When we call it the parable of "the prodigal son" (an expression that does not occur in the parable itself), we are reading it from the perspective of the younger son. But in the context in which Jesus told it, it was clearly about the father.

If the word 'prodigal' means lavish, we ought to call it the parable of the prodigal father. The father was prodigal in mercy and forgiveness. In the parable the father represents God. Jesus could have drawn any kind of picture of God he wanted. This is the one he drew. God is rich in mercy, abounding in love. The 'Almighty God' of our youth didn't always leave us with that impression, but the truth was never lost on the saints. Julian of Norwich wrote, "Our courteous Lord will show himself to the soul full joyfully and with glad countenance and friendly welcoming, as if he had been in pain and in prison, saying sweetly, 'My dear one, I am glad that you are come to me: in all your woe I have always been with you, and now you see my love, and we will be united in bliss.'"

This heart-warming story of God is essential to our Lenten diet. Without it, our efforts to lead a better life only lead us into self-righteousness.

...Which brings us to the older brother. Remember that when Jesus told this story he was surrounded by a crowd of surly scribes and Pharisees. They were objecting to his friendliness towards sinners. "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Jesus captured them perfectly in the figure of the older brother. It sometimes happens that the eldest in a family becomes a sort of third parent, but of course without the warm instincts of a father or mother. When an elder brother loses his brotherliness, other qualities flow in to take its place: grumpiness, cold anger, stinginess, resentment.... Thank God there are many exceptions in real life, but the older brother in the parable was all of those things.

"I have been working like a slave for you... yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends." But as his father pointed out, the goats were *his!* "All that is mine is yours." The real reason is that celebration was foreign to him, he was enjoying his resentment, he was a kill-joy, he had no heart. And he was stingy.

Any of us, if we're not careful, could slip into that dreary role. We can become so addicted to doing our duty that we forget how to celebrate. The Pharisees were like a group of angry elder brothers; they accused Jesus of being a glutton and a drunkard (Lk 7:34), because he knew how to celebrate. But they were not able to make him like themselves. In fact he spoke of the kingdom (the presence) of God as a banquet (Mt 22). Again, it was not lost on the saints. Julian wrote: "Our sins are forgiven by mercy and grace, and we are received with joy, just as it will be when we come to heaven."

4 March [3rd Sunday of Lent]

Jn 2:13-25

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?"

But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.

This is one of the few incidents described in a similar way in all four gospels. It is full of resonance from the Old Testament. "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" (Malachi 3:1), and, the passage quoted by Jesus on the occasion, "Zeal for your house has consumed me" (Psalm 69:9). This act of cleansing the Temple signalled the new age, the time of the Messiah, when God would be worshipped "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23), because God is spirit.

In the subsequent argument with the Jews he changes the focus to another Temple - not the stone Temple from which he had just routed the moneychangers, but instead (as John said), "he was speaking of the temple of his body." The stone Temple would now be obsolete, and in fact it was destroyed in 70 AD. But the new temple, too, would be destroyed: he himself would soon be put to death. Soon there would be no temple of any kind. Worship of the Father would not be localised anywhere on earth.

But he had said, "Destroy this temple (my body) and in three days I will raise it up." The Risen Christ is henceforth the only Temple. All prayer and worship is "in Christ Jesus." Christians have no holy city, no temple but the Risen Christ. The early Christians were sometimes accused of being pagans. Churches are not places where God is enclosed. Once Christians began to be supported rather of persecuted by the Roman Empire, they built places of worship on the plan of pagan 'basilica' (basilicas were used for law courts or for commerce). A church is not a temple; it encloses us, not God. The Irish for a church is *teach an phobail*, "the people's house".

We are members of Christ's body (1 Corinthians 12:27), and as such we ourselves are the place of prayer and worship. We have no other temple, and so, everywhere we are is our temple. "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you" (1 Corinthians 6:19).

This temple – our body, our soul, our being – is in constant need of cleansing, as Jesus cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem., "This temple," said Meister Eckhart, "is the human soul, which God has made exactly like Himself, just as we read that the Lord said: 'Let us make humankind in our image and likeness' (Genesis 1:26)... So like Himself has God made the human soul that nothing else in heaven or on earth, of all the splendid creatures that God has so joyously created, resembles God so much as the human soul." Everything unworthy

of God has to be cast out. This is for all times, but it has a special resonance in the season of Lent.

5 March

Lk 4:24-30

Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Why is no prophet honoured in his or her own country? Is the reason something like this: if I feel that I myself am nowhere, then anyone who is next to me must be next to nowhere, or next to nothing! So I despise that person as I secretly despise myself.

We know very well that people who despise themselves are capable of vast evil: 'I am nothing and therefore I will reduce everything around me to nothing.' Nazareth was a despised place. It was never even mentioned in the Old Testament, and when it was mentioned in the New, it was to ask, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). This may be why the inhabitants were capable of throwing Jesus over a cliff.

They liked him until he began to say things they didn't like to hear. They liked him while he seemed to groom their egos, but as soon as he rubbed them the wrong way they tried to kill him. The individual ego is like a wounded animal, and just as dangerous. The corporate ego is still worse: the support of other angry people looks like moral support while being *immoral*. But the most poisonous of all egos is the religious ego. People do unspeakable horrors in the name of religion. Jesus was in the best position to see this, and warned his followers: "An hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God" (John 16:2). His early experience in his hometown had taught him that lesson. He teaches us how to have no illusions. We think 'disillusioned' is a bad word, but it's a very good word – if you can then love from there.

6 March

Mt 18:21-35

Peter came and said to Jesus, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Notice what happens when two people who are not on speaking terms happen to meet. They put on a fixed stare, their faces become hard, their bodies rigid. In other words they become a little like two corpses. Where there is a refusal to forgive, life stops flowing and there is something akin to death. If Jesus said we should forgive endlessly, it must be because he also said he came so that we should have life and have it to the full (John 10:10).

To some people the refusal to forgive looks like strength, and forgiveness looks like weakness. This is where appearances are just the opposite of the reality. It takes strength to forgive. "The weak can never forgive," said Mahatma Gandhi, "forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." God forgives; and there is something God-like about forgiveness. Longfellow wrote:

*"For 'tis sweet to stammer one letter
Of the Eternal's language;
- on earth it is called Forgiveness!"*

Jesus said he came to set prisoners free (Luke 4:18). Forgiveness sets free the person who is imprisoned by your enmity; but it frees another prisoner too: *you*.

7 March

Mt 5:17-19

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

"Not the smallest letter or stroke of the Law will change until all is fulfilled," said Jesus. But he himself often broke the Law - certainly as it was interpreted by his contemporaries.

When is a law perfectly fulfilled? When it is observed to the letter? Hardly. The scribes and Pharisees adhered to the letter of the Law, yet Jesus accused them of "setting aside the commands of God and clinging to human traditions" (Mk 7:8). A law is being fulfilled, surely, when the purpose for which it was made is being fulfilled. A law is a means to an end; but if the end is being subverted by the law, then it is no longer a law. This is the revolutionary teaching of St Thomas Aquinas. Law, he said, is an act of *reason* (ordering a means to an end), not an act of *will*. Law is not the grip of someone's power over you, but guidance for your mind. It subverts neither your mind nor your will, but guides you along a path. It does not take away your freedom, but supports, enlightens and defends it. This is how there can be such a thing as the law of God. There is no real opposition between law and love.

8 March

Lk 11:14-23

Jesus was casting out a demon that was mute; when the demon had gone out, the one who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed. But some of them said, 'He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.' Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven. But he knew what they were thinking and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? —for you say that I cast out the demons by Beelzebul. Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armour in which he trusted and divides his plunder. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

It happened in Ireland that a dying man bowed his head at mention of the devil in the prayers for the dying. "Why?" asked the priest, greatly puzzled. "Politeness costs nothing," said the man, "and this is not the time to be making enemies!"

If the devil doesn't seem as frightening as before, it could be due in part to some new translations of the Bible! The power of the King James version of 1 Peter 5:8 (for example) is retained in the NRSV: "Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour!" Such muscular English! All those 'ow' sounds almost take you into the jungle! *Devour*, and you almost see the bloody jaws! The Christian Community Bible and the NIV retain this power, but the JB has the devil "looking for someone to eat!" This kind of language makes the devil seem quite domesticated, like someone cruising around looking for a good restaurant, or perhaps politely taking a cookie from the plate!

Everything fades with time – our characterisation of evil too. The old devils fade, once their cover is blown. But the reality is that there are always new devils. And our translations don't always keep up with them.

9 March

Mk 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and... asked Jesus, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.' Then the scribe said to him, 'You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that "he is one, and besides him there is no other"; and "to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength", and "to love one's neighbour as oneself",—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.' When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' After that no one dared to ask him any question.

This was a remarkably friendly exchange between Jesus and the scribe, and it stands in strong contrast to the two exchanges just before it in Mark's gospel. The scribe asked a straightforward question; this ball had no spin on it. It was a much-debated question among rabbis. As they tended to expand the Law into thousands of regulations, they also tried to pick out its essence and express it in the shortest form. (A rabbi was once asked to instruct someone in the Law while standing on one leg!) The scribe in today's Gospel passage came with the usual question. When Jesus answered, the scribe said, "You are right, teacher!" It was perhaps slightly patronising, like saying, "Good boy, Johnny!" But at least he was more polite than the other scribes. "You are not far from the Kingdom," said Jesus. The Kingdom is more than reciting the correct formulas; it is God's grace invading us like a great wave and sweeping us out of our depth.

It was good to meet an honest scribe. This scene may have been put in the gospel to show that Jesus' teaching was not necessarily in conflict with the best of what was before. In other words, a bridge between the two was possible.

How important it is to construct bridges! A bridge is the other side made attainable; it enables you to hope. It was St Catherine of Siena's favourite image; she pictured Christ as a bridge. In her *Dialogue*, the Father says to her, "I made a bridge of my Son as he lived in your company. And though that living bridge has been taken from your sight, there remains the bridgeway of his teaching, which...is held together by my power and my Son's wisdom and the mercy of the Holy Spirit."

A bridge is a connection. It is all too easy to make disconnections: it is the easiest thing for the mind to do. A disconnection is a negative, and many live naturally in negativity; they are people who cannot invest themselves in anything. But bridges! Let's make bridges today!

10 March
Lk 18:9-14

Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'

This parable is unique to Luke, and it has the characteristic Lukan strong contrasts: heroes and villains. (Think, for example, of the rich man and Lazarus, the parable of the prodigal son, the woes following the beatitudes....) The Pharisee and the tax-collector stand at opposite ends of the social spectrum.

The Pharisee "stood by himself": that was the very definition of Pharisee: the name 'Pharisee' means 'separated': their special practices and attitudes separated them from the common people. Perhaps for that reason his prayer was all about himself. Cyril of Alexandria described him as "standing there bold and broad, lifting up his eyes without a qualm, boastful and bearing witness to himself." At the beginning his prayer seems to be a thanksgiving psalm; but soon enough we see that it is really about his own accomplishments. He is not slow to put these on show. Cyril remarked: "No one who is in good health ridicules one who is sick for being laid up and bedridden. Rather he is afraid that he himself might perhaps become the victim of similar sufferings." Another ancient writer said the Pharisee was "drunk on pride in the sweet and lovely sound of his own voice." Notice that the Pharisee offers no honour to God and makes no request. He is separated not only from others but from God. When there is emphasis on the separate self, life becomes competition: the 'I' has to win every race and be 'better' than others. That means that it can never afford to relax and be off-guard. How difficult life becomes! It is hardly a life at all, and it certainly is not life-giving to others.

The other spoke directly to God, asking for mercy. There could hardly be a more essential prayer. He did not think of himself as complete, needing nothing. A circle is complete: it marks out a small space and it divides it off; it needs nothing from the outside. The Pharisee was such a circle: he didn't come out of himself to God – nor of course to the tax-collector in the story. But the tax-collector knew his own incompleteness. He was like a circle with a breach in the circumference. We are at our best when we are open: when we know our need of God and of one another. Then something can flow in and out. Through our woundedness the mercy of God can flow through to the world.

11 March [4th Sunday of Lent]

Jn 3:14-21

Jesus said, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

This fourth Sunday of Lent is known as 'Laetare Sunday'. In Latin *laetare* (rejoice) is the first word of the entrance antiphon: "Rejoice, Jerusalem...." Joy is the theme of today's Liturgy.

Can joy be turned on and off? Can you experience joy just because today is the 4th Sunday of Lent? "He who binds to himself a joy / Doth the winged life destroy," said William Blake. And besides, what an unlikely season for it! you might say. You must kiss it as it flies, said Blake; you cannot arrange it.

"At night there are tears, but joy comes with dawn," (Psalm 29:5). You can no more arrange for joy to descend on you than you can arrange for the sun to rise. Joy is a fruit of God's Spirit, not a feeling that can be turned on and off. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22). Notice that St Paul places it directly after love, so close is it to the heart of the Faith. It is a gift, not a purchase.

"God loved us with so much love.... It is through grace that you are saved," (2nd reading). "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son..." (today's gospel reading). *God loves us*: this is the source of our joy, whether we actually experience it or not at the moment. Quite often we see the Christian faith diminished to a morality, an account of what we should do: how we should love God and our neighbour.... But St John wrote, "In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us" (1 John 4:10). "We love because God first loved us" (1 John 4:19). This is the source of our joy.

Happiness is conditional: it depends on good fortune, pleasant surroundings, congenial friends, a good digestion.... But joy is unconditional. It depends on nothing. You can even experience joy in times of unhappiness. It is like a ray of sunshine that suddenly penetrates the clouds, a reminder that it is always there, whether you see it or not. Such is God's love. Even when we are at our worst, God still loves us. "God loved us when we were not, and when we were His foes," said Meister Eckhart. "Whether we go near or far, God never goes far away but always stands nearby; and even if He cannot remain within, He never goes further than outside the door." There is an Irish proverb, *Is gaire cabhair Dé ná an doras*, "God's help is nearer than the door."

12 March

Jn 4:43-54

There was a royal official whose son lay ill in Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. Then Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my little boy dies." Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way. As he was going down, his slaves met him and told him that his child was alive. So he asked them the hour when he began to recover, and they said to him, "Yesterday at one in the afternoon the fever left him." The father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." So he himself believed, along with his whole household. Now this was the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee.

They had rejected him when he was at home, but when they saw him performing in the city they changed their attitude. At home they felt small beside him, but in the city they felt big because of him: he had put Nazareth on the map. The ego enters everywhere and leads wherever it will. It cares about nothing except its own need to feel big – or to feel at least that it exists. Someone said cynically once, "Who cares what the general public thinks? Their opinion is a lottery." Not so, I'm afraid. Our opinions are not random like a lottery; they are fairly consistently the work of the ego.

Is there any hope for us? Of course! How could there be no hope for a Christian?

"Sir, come down before my child dies!" said the official (John does not say whether this official was a Jew or a Gentile; it is everyone.) Love made that official think and feel beyond his ego.

13 March

Jn 5:1-16

There was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Bethzatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralysed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?' The sick man answered him, 'Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.' Jesus said to him, 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.' At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, 'It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.' But he answered them, 'The man who made me well said to me, "Take up your mat and walk." ' They asked him, 'Who is the man who said to you, "Take it up and walk"?' Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, 'See, you have been made well! Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you.' The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath.

"Do you want to be healed?" Jesus asked him. This seems an odd question when you consider that the man had been waiting for thirty-eight years to be healed. But, of course, you often have compelling reasons for clinging to your sicknesses. You will no longer have people to take you around – do you want to be healed? You will no longer have sympathy from everyone – do you want to be healed? You will have to work, and you are not used to it – do you want to be healed?

He wanted to be healed. Then Jesus said, "Stand up!" This too seems odd at first sight. Jesus was asking him to do the very thing he could not do.

Then the miracle happened: the man *went to stand up*. He overcame the habits – physical and mental – of more than half a lifetime. His mind and will said, "Stand!" That was an amazing achievement. Then, when he went to stand up, he found that he could. The miracle was not worked 'on' him, it was worked 'in' him. This is not to say that it was just mind over matter. It was the presence of Jesus, but that presence in this case required the full conscious presence of the paralysed man.

What does it say to us? The very thing we can't do is sometimes the only thing worth doing.

In reference to this gospel passage Johann Tauler (1300 – 1361) said: "If we could only wait for the Lord, we would have the power and strength to pick up and carry the thing that was carrying us before." It is a wonderfully suggestive phrase. The man had been lying on his bed, being carried around by other people; but now, healed by the Lord, he picks up the same bed and puts it on his shoulder. Many things carry us along: addictions, fixations, obsessions... many false kinds of passivity. We are prostrate in many ways and excessively dependent on other people. If only we could be 'unlocked' at the root of our being, we would walk free. We would still have to carry the pain and the consequences of an addiction, or the like; but exactly so: we would be carrying *it*. We would probably win no races and no dancing competitions. But it would be the most beautiful movement in the world.

14 March

Jn 5:17-30

Jesus said, 'My Father is still working, and I also am working.' For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.

Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomsoever he wishes. The Father judges no one but has given all judgement to the Son, so that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. Anyone who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him. Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life. 'Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; and he has given him authority to execute judgement, because he is the Son of Man.

Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. 'I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgement is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

Father and Son. Not Prime Mover, not Emanation, not Life Force, not Energy.... Christians use the language of human relationships to speak about God. We do this because Jesus did so. He spoke of God as his Father. And the Father called him his Son: "a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son'" (Mt 3:17; 17:5). In Jesus, our God is translated into human reality. In the history of the world's religions the supreme deities tended to evaporate into thin air because they were perceived as too remote, and were replaced by more proximate deities. In the Christian faith, God does not evaporate into total generality but becomes, in Christ, one of ourselves.

This mystery really touches us in every sense. It is "what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands" (1 Jn 1:1). It also plucks at the heart-strings. But it is hard, if not impossible, to keep possession of our full spiritual inheritance. We are forever going lopsided. Christian devotion can sometimes focus so exclusively on Jesus that it makes him a substitute for the Father rather than a revelation of the Father. At times it goes even further, practically substituting Mary and the saints for Jesus.

The 'Glory' used to read: "Glory to the Father, *through* the Son, *in* the Spirit." It was in reaction to the Arian heresy (which denied the divinity of Christ) that it was changed to "Glory to the Father *and* to the Son *and* to the Holy Spirit." This underlined the equality of the divine Persons, but it tended over time to obscure the 'working' of the Trinity. It seemed to put the divine Persons there statically in front of us. It is hardly surprising then that some people just took their pick. We often hear that our spirituality should be Christ-centred. However, the Liturgy – which is our primary spiritual teacher – is Father-centred, in the sense that the prayers, with extremely few exceptions, are addressed *to* the Father, *through* Christ our Lord.

15 March

Jn 5:31-47

Jesus said, 'If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true. You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth. Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent.

'You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept glory from human beings. But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?'

One can suppose a challenge to Jesus, "Who bears witness to your claim?" Jesus mentions four: 1. John the Baptist; 2. the "works" that the Father entrusted to him; 3. the Father's word – though they are deaf to this witness; and 4. the Scriptures. All of these are aspects of the Father's ("Another's") witness to him.

Some scholars believe that what we have here is a worked-out answer that later Christians gave when challenged by Jews. St Paul said that believers should be able to give an account of their faith and hope; and this is so with us too today. We need not trouble ourselves with 'proof-texts' in the way that Christian fundamentalists do; but we need to be in tune with the great 'witnesses'. We should be like musicians, who are able to hear music more deeply than others (others who may be just arguing about the score). The great witnesses: the Father, and the work he accomplishes through Jesus; and the word of Scripture, alive in our hearts and in our lives.

The words 'testify' and 'testimony' suggest rather a law court than a conversation about religious beliefs. But look at the word 'belief'. 'Lief' is an old word that used to mean 'love'. Shakespeare used it ("I had as lief the town crier spoke my lines"). As a full word it has faded out of use since the 17th century, but it lives on as part of the word 'belief'. To believe, then, is in some sense, to love. We are apt to think that belief should be based purely and simply on 'evidence' which is entirely objective, and that no subjective factor should enter it at all. If this were the whole story, calculation would be the only law of life, and computers could handle it much better than we could. But there is a deeper kind of belief from which the human factor can never be expelled; it is belief in *persons*. It is this that is meant when you say, "I believe in God."

16 March

Jn 7:1-2, 10, 25-30

Jesus went about in Galilee. He did not wish to go about in Judea because the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him. Now the Jewish festival of Booths was near. But after his brothers had gone to the festival, then he also went, not publicly but as it were in secret. Now some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, 'Is not this the man whom they are trying to kill? And here he is, speaking openly, but they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah? Yet we know where this man is from; but when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from.'

Then Jesus cried out as he was teaching in the temple, 'You know me, and you know where I am from. I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him. I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me.' Then they tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come.

The festival of Booths (or the Feast of Tabernacles or Tents) is believed, by some scholars at least, to have been a commemoration of the forty years when the Jews wandered homeless through the desert. During the seven days of the feast they lived in tents.

It may have been an annual reminder that they came from nowhere. Where is a tent? Nowhere. It has no address.

But when they settled they settled in earnest. The place where a person lived became, in a way, his or her name: Mary of Magdala, Joseph of Arimathaea, Jesus of Nazareth....

"We know where this man comes from," the people said. His identity was well pinned down. "You know me," he said, "and you know where I am from!" They thought they knew exactly who he was: the carpenter from Nazareth. But he is going to tell them that they don't know him at all. Nazareth is not his identity. His identity is that he is sent by the Father. His real address is the Father.

Those people who were so certain about the identity of Jesus seemed equally certain about their own identity. But they came from nowhere, as the festival of Booths should have served to remind them. What really cripples people's minds is not what they don't know but what they mistakenly think they know. There is an addiction to certainty that cares little about the truth. Some people don't really want to *know*; they want to be *certain*. This is only an expression of their insecurity and their fear of the truth. They are afraid of their uncertainty so they cling to external 'certainties'. Like everything false it is transparent in a person's eyes: you can see there a vast unacknowledged indifference to the truth. A friend of mine said of someone, "His faith is so weak that it borders on certainty."

"I was sent by the One who is true, and you don't know him. I know him for I come from him and he sent me." This was his real identity. In our way, we too have to drop superficial identities and come to this realisation.

17 March

Jn 7:40-53

When they heard these words, some in the crowd said, 'This is really the prophet.' Others said, 'This is the Messiah.' But some asked, 'Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?' So there was a division in the crowd because of him. Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, 'Why did you not arrest him?' The police answered, 'Never has anyone spoken like this!' Then the Pharisees replied, 'Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, which does not know the law—they are accursed.' Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, 'Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?' They replied, 'Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.'

John Chrysostom remarked wryly: "[The chief priests and Pharisees] made use of the most foolish argument against [the temple police]: 'Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him?'" Of course they hadn't. "Such malicious minds believe nothing," Chrysostom adds, "they look only to one thing, blood." (And they neglected to mention Nicodemus, he added; Nicodemus was a Pharisee who had a timid sort of belief in Jesus.) He played on the paradox of it: the ones who were sent to take hold of Jesus were themselves taken hold of by him.

St Augustine too had a good eye for paradox: the very people who were teaching the Law were blind to the one who embodied the greatest law; while the people who knew nothing of the Law were won over instantly by him. This, Augustine said, was a good illustration of what Jesus had said, "I came into the world so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." (Jn 9:39).

You could read today's passage as a lesson on snobbery. Jesus had a country accent. When he was taken bound to Caiphas's house the bystanders said to Peter, "You are one of them for sure! Why, your accent gives you away" (Mt 26:73); Peter spoke like Jesus, with a Galilean accent. The religious authorities had no doubts: no Galilean could be a prophet. The Scriptures said so; "look it up!" How could a prophet come from a backwater place like Nazareth, a place never mentioned even once in their Scriptures?

Dukes and dustmen, someone said, are usually not snobs, because both are free of social pretension. It is the people in the middle who become snobs: tuppence ha'penny looking down on tuppence. Snobs are forever trying to climb over other people, and what propels them forward is that there are always more people to be climbed over. It betrays a deep uncertainty about their own identity. If I'm a snob, I am constantly measuring myself against other people; and the worst moment is when a local person seems to get ahead of me. I could endure being less than the very greatest, but to be less than the local carpenter....

There were some people in the crowd who had the uncomplicated gift of admiration; they knew how to admire rather than compete. "This is really the prophet," they said. "This is the Messiah." But the chief priest and the Pharisees felt their positions threatened by him. They would like to identify him with Galilee – which was his past – in order to stop him. They were attempting to deny him a future.

A useful question to ask oneself: do I allow the people around me to have a future?

18 March [5th Sunday of Lent]

Jn 12:20-30

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour. "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – ' Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine."

There is no mention of Gethsemane in John's gospel. John has Jesus striding in glory through his life and death: his miracles are not acts of compassion as in the other gospels, but signs of his glory (2:11). Yet in this reading Jesus says, "Now my soul is troubled." Though there is no account in John's gospel of his healing the possessed, we still see his compassion: later in the same gospel he says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled" (14:1); he is human and he is with us after all. This gospel has no account of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, but in its place there is an account of Jesus washing the disciples' feet.

The Passion begins to loom early in this gospel. Jesus speaks of being "lifted up" (3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34), and John plays on the ambiguity of this phrase. Jesus will be lifted up in shame on the cross, but this same lifting up is a lifting up in glory. Strange paradox: his shame is his glory, his death is his resurrection.

The mystics are the ones who best appreciate this paradoxical level of our Faith. Johann Tauler, a disciple of Meister Eckhart, said, "Peace is what all people are striving for; they seek after it in every direction, in every occupation, and in all their ways of life. Oh if we could only shake ourselves free from this tendency, and learn to seek peace *in* tribulation. Only there is true peace born, peace which will last and really endure. To seek elsewhere is to go astray inevitably. You will always find that this is true. If only we could seek joy in sadness, peace in trouble, simplicity in multiplicity, comfort in bitterness! This is the way to become true witnesses to God."

The peace that comes from avoiding trouble is mine only as long as I can avoid trouble, and "piecemeal peace is no peace." I cannot avoid trouble forever. If all my efforts are directed to avoiding trouble, then even the thought of it is enough to deprive me of peace. I have to be able to find peace even in trouble. Only then is it unconditional peace. Tauler again: "Before His death, our Lord always promised His disciples peace, and also after His resurrection He promised them peace. Yet they never obtained peace externally. None the less, they found peace in tribulation and love in suffering. In death they found life; to be cross-examined, judged, and condemned was for them a joyous victory. These were true witnesses."

Briefly, a note on 'Eternal life'. It is badly translated as 'everlasting life'. Eternal life means God's kind of life, not human life stretched out in time to infinity. Nor is it a life that begins beyond the grave. "Whoever believes has eternal life," said Jesus (John 6:47) – already has, not will have. In keeping with the other paradoxes of the faith: eternal life is here and

now, in this world, in this mess. It will flower beyond the grave, but not if it has no roots here and now.

19 March [St Joseph]

Mt 1:16, 18-21, 24

Jacob [was] the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.... Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife.

I once knew a very pious lady who would never refer to St Joseph by name, but as "The Holy Old Man". Every time I heard it I felt sorry for the many men I know who have been weakened and faded – denatured – by an unreal spirituality. Why old? We make Joseph old in order to weaken him. The same lady (and most people) would never think of Mary as old. On the contrary, she is represented almost as a pre-teen. There is some sort of investment in keeping Mary at this side of adulthood as there is in putting Joseph at the far side of it. It is as if we can't take the full presence of a vigorous adult man or woman. Virginity and old age become privileged; but what if the root of this, in some people, should be nothing more than a fear of sexuality?

In *The Wild Man's Journey* Richard Rohr wrote about the state of male spirituality in today's world. A quote almost at random: "The wild man locked inside us is telling us that his incredible strength can be reached by moving into the space of the feminine, yet so often the woman who could lead us into that space wants to prevent us from getting in touch with the wild man. Rebekah so rejected her hairy, hunter son, Esau, that she betrayed him in favour of the gentle Jacob (see Gen 27). This is not a new issue."

Since we know so little about him, we have weakened St Joseph and moulded him according to our image of what a holy man should be. We need to restore his masculinity to him, for a start. On May 1 we celebrate him again under the title Joseph the Worker. That's a good beginning: he is not Joseph the Faded, the Ineffectual, the Weak; he is Joseph the Worker. And he had to work all year round, not just on May 1.

When Jesus spoke about his Father in heaven he did so with real tenderness and affection, but without guilt or weakness or sentimentality. Consider: where did he get his feeling for this word, the 'colouring'; where did he first experience the reality of the word 'father'? From Joseph, of course. Joseph must have been a very successful father.

20 March

Jn 8:21-30

Jesus said, "I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come." Then the Jews said, "Is he going to kill himself? Is that what he means by saying, 'Where I am going, you cannot come'?" He said to them, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he." They said to him, "Who are you?" Jesus said to them, "Why do I speak to you at all? I have much to say about you and much to condemn; but the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him." They did not understand that he was speaking to them about the Father. So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him." As he was saying these things, many believed in him.

The Word became flesh: took on our human nature and became one of us. He is fully human and belongs here. Yet in this passage he says, "I am not of this world." How are we to understand this?

The 'world' in John's gospel is not the physical world, but all the forces in human life that oppose the Kingdom of God – in other words, all the forces that originate in the human head. The great enemy of the Gospel is the alternative world we invent for ourselves, in which we ourselves are the centre of everything. It is the ego's creation. The ego is a world-conqueror. Its story, its personal history, takes the place of the history of the world. It cannot be one with anything; when it looks at anything it sees only how alien and different it is. It sees good in things and people only insofar as they appear to support its claims, or at least to tolerate them. This is what Jesus means by "this world", not our beloved blue planet but the human ego that closes its eyes to everything but itself.

In the 1960s, in a series of books that proved difficult to categorise, Carlos Castaneda told of his experiences (fictional but very striking) with the Yaqui people and particularly with one of their shamans, Don Juan Matus. One day Castaneda was questioning him about his life, when Don Juan replied, "I don't have any personal history.... One day I found out that personal history was no longer necessary for me, and like drinking I dropped it." We have been attaching enormous importance to our personal stories. Listen for a moment to someone who attached no importance to them at all. One day when Castaneda was about to leave in frustration, Don Juan said to him, "You take yourself too seriously.... You are too damn important in your own mind. You are so goddam important that you feel justified to be annoyed with everything. You are so important that you can afford to leave if things don't go your way. I suppose you think that shows you have character. That's nonsense. You're weak and conceited."

No joy for the ego there! Anyone, even a fictional shaman, who helps to demolish the ego is helping to make way for the Kingdom of God.

21 March

Jn 8:31-42

Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' They answered him, 'We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, "You will be made free"?' Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.' They answered him, 'Abraham is our father.' Jesus said to them, 'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are indeed doing what your father does.' They said to him, 'We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself.' Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me.'

The ancestors of the people Jesus was addressing had been slaves in Egypt in the remote past, and perhaps this made their descendants a little sensitive on the question of freedom. Their pride in their freedom made them deny the real past and claim a fictitious one: "We have never been slaves to anyone," they said. The ego picks and chooses its facts. Sometimes you feel that personality – an individual's or especially that of a group – is just the opposite of the truth. Personality is a defence, sometimes a belligerent one; but more often it is like the camouflage that animals use so well to protect themselves. Aggressive talk and behaviour are often a cover for fear; boasting is evidence of a low self-image; a pleaser has no interest in you at all. The truth alone, Jesus said, will set us free.

'Freedom', like the words 'God', 'love', 'faith', in practice means whatever you want it to mean. These words are like empty forms into which you pour whatever you want. This is not to suggest that real freedom, love and faith do not exist, any more than it is to suggest that God does not exist. It is to say that there is an inner reality that is not guaranteed by the corresponding word. External forms of freedom have their own urgency, but inner slavery can co-exist with external freedom. I am not fully free until I have inner freedom: in other words, until I am free of myself.

How free are you? Try this experiment. Take a sheet of paper and a pencil and draw a figure that expresses pure freedom – a figure that *is* pure freedom. Nobody is pushing you or holding you back. There are no guidelines and no expectations, except that the figure should express pure freedom. It is very difficult! But just think: if it is so difficult in such a simple matter, how much more difficult when it comes to highly complex human actions? The truth, Jesus said, will set us free. One part of that truth is that we are not free. Freedom is not a thing of the past; it is something I have to step into in the present, with every step.

22 March

Jn 8:51-59

Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death." The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets; yet you say, 'Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.' Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets also died. Who do you claim to be?" Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, he of whom you say, 'He is our God,' though you do not know him. But I know him; if I would say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him and I keep his word. Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad." Then the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am." So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

"It is the tragedy of the world that no one knows what he doesn't know – and the less a man knows, the more sure he is that he knows everything," wrote Joyce Cary. This seems to be especially true in the field of religion. Claiming to know what I don't know is a form of swindling: it is like putting forged money into circulation. The world is filling up with fundamentalists, all of them claiming to be certain of something. Their very aggressiveness shows that their 'certainty' is a cover for disbelief and confusion; it is a drowning man's grip. When you are full sure of something, there is no aggression, just a quiet resolve to live by it. Fundamentalists are afraid of doubt, so they claim certainties they have no right to, since they have not travelled the path themselves. Francis Bacon (1561–1626) wrote, "If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties."

Jesus told his hearers bluntly that they did not know God. This was a stinging criticism of people who considered themselves "heirs of the prophets, and heirs of the covenant." God is not known in the way you know anything else. Knowledge of God is a strange kind of knowledge that seems at times like the opposite of knowledge. Having spoken about the limitations of theology, St Thomas Aquinas added, "Nevertheless it is useful for the human mind to exercise itself in such enquiries, inadequate as they are, provided there is no presumptuous claim to complete understanding and demonstration." And in another passage he wrote, very challengingly, "This is the final human knowledge of God: to know that we do not know God." We might have expected such statements from Meister Eckhart, who said, "If one knows anything in God and affixes any name to it, that is not God; God is above names and above nature," but to hear the sober Aquinas say the same thing is very challenging.

"Before Abraham was, I am," said Jesus. This echoes God's revelation of his name to Moses: "God said to Moses, 'I Am Who I Am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: `I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:14). Before Abraham was, "I am," not "I was." This is Jesus' clearest claim to divinity in the gospel. He knew God because he was one with God.

If you refuse to pretend you know something about yourself or the universe, about life itself, then one sweet day, you will notice something very tender and delicate at the core of your being. It is where all affection and compassion come from.

23 March

Jn 10:31-42

The Jews took up stones again to stone Jesus. Jesus replied, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?" The Jews answered, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God." Jesus answered, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'? If those to whom the word of God came were called 'gods' – and the scripture cannot be annulled – can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, 'I am God's Son'? If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." Then they tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands.

"If I am not doing the works of my Father then do not believe me." Talking about God is not enough, even when it is Jesus who is talking. This is the greatest challenge to every preacher and every professor of theology. Christians often talk about "the Christian message" as if it could be written on a piece of paper. The Word was made flesh, not ink. St Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "You are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on the tablets of the human heart" (2 Corinthians 3:3).

The word 'orthopraxis' was coined to supplement 'orthodoxy'. Orthodoxy means 'right teaching'; orthopraxis would mean 'right action'. Our words have to become flesh too: to reach our fingertips, so to speak. "What good is it," wrote St James, "if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food: if one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:14-17).

Meister Eckhart said, "When St Paul spoke a great deal to our Lord, and our Lord to him, this availed him nothing till he abandoned his will and said: 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' (Acts 9:6). Then our Lord knew well what he should do. So too, when the angel appeared to our Lady: nothing that she or he said to one another could have made her the mother of God, but as soon as she gave up her will, at once she became a true mother of the eternal Word and conceived God straight away: he became her natural son."

24 March

Jn 11:45-56

Many of the Jews who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

*Poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its saying where executives
Would never want to tamper... (W.H. Auden)*

These lines are part of a poem written in memory of another poet, W.B. Yeats, but I think Yeats was not so sure that poetry made nothing happen. He once had reason to wonder:

*Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot...?*

Sometimes words can be a substitute for action (see yesterday's reading). But this is not always the case. Sometimes they don't "survive in the valley of their saying," as Auden put it; sometimes they flood down from the mountaintops and shake an Empire. The Sanhedrin knew this. "The Romans will come and sweep away our Holy Place and our nation." So they were determined to kill him. "It is better to have one man die for the people than to let the whole nation be destroyed," said the High Priest, exactly according to Nietzsche's saying: "Where there are four of you a fifth must die." These people were not the first, and they were not the last, to kill someone in order to silence him. Most of us don't go that far, but we go some of the way. An interesting list to compile: all the people I silence in subtle or unsubtle ways.

25 March [Palm Sunday]

Mk 14:1—15:47

....At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last....

M. Kaeler described the gospels as "accounts of the death of Jesus, preceded by long introductions." The essential Christian proclamation is, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." The primary interest was the manner of his death, and that God raised him from death, giving us hope of rising with him.

The Cross of Christ has been a potent symbol throughout the ages. Its vertical axis, it has been said, joins heaven and earth, and its horizontal axis joins all ages and races of humankind; everything meets in the broken body of Christ.

The Christian faith without the Cross is nothing. The Cross tells us that our goodness is not good enough. We cannot 'achieve' God by our own efforts: that would be to try to possess God as a sort of ornament on a life of achievement. Our ego would indeed love to do this, and is always ready to imagine that it has done so in fact. A popular writer of spiritual books that never mention the Cross of Christ said in an interview that for him the Cross was like a question-mark, or a giant hook, reaching up to heaven for an answer. Christ is not necessary to such a spirituality. It is well to explore the aesthetic aspects of the faith, but "we preach Christ *crucified*," wrote St Paul (1 Cor 1:23).

The grave is a narrow place, and to suffer is distressing. But this is the narrow road that leads to life. First of all, the Scriptures, and then the saints and mystics, vouch for this. First the narrow way, then the opening out. Here are a few of the many texts that could be quoted to illustrate this:

- "The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life" (Mt 7:14).
- Meister Eckhart said, "The more the soul is collected [focused], the narrower she is, and the narrower, the wider."
- Mde Guyon, the 18th-century French mystic, wrote, "How very narrow is the gate which leads to a life in God! - and how little one must be to pass through it; it is nothing else but death to self! But when we have passed through it, what enlargement we find! David said, (Ps 18:19) 'He brought me forth into a *large* place.'"
- Her mentor, Bishop Fénelon, wrote, "When we are faithful in instantly dropping all superfluous and restless reflections, which arise from a self-love that is totally different from charity, we shall be set in a large place even in the midst of the strait and narrow path." He also wrote, "We are in a narrow place, indeed, when we are enclosed in self, but when we emerge from that prison, and enter into the immensity of God and the liberty of his children, we are set at large."

A Christianity without the Cross has never worked, and it is never likely to do so. It takes a crucified Church to bring a crucified Christ before the eyes of the world.

26 March

Jn 12:1-11

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

Judas will be with us many times during Holy Week – almost every day. There must be significance in this. We cannot ignore him; we have to look at him. He comes to us already judged and condemned in John's gospel. He stands there, hopeless, expecting no mercy.

John wrote, "He had no concern for the poor; he was a thief and used to help himself to the funds." The other gospel writers only record what Judas did, and refrain from passing judgment on him. As if in contrast to John's testy presence we have Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. What is she doing to the atmosphere? "She took a pound of costly perfume...and anointed the feet of Jesus.... The whole house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged," Jesus had said (Mt 7:1). Our judgment may be factually true: that's the bait on the trap. But it is not the whole truth: that's the trap. All our judgments are incomplete. We don't know the full truth about anyone. And we hardly begin to understand the mercy of God.

27 March

Jn 13:21-33, 36-38

Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.' The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, 'Lord, who is it?' Jesus answered, 'It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.' So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, 'Do quickly what you are going to do.' Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, 'Buy what we need for the festival'; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, where are you going?' Jesus answered, 'Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterwards.' Peter said to him, 'Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.' Jesus answered, 'Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.

In the spiritual life, Johann Tauler said, we should have “no will to be or become or obtain anything for ourselves.” This may sound more like a description of a dishcloth, but there was nothing weak or slavish about the Rhineland mystics. He meant that we should have no *agenda* of our own. There are many reasons why people are religious, not all of them religious. I could be using religion, paradoxically, as an escape from the deepest questions about life; or I could be using it just to feed a need to be on the ‘inside’, whether socially or psychologically; or I could be using it as a camouflage for bigotry, following the lead of the Pharisees.... All of these reasons are a betrayal of religion, no better than Judas’s betrayal.

Judas is mentioned constantly in the readings this week. In fact he is mentioned in the gospels far more often than some of the Twelve. He was a man who imposed his will and was unwilling to wait. John places the Beloved Disciple as near to Jesus as he places Judas away. Such dualism is characteristic of John’s gospel: light/darkness, above/below, etc. John is “reclining near Jesus,” whispering to him; but Judas goes out, and “it was night.”

But notice that there are two betrayers in this reading; the other is Peter. Jesus said to him, “The cock will not crow before you have denied me three times” (in other words, before morning). But Peter had the courage (or perhaps the opposite) to wait for forgiveness; and he was forgiven (John 21). Tragically, Judas didn’t wait; he too would have been forgiven. If he was just greedy for money he should have been happy; but instead he was plunged into despair; he must have had an *agenda* that went wrong – some plan to speed things up. It was typical of him, then, not to wait. There are two kinds of repentance, someone said: ice melted and ice broken. Ice takes time to melt, but no time to break. Peter was ice melted, Judas was ice broken. In a tragic twisted way Judas died for his Master. Without doubt, God the Father, “slow to anger and rich in mercy,” had pity on him. His daily presence in the Liturgical texts this week is a reminder to check our agendas.

28 March

Mt 26:14-25

One of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, 'What will you give me if I betray him to you?' They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?' He said, 'Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, "The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples."' So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal. When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.' And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, 'Surely not I, Lord?' He answered, 'The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.' Judas, who betrayed him, said, 'Surely not I, Rabbi?' He replied, 'You have said so.'

This day is sometimes called 'spy Wednesday', a reminder of Judas's betrayal of Jesus to the Sanhedrin. Holy Week is under way, with its riveting story of betrayal, suffering, death, and finally resurrection.

Everyone discovers the reality of suffering soon enough, but its meaning takes longer to discover. Popular culture does not reveal that meaning to us; in fact it goes far to make it invisible. It creates a vast dream of comfort, satisfaction and security that couldn't possibly be true to actual experience. Even when the media show us gruesome pictures of human suffering, these are quickly followed by ads for sportswear, faster cars and make-up. The images thereby lose their power, and there is an unspoken assumption that it is all right to pass suffering by.

But this week it is not possible to pass it by. It unfolds before us, with its questions, its power to challenge and uproot. We have to ask: Why suffering? Am I supposed to think that it's good for me? And why do we celebrate and glorify the suffering of Christ, instead of deploring it? What meaning does it have?

Nobody will ever be satisfied with a quick answer; suffering is too close to us for book answers. Suffering is a different kind of 'knowing'.

"People who have not suffered, what do they know?" said Henry Suso, a man who suffered more than most in a century (the 14th) that suffered more than most. Here is his statement in context: "There is nothing more painful than suffering, and nothing more joyful than to have suffered. Suffering is short pain and long joy. Suffering has this effect on the one to whom suffering is suffering, that it ceases to be suffering. Suffering makes a wise and practised person. People who have not suffered, what do they know...? All the saints are the cup-bearers of a suffering person, for they have all tasted it once themselves, and they cry out with one voice that it is free from poison and a wholesome drink."

'The one to whom suffering is suffering.' He was being precise about this. To many who suffer, suffering isn't suffering as such, but misery and anguish and rejection of suffering. The word 'to suffer' in English means 'to allow', whereas the word 'anguish' comes from the Latin 'ang(u)ere', which means 'to choke'. Suffering, Suso persuades us, is "a wholesome drink." We should not choke on it. The saints have tasted it before handing us the cup; they are the proof that it is not poison.

Have you ever met anyone who never suffered? What would such a person be like? He or she would have no depth, no growth, no awareness; they would be absolutely juvenile. Imagine parents who protected their child from everything! God's mercy did not protect Jesus from suffering, nor Mary, nor any of his disciples through the ages. We cannot expect that it will protect us. It would be protecting us from life, and that would be no mercy.

This 'knowledge' of the meaning of suffering is not book-knowledge or factual knowledge; it is *experience* that continues day by day and is never finished. It is not the kind of knowledge that gives us security and control (which would be a kind of closing-down) but which opens us up to experience, to new life.

29 March [Holy Thursday]

Jn 13:1-15

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.'

St Augustine had a profound sense of humility. The three essentials of any spiritual life, he wrote, are humility and humility and humility. Predictably he is moved by Jesus' washing the disciples' feet. "It is He into whose hands the Father had given all things, who now washes the disciples' feet: and it was precisely while knowing that 'He had come from God, and was going to God,' that He performed this task of a servant – a servant to humanity."

And yet Augustine feels he has to twist the words around so that in the washing of the feet, Peter should come first! "[The text] says 'Then he came to Simon Peter,' as if He had already washed the feet of some of the others... But who can fail to know that the most blessed Peter was the first of the apostles? So we are not to understand that Jesus washed some others first. Instead He began with Peter."

It seems to say that while it is all right for Jesus to make himself least of all, it would not be right for Peter. It is a curious contradiction, and the first of many silly claims to precedence in religious circles. A preacher was heard to say, "It's my humility that makes me the man I am." There's a kind of humility that is 'official' but not real – as when people used to sign letters 'Your humble servant....'

The astounding thing, commemorated in today's Liturgy, is that Jesus was genuinely humble; he wasn't just going through the motions. His washing their feet was in keeping with his whole life. He had queued up, shoulder to shoulder with sinners, for John's baptism of repentance (Matthew 3:13; Mark 1:9; Luke 3:21). Yet John's gospel doesn't show him being baptised by the John the Baptist, nor of course queuing up for such a baptism. Instead, he is said to be just "walking by" (1:35). This is in keeping with the image of Jesus in the fourth gospel: he is walking above the ground rather than on it. This, even though the immortal words "The Word became flesh and lived among us" are from this gospel. It is hard to follow something through to the very end. Jesus "loved [the disciples] to the end" (today's reading). Why conceal the fact that he was also humble to the end? The two go together.

30 March [Good Friday]

Jn 18:1—19:42

The soldiers took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.' Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, 'Do not write, "The King of the Jews", but, "This man said, I am King of the Jews."

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) wrote with passion about what he called “the transvaluation of values.” His word, *Umwertung*, might also be translated as ‘revaluation’. All human values had been stood on their head, he maintained, by Christian faith and culture. Christians like to say this too, but in Nietzsche’s mouth it was not praise. He saw Christianity as the greatest curse, “the one great intrinsic depravity.” It was fuelled, he believed, by a spirit of *resentment*: the resentment of the weak against the strong, of the sick against the healthy, of the morbid against all that was natural and vital. He advocated a return to all that was natural, powerful, healthy.... Forty years or so after his death Europe got a taste of what that might mean in practice.

The image of Jesus dying on the cross summed up for Nietzsche all that was sick and despicable. Is there any credit at all due to this philosopher? Perhaps this: at least he didn't pass an unseeing eye over the cross of Christ, as most people do – Christians perhaps more than most. We have turned the cross into an ornament – something to take the bare look off a wall. By taming it we have robbed it of its power to shock and challenge our values and priorities. This is a bigger scandal than Nietzsche and all his explosive denunciation of Christianity. St Paul wrote, “We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:23-24).

For St Paul there is a kind of power in the world, and a kind of wisdom, that cannot be compared with the power of armies and governments. In our own era there have been many witnesses to this kind of power: Mahatma Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, and countless others. Like St Paul, they drew their inspiration from the man who said, “To the one who slaps you on one cheek, present the other cheek too; to the one who takes your cloak from you, do not refuse your tunic” (Lk 6:29). This looks like weakness, but it is stronger than human strength. “For God’s foolishness,” wrote St Paul, “is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (1Cor 1:25).

31 March [Holy Saturday, Vigil Mass]

Mk 16:1-7

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.'

Jesus was silent before Pilate, and now he is silent in death. History doesn't record silence, only disturbance. Today, of all days, the Christian heart feels the darkness of the world with its loss of meaning, and allows itself to look at the darkness and experience the silence. George Steiner, among others, remarked that our world today is a kind of prolonged Holy Saturday: the age between Friday and Sunday, between defeat and hope.

When Jesus was crucified, only the women came near. The apostles had fled into hiding. If he were being enthroned they would all be there, jockeying for position. But the women came to his tomb. He had nothing to give them, but they came near. Only the heart comes near.

There is no Eucharist on Holy Saturday. The altars are stripped bare, tabernacles lie open and empty – an extraordinarily powerful symbol for Catholics. The whole Church is one with Christ in his death. It is necessary to experience this. We have to allow ourselves experience sadness and loss. The Liturgy is a wise teacher.

However, popular devotion immediately negates the power of the empty tabernacle by setting up an 'altar of repose', much more elaborately decorated with flowers and candles than the high altar. We find it hard to live even for a day with anything that seems like emptiness.

The emptiness and darkness that we have allowed ourselves to feel will show us the light of Easter all the more clearly. In the darkness we rise for the Easter Vigil. Against a black sky we light the Easter fire. But this would be a forlorn gesture if Christ were not risen from the dead. Suddenly the Paschal candle is alight. *Lumen Christi!* – the light of Christ lightens our darkness. *Exultet!* – "Exult, all creation...! Rejoice, O earth, in shining splendour, radiant in the brightness of your King.... Darkness vanishes forever...! Let this place resound with joy, echoing the mighty song of all God's people!"

1 April [Easter Sunday]

Jn 20:1-9

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."

Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

Echoing an ancient homily, Meister Eckhart said that it was because Mary Magdalene had nothing else to lose that she dared approach the grave; the apostles had run away because, by implication, they were still trying to save themselves. She had lost everything else, he said, "and so she was afraid that if she went away from the grave she would lose the grave as well. For if she had lost the grave she would have nothing left at all."

But of what use was that grave to her? Graves are about the past. But not this grave. The Resurrection did not take place on the mountain-tops, or on a bright cloud, but in the heart of the grave, the 'degree zero' of human life. It was because Mary Magdalene stayed by the grave that she became the first bearer of the news of the Resurrection; she was the first Christian preacher.

At first she could not see Jesus anywhere. Why? "Because she kept looking further away than he was," said Eckhart. She kept looking for a dead body, an object; but Jesus was alive and standing beside her. We are at home with objects; they are at arm's length and we can deal with them. We make this kind of knowledge-at-arm's-length the standard of all knowledge; we equate 'objectivity' with truth. The word 'object' comes from Latin *ob* (against) + *jacere* (to throw). Besides, the word 'object' connotes 'objection' rather than faith. But the Risen Christ is nearer to us than any object could ever be. "Why are you seeking the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5).

Eckhart concludes his sermon: "That we may thus seek Him and also find Him, so help us God. Amen."

2 April

Mt 28:8-15

[Mary Magdalene and the other Mary] left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.' While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, telling them, 'You must say, "His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep." If this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.' So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day.

In a culture that did not accept as valid the testimony of women, it is remarkable that the four gospels did not hesitate to make Mary Magdalene's the first testimony of the resurrection of Jesus.

The chief priests and the authorities also had a 'first': they were the first to give an explanation of the empty tomb. They would be followed by a cloud of theologians throughout the centuries who have tried to explain everything in the Faith. To explain is to explain away, because our explanations never do justice to reality. The word 'explain' comes from Latin and means 'to flatten out'. A mystery flattened out is only a theory at best. Perhaps it will be especially through the testimony of women that the mysteries will become mysteries again.

Alleluia is our word in the Easter season: sung, played, repeated endlessly. It is a cry of exultation – not a nervous and superficial one, but quiet, because deep. The joy of Easter is a deep joy that is not tied to any passing event but only to the resurrection of Jesus – and our rising with him.

3 April

Jn 20:11-18

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.

A frequent literary device in John's gospel is the use of gradual recognition, or misunderstanding, as a stage on the path to understanding: see for example, the conversations Jesus had with Nicodemus (ch. 3), the Samaritan woman (ch. 4), etc. In today's passage we find it once again: Mary thought at first that Jesus was the gardener.

The moment of full recognition was when he spoke her name. This has a great deal of resonance throughout the Scriptures, from beginning to end. "The Lord said to Moses, 'I am pleased with you and I know you *by name*'" (Exodus 33:17). Referring to himself, Jesus said, "The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep.... The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep *by name* and leads them out" (John 10:2-3). A faith that does not go to the depth of one's personal existence is not faith but theory. Even theology is not faith: a person may know a great deal of theology but have no faith. I heard a woman say about her husband, "He's very interested in religion, but he has no faith." Conversely, a person may know little about religion but have profound faith. St Thomas Aquinas said that one old lady (*una vetera*) may have more faith than a host of learned theologians.

Matthew's account says, "The women left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy" (28:8). A tomb is not a place you come away from with joy: you come away in deep grief in the early days of bereavement, and later on with quiet acquiescence; hardly with joy! But with the death of Jesus there was to be no 'closure': the past was not to be closed up and sealed with nostalgia. The past had flooded into the present through the open tomb: the past is no longer past, it is timeless. This is the destruction of time. "Christ yesterday and today and the same forever" (Heb. 13:8).

4 April

Lk 24:13-35

Two of the disciples were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognising him....

Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Two men with heavy hearts, full of regrets and foreboding, going in the wrong direction.... Jesus walks beside them and talks with them, but they are unable to recognise him. This story is an image of the life of the Church. What we have in today's reading is an example of how Christians should read the Scriptures. The Lord is with them unawares. He teases out their fears and doubts and disillusionment.... He calls their attention to what they had overlooked or misunderstood. Finally they "recognise him in the breaking of bread." This is a phrase that Luke repeats (verses 31 and 35), as if to make sure we notice it. Throughout, the language is eucharistic, the same that he had used a few chapters earlier in describing the Last Supper (22:19). That phrase, "the breaking of bread", is used repeatedly in the Acts of the Apostles (also written by Luke) to refer to the ritual meal of the Christian community, the Eucharist (Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7; 27:35). Disciples in every century have continued to recognise him in "the breaking of bread."

About five years later, Paul, the persecutor of Christians, was to have his transforming spiritual experience. On the road to Damascus he was thrown to the ground and he heard a voice, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? I am Jesus whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:4,5). Jesus, then, is still beside his followers. He is only dimly recognised and by few. "You were with me," wrote St Augustine some centuries later, "but I was not with you" (*Confessions*, X, 27). But we are able to recognise him in the breaking of bread.

5 April

Lk 24:35-48

The disciples told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence. Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

“He stood among them.” John said (20:19) that they were huddled together, with the doors locked, for fear of the Jews; then he uses the same words as Luke: “Jesus stood among them.” He did not have to fumble with a key, or knock loudly (which would have made them lock the door even more securely) or call out (they would not have believed). He just came and stood inside the circle of their fear. Left to ourselves we would remain imprisoned forever inside that locked door, and all efforts to bring us out would have the opposite effect. The Risen Lord comes to meet us where we are, comes without violence, without argument or explanation, comes to liberate us into joy.

They had so recently deserted him, but he “stood among them,” and greeted them with peace. Everything in Luke’s account is intended to express the reality of Jesus’ presence. By eating he is demonstrating that he is not a ghost. In John’s account, Jesus shows his hands and feet to show the marks of the nails, but in Luke’s account there is no mention of the wounds. Showing them “his hands and his feet” was intended to show them his physical reality.

Our physical bodies are material of the resurrection. The Russian theologian, Paul Evdokimov, wrote about the ways in which matter and nature (including human nature) are represented in some instances of modern art. We are looking, he said, at a “closed and atheistic world...a world of still life and dead matter which is no longer the substance of the resurrection.” But the Christian faith affirms that this mortal body of ours, because Christ shared our human nature, is destined for things beyond our power to imagine.

6 April

Jn 21:1-14

Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way.

Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.

That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When we are in doubt we return to what we know: the past. When we don't know where we are going, we turn back. When Jesus was dead his disciples returned to their former way of life: they tried to go back to fishing. But "they caught nothing that night." Even the past could give them no reassurance; they had nowhere to go. They had no future, they thought, because Jesus was dead; and now they seemed to have no past either. Tragedy and failure drove them into the present moment. It was in that cataclysmic Now that they saw Jesus. The Good News reveals itself in the Now. The Resurrection of Jesus is God's new deed.

Can I be said to 'have' the faith if I think of it only as an old ideology battling for survival against new? What about that cataclysmic Now that those broken-down disciples had to enter before they could see the Lord? There is a way of appearing very Catholic: it is to appear very concerned with the past. How could this be the proper emphasis? Our faith is not a form of nostalgia or antiquarianism. We are already too prone to slipping away into the past when the present is too painful. If we follow the same line with our faith, we will not be witnessing to the resurrection of Christ, but only offering one another bland assurances that convince no one, not even ourselves. Unless we experience this 'dying to oneself', our words will offer nothing but routes of escape into a reassuring past.

7 April

Mk 16:9-15

Now after Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.

After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.

Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.

And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.'

People didn't recognise Jesus very easily when he appeared after his resurrection. Some thought they were seeing a ghost (Luke 24:37); he showed himself "under another form" to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Mark 16:12); and even Mary Magdalene thought at first that he was the gardener (John 20:15).

We give supreme authority to bodily sight: "seeing is believing." Aristotle said that sight is "our principal source of knowledge." But this kind of sight was not adequate to recognising the risen Christ. It requires a seeing from the heart and the spirit, not from the eyes. People who claim today to have seen apparitions give the impression that they have exceptional faith; but what they are doing is just going back to eyesight and suggesting that this is superior to faith. Religion is always only millimetres away from fantasy and projection; it can be naive beyond words. A woman who claimed to have had a vision of St Joseph was asked how she knew it was St Joseph. "Sure, doesn't everyone know what St Joseph looks like?" she replied.

God is not captured by the eye, nor even by the mind. "We cannot grasp what God is," said St Thomas Aquinas. We cannot 'grasp' God – neither with our eyesight nor with our minds. God cannot be possessed in the way we possess things; it is the other way around: we are possessed by God; we are grasped by God.

Our faith is a bottomless ocean. How could it be otherwise? St Paul prays that the Ephesians, "knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge... [will be] filled with the utter fulness of God" (Ephesians 3:19).