

October
2018

GOSPEL COMMENTARIES

1 October

Lk 9:46-50

An argument arose among the disciples as to which one of them was the greatest. But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them, 'Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.' John answered, 'Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.' But Jesus said to him, 'Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you.'

Someone said that a neurosis is a secret you don't know you're keeping. There must exist somewhere deep in us the mother of all neuroses (otherwise where would the little ones come from?). This would be the one to get to know. It has been given a name: it is the ego.

It is not me, it is the *idea* I have of me. That makes two of me. The first me (let's call me that) is dependent for life on an astronomical number of other creatures. There are more living beings (with their own DNA, different from mine) living in my body than there are people in the world! I am their planet, I am their mountains and rivers. They depend on me and I depend on them; if I sprayed them all to death (were that possible) I would die instantly.

This is not good news for the ego (that's the other me). This 'me' thinks he's basically alone in the world, and that anything he gets (apart from what he got for nothing from his mother a long time ago) is due to his own efforts. He's a lonely competitor for just about everything, and he has his story to tell (which forgets to mention the many billions of creatures inside and outside his skin). So it is very important for him to be reassured that he's doing well. Or rather (since he doesn't really know who or what he is), that he's doing better than someone else.

The disciples of Jesus, like all of us, had the same problem. They were "arguing about which of them was the most important." Jesus took a child and said, "You must become like children." Children were not romanticised in those days: a child was a nobody. You must become nobody, then there will be room in you for you - and for all the others.

2 October [Guardian angels]

Mt 18:1-5, 10

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

The word 'angel' means 'messenger' (Greek, *aggelos*). In the Old Testament the Hebrew word *mal'ak* was applied to both human and divine messengers. The more remote God seemed, the greater became the need for intermediaries. Certain mighty figures, later known as archangels, appear in the Book of Daniel, and the process of naming angels began. A confusing variety of functions and names is found, probably because angels had become important in popular devotion. All these names have meanings, of course. Michael means 'one who is like God', Gabriel means 'God is strong', Raphael means 'God heals', Daniel means 'God judges', Elizabeth means 'God is fullness', and so on. The archangel Michael was thought to have a special responsibility as the guardian angel of Israel (Dan 12:1).

Early Christianity inherited Jewish beliefs about angels, but the interest is much diminished. The angel of the Annunciation has a permanent place in Christian spirituality, but the New Testament tends if anything to put angels in their place. So in Hebrews 1, angels are inferior to the Son; in 1 Cor 13:1 the eloquence of angels takes second place to love; and in 1 Pet 1:12 the angels are seen as envying the Christian.

It seems the spiritual world too abhors a vacuum, and now that belief in God is being reprocessed widely, angels are flooding in to fill the vacuum. Bookshops have shelves full of books on angels. Modern angels seem to have very sweet natures, but in the Jewish world it wasn't always so. Lucifer was an angel of light – his name means 'light-bearer' – but he became Satan, prince of darkness (see October 6); he spanned the spectrum from end to end. But the angels of the New Age are all nice and friendly.

If I were a modern angel I'd keep an eye to my back. Computers are taking over the space occupied by angels. The mediaevals said that angels were neither temporal creatures, nor were they eternal; they occupied a sort of intermediate zone they called 'aeviternitas' – a word coined from a combination of the two. An English equivalent might be 'tempiternal'. Cyberspace is above time and space, yet it is not eternal; it is a sort of tempiternity.

But someone said recently, with greater depth and with wonderful simplicity, that angels are "God's thoughts."

3 October
Lk 9:57-62

As they were going along the road, someone said to Jesus, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'

In Judaism students lived with a rabbi to learn Torah and to see it lived out in the flesh. But Jesus makes it clear that there is more than this to being a disciple of his. He offers no kind of security or stability at all. He himself has abandoned all security and has nowhere to lay his head; so anyone wanting to follow him will likewise have to live with insecurity.

He was neither the first nor the last to praise insecurity. Thales of Miletus (6th century BC), credited by Aristotle as having been the first philosopher, prescribed insecurity as the first requisite of the thinking person. The Greeks gave us other examples of wise people who had cut the ties of normal social life to live a life of wisdom – the most famous being Diogenes, who is said to have lived in a barrel. Alexander the Great saw him, took pity on him, and asked him if there was anything he could do for him. “You could stand out of my light,” said Diogenes. Every culture has produced wanderers – people who orbit their society in wide elliptical paths. Jesus was a wanderer, but there was an intensity about him that is not typical of wanderers. Today’s reading shows that intensity at its extreme.

It is truly amazing that so many of his disciples through the ages have valued security above all else, and that the highest praise for a religious teacher is that he or she is “safe”. Safe and sound. In general (and with all due qualifications, which you can supply yourself), security is an insipid thing, and our longing for it shows that we are more afraid of life than we are of death. Where would we be without the spur of insecurity of some kind? It is not the enemy; it brings out the best in us. It is a terrifying friend.

Two of the three people mentioned in today’s reading said, “I will follow you.” It was their own idea; they thought they might enjoy that kind of life. Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376 – 444) commented: “Their wish was not simply to follow Christ.... What they wanted was to be self-called. The blessed Paul writes that no one takes the honour to himself unless he is called by God, as Aaron was (Heb 5:4).... We see that none of the apostles promoted himself to the office of apostle but rather received the honour from Christ.” The third person in today’s reading was called by Christ, but he would only follow at a time that suited himself. None of the three is heard of again. It seems that having their own agenda put them out of the running. To give up property is not much, but to give up your agenda is give yourself up.

4 October [St Francis of Assisi]

Lk 10:1-12

The Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.' I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.

"What good or harm would it do them to have shoes on their feet or to go without them...?" wrote Cyril of Alexandria. "Jesus wanted them to learn, and to attempt to practise, that they must depend entirely on him." Their poverty, then, was not to be a mark of hatred of the world (though 'contemptus mundi' was sometimes given that twist); when you are barefooted you are actually closer to the world than when you have shoes on. It was an expression of defencelessness, and therefore of trust in God.

"I am sending you out like lambs among wolves." Jesus had a right to say this because he himself was like a lamb among wolves. The Christian Gospel proclaims that the deepest wisdom is hidden in suffering, not in self-defence or victory. This is not to love suffering for itself, but to understand that "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).

It is very paradoxical. Any deep teaching is full of paradox. The English word 'suffer' originally meant 'to allow'. To suffer is to allow the pain of life of reach me. It is natural to try to avoid pain, but when it comes my way I should let it reach me; I should go barefooted. Otherwise I will develop a hard outer layer of insensitivity. When we see people who have done this we are inclined to say: suffering has made them hard and bitter. But it hasn't. It is their *rejection* of suffering that has done so. Life doesn't make people hard; it is the denial of life that makes people hard.

Hard outer shells go with inner mushiness. You often find that people with hard exteriors are the very ones whose inner lives are full of self-indulgence and self-pity. This has none of the openness or possibilities of growth that genuine suffering has. One of the things we learn as we grow older is the difference between neurotic self-inflicted suffering and genuine suffering. "By their fruits you shall know them." Even by their appearance – by the *skin* of their fruits – you shall know them.

What are we to make of that strange verse, "If anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you." In Hebrew the same word 'dabar' means 'word' and 'thing'; the idea was that a blessing that could not find a resting-place in the other person had to return to the sender. That is not an easy thought to take on board now, but St Augustine's ingenuity found a way of using it. "Since we do not know who is a child of peace, it is our part to leave no one out, to set no one aside, but to desire that all to whom we preach this peace be saved. We are not to fear that we lose our peace if the one to whom we preach it is not a child of peace.... Our peace will return to us. That means our preaching will profit us, not him. If the peace we preach rests upon him, it will profit both him and us."

A word about St Francis, whose feast is celebrated today. One of the most loved of all the saints, Francis showed a Gospel way of life to his contemporaries, a complete indifference to wealth and security – the very things by which we calibrate our life. When his father threatened to disinherit him because his generosity to the poor was eating into the family savings, Francis abandoned everything, and even kicked off his clothes – to show that he was a totally free man, a new kind of human being. Nothing could bind him. He became a kind of archetype, the *poverello*: poor, free and full of joy. He threw everything away and (in Thoreau's words) lived life near the bone, where it is sweetest. He makes us look like thieves, grabbing and holding our possessions – and looking for more: the 'little more' that keeps beckoning us on. A simple man said to me once, "Enough' is always just a little more than what we have." Possessiveness is a bottomless pit, and nothing that we possess can ever fill it.

5 October

Lk 10:13-16

Jesus said, "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But at the judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."

Chorazin and Bethsaida have disappeared from the record. There have been many preachers in many centuries speaking many words in many towns, and practically all of them disappeared without trace. But it is strange to find Jesus in that company. He did great deeds there, but nothing whatsoever is heard of them. Even the towns themselves have disappeared. There is complete silence.

There is good silence, but this was not good silence. It is the silence of the barren ground where the seed of God's Word could not find soil. It is the barrenness of the unloving heart. How amazing to think of the vast tracts of the world that have never come to fruit! Even the words and actions of Jesus seem to leave no trace in so many places.

How can one live with such a thought? But we are not the measure. We can't even say when we ourselves have failed. What looks like total failure and emptiness is often the doorway to a new life. How could we say that Jesus failed, except in a material sense? If he is to teach us to stop trying to measure success, there has to be a Chorazin, there has to be a Bethsaida.

6 October

Lk 10:17-24

The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it."

"I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning." Jesus is telling them that their ministry represents the defeat of Satan, the accuser.

Satan was at first named Lucifer, which means 'bearer of light'; but he became the prince of darkness. Milton wrote:

*Satan; so call him now, his former name
Is heard no more in heaven.*

The name 'Satan' means 'The Accuser'. (Most of us grew up thinking *God* was the accuser.) John's vision of the end-time: "I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, 'Now...the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God'" (Rev 12:10). But already in the ministry of Jesus' disciples, Satan was falling. Their word of truth was destroying Satan's power.

What kind of truth were they speaking? They were not delivering theological lectures or engaging in philosophical debate. Jesus had told them, "Cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'" (Lk 10:9). Nothing more. The truth they spoke was not an accusing word (some preachers have made capital of that); it was a healing and hope-giving word, a word that built up rather than pulled down.

"Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.'" To intensely serious people joy looks a bit childish – probably because it isn't very logical and controlled. But Jesus was filled with joy, as Luke says. Luke records that the disciples too were filled with joy (Acts 13:52). In each case he says it is joy in the Holy Spirit. Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit, mentioned next to love by Paul (Gal 5:22). Children, and people who are capable of facing things directly, are capable of joy. With others, there's something sidelong and strategic in the way they see everything. Clement of Alexandria sums up: "Jesus cried out in joy and in great delight, as if attuning himself to the spirit of the little ones."

7 October [27th Sunday in Ordinary Time]

Mk 10:2-16 or 10:2-12

Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

On the very first page of the Bible, in the Book of Genesis (1:27) there is a beautiful lyrical description of the creation of man and woman: "God made human beings in his own image, in his own image he created them; male and female he created them." (see also 5:2) 'Adam' is not a name like James or John; it means 'the creature made of dust (the word for which is 'adamah' in Hebrew). In the first three chapters of Genesis, 'Adam' means man and woman equally. Obviously, then, man and woman are on an equal footing and both are equally images of God.

All this, of course, is before the Fall! After the Fall, all is changed. Humans are seen as being under a curse, and they suffer differently for it. To the man, God said, "'Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return'" (Genesis 3:17-19). To the woman he said, 'I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you'" (Genesis 3:16).

Not great wedding presents! Nothing like "unconditional positive regard" (someone's definition of love) as they go out into the world to make a living. Scholars regard this Genesis story as a reflection of actual conditions in the ancient Near East at the time that Genesis was written. In particular, it reflects the position of women in society at that time. A woman was subject first to her father, and then on her marriage she became subject to her husband. She was subject to them because she was their *property*. We used to be told that the Ninth Commandment was against entertaining sexual thoughts, and it was quoted only in part: "Thou shalt not cover thy neighbour's wife." But it was actually about property, as is clear when you read the full verse: "You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, you shall not set your heart on his house, his field, his servant - man or woman - his ox, his donkey or anything that is his" (Deuteronomy 5:21).

Divorce was very easily obtained in the time of Jesus. Some Rabbis taught that if a woman ruined a meal or spoke badly about her in-laws her husband could divorce her; some even said that if a man spotted a woman who was more beautiful than his wife he could divorce his wife.

All this was the background to the Pharisees' question to Jesus, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Instead of going into a legal haggle with them about the law of Moses,

Jesus harked back to the original state of innocence (before the Genesis story of the expulsion from Eden). He affirmed the *original* state over the corrupted one; he stated God's idea of man, woman, and marriage. The original state was the companionship of equals, not ownership by the man; it was love, not domination and subjection.

Today, wherever husbands and wives respect and love each other, refusing to regard each other as property - disposable or not - the mind of Christ is made visible and human beings are living in a state of original innocence instead of original sin.

8 October

Lk 10:25-37

A lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"

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

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Jesus was quoting when he said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul" (Deuteronomy 11:13), and "You must love your neighbour as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). But when the scribe asked the further question (a common one among them), "Who is my neighbour?" Jesus spoke from himself. Let's hear what he said and how he said it.

Some Rabbis restricted the word 'neighbour' to fellow Jews; others gave a somewhat wider definition. But Jesus turned the question inside out. He did not answer the question, 'Who is my neighbour?' but a different question, 'Who should I be neighbour to?' These two questions may seem more or less the same, but they are quite different. The first question is about other people and how they are to be classified; the second question is about myself and how I should behave towards them.

It is easier to deal with questions that only have to do with things (or people) 'out there'. But many of the difficult things that challenge us are very much 'in here'! Assuredly that is why we project things onto other people. I remember a teacher long ago who used to spend the whole day telling everyone they were stupid. The hissing way he pronounced it – *ssteuuuupit!* – made it sound much worse than stupid. Meeting him years later I saw that he was not a clever person. What he was doing, all those years before, was projecting onto us the stupidity he couldn't admit in himself, and condemning it.

It is a bit terrifying when it first strikes you clearly: what you see around you is what lies within you. "Two men look out through prison bars, / One sees mud and the other stars." Two people grow up in the same family; one remembers the good things, the other remembers nothing but bad. Two people look at a third; one sees a decent person struggling, the other sees a write-off. In the story of the Good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite pass an injured man and see only a problem to be avoided; the Samaritan (and to Jews at that time, Samaritans were heretics) saw the same man and saw his need of help. How you see and act depends on what is inside you. Jesus looks at you and says, "You are the salt of the earth.... You are the light of the world" (Mt 5:13,14). He was able to say that because he himself was the light of the world (Jn 8:12; 9:5). He was willing to say it because he was filled with love.

9 October
Lk 10:38-42

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

Through the centuries there has been an immense amount of commentary on these two sisters, most of it favouring Mary. But Meister Eckhart, almost alone among the mystics, favoured Martha over Mary. "Mary was praised for choosing the best; but Martha's life was of very great profit, for she served Christ and his disciples. St Thomas says the active life is better than the contemplative, in so far as in action one pours out, for love, that which one has gained in contemplation. It is actually the same thing, for we take only from the same ground of contemplation and make it fruitful in works, and thus the object of contemplation is achieved."

It was more usual to favour Mary. So Jeanne-Marie Guyon (1648 – 1717) wrote, "Martha did what was right; but because she did it in her own spirit Christ rebuked her. The human spirit is restless and turbulent; for which reason it does little, though it would appear to do much. 'Martha,' says Christ, 'you are worried and troubled about many things, but only one thing is necessary; and Mary has chosen the better part which shall not be taken away from her' (Luke 10:41, 42). And what was it that Mary had chosen? Repose, tranquillity, and peace. She apparently ceased to act, that the Spirit of Christ might act in her; she ceased to live, that Christ might be her life."

Mde Guyon's friend, François Fénelon, tried to put them in balance, rather than just favouring one. In this, he was on a similar path to the 14th-century *Cloud of Unknowing*, which favoured the contemplative life but made the active life essential to it. "There are two ways of life in Holy Church. One is the active, the other is the contemplative life. Active is the lower, contemplative the higher. The active life has two parts, a higher and a lower, and likewise the contemplative has two parts, a lower and a higher. These two ways of life are linked, and though they are different, each is dependent on the other. For what we call the higher part of the active life *is the same* as the lower part of the contemplative. You cannot be fully active unless you are partly contemplative, nor fully contemplative (at least on earth) unless you are partly active."

10 October

Lk 11:1-4

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

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

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

I remember standing years ago at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, surrounded by Jews. It is a privilege to stand there beside them, at the only remaining part of the Temple that the Romans destroyed in the year 70. I thought of Jesus, a Jew, as I stood there, and wondered what would be an appropriate prayer in these circumstances. Of course, any of the psalms would have been appropriate, but I was thinking of something specifically Christian, so I prayed the Our Father. I noticed for the first time that there is no mention of Jesus in it, nor of any of the Christian mysteries! - no mention of his passion, death and resurrection, no mention of the redemption, nor of the Trinity.... I realised that any Jewish person at that Wailing Wall could pray the words of the Our Father and not find them the least bit strange. Jesus was among his own people. But how then can the Our Father be a Christian disciple's prayer?

Sometime later it came to me: if there is no mention of Jesus, his life, death or resurrection, nor of any of the Christian mysteries, it is because *this was his own prayer*. In prayer he was seized by a single awareness: the Father; he was not thinking about himself. When we pray the Our Father we are not praying *to* him, but *with* him; we are praying his prayer. We are so close to him that we cannot see him; like him, we see only the Father. We are, as it were, inside his head, looking out through his eyes: seeing the Father, and seeing the world as he sees it. We are totally identified with him – we are indeed his disciples. We are praying *through* him. All our prayers end with the phrase, "*through* Our Lord Jesus Christ...." At the end of the Eucharistic Prayer we say, "*Through* him, and *with* him, and *in* him...."

If Jesus sometimes seems absent it is because he is everywhere. He has drawn the whole world into his heart. As usual the poet puts it better. Jessica Powers found him in everything, or in her phrase, "in his ubiquity."

*I went into the Christmas cave;
there was no Child upon the straw.
the ox and ass were all I saw.
I sought his stable where He gave
His goodness in the guise of bread.
Emptiness came to me instead....
I found Him (and the world is wide)
Dear in His warm ubiquity.*

Where heart beat, there was Christ for me.

11 October

Lk 11:5-13

Jesus said, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

This doesn't seem a very heart-warming image of prayer. But when we look closely we see that Jesus is not comparing God to the reluctant neighbour; in fact he is *contrasting* them. The positive point of the parable is that we should pray boldly. We don't have to hang our head piously to one side and place our hand on our heart and mimic feelings that we don't have. We just have to be truthful and persistent. Just as we have to clean our windows now and then, we have to clear away the accumulations of humbug from our prayer-life.

But what if our prayer is not answered? Our prayer is always answered, but not necessarily in the way we want or expect. Cyril of Alexandria (375 - 444): "Sometimes we pray without discernment or any careful examination of what is truly to our advantage. If God were to grant what we asked, we do not know if it would prove to be a blessing or an injury. By a thoughtless impulse of our fancy, we fall into desires full of ruin that thrust the soul into the snare of death and the meshes of hell. When we ask of God anything of this kind, we will certainly not receive it."

In retrospect we can often see the wisdom in this. But sometimes we cannot see it. If we have prayed as never before for the recovery of a sick relative or friend, and the person dies, the question arises again, more intensely and personally than before, "Does God answer my prayer?" All we can do then is cling to the assurance of faith. God's providence for us takes us far beyond our own terms. God takes us beyond life and death. People speak of "finding comfort in God's will." This does not mean 'comfort' in the ordinary sense of ease and good feeling. It means comfort in the original sense of the word: *strength* (the word comes from the Latin 'fortis': strong). God answers our prayer by giving us a kind of strength we never knew we had – or rather, a kind of strength we did not have till the moment we needed it.

12 October

Lk 11:15-26

Some people said of Jesus, "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 armor in which he trusted and divides his plunder. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but not finding any, it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' When it comes, it finds it swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first."

The usual image of hell is heat, but in ancient Ireland it was cold. I suppose it is whatever you suffer from. But the worst cold is emotional and spiritual, not climatic. "The devil appeared to St Bridget," wrote Abbé Huvelin, "and she asked him, 'What is your name?' 'Coldness itself,' he replied." It suits him better than heat, since he is the prince of darkness and lacking in every kind of love except self-love.

How could those people in the crowd imagine that Jesus was in league with his opposite? They were impatient to explain him away. They were not entering the mystery; they were fleeing from it. Many explanations of things are just that: an eagerness to dispose of something that is not understood, a flight from ignorance into greater ignorance. A false or a shallow theory is a worse kind of ignorance than simple ignorance. It is a defence against understanding. "I don't know" is a perfectly honest and humble position; it is the only perfect position for learning. If we could enter "I don't know" fully, our minds would be as fresh as children's minds, and we would learn as quickly as they do. Instead we clutter the path of knowledge with theories and explanations, which we mistake for knowledge. It is full of danger, because it sometimes leads us, like that crowd long ago, to calling good bad. It is a very present danger: the Church has become more and more polarised in recent decades; you hear people say horrible things about anyone whose views don't match their own. It is a terrible thing to have enough religion in you for hatred but not enough for love. That is the same stuff that made it possible for those people to think Jesus was in league with Beelzebul.

13 October
Lk 11:27-28

A woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to Jesus, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!"

St Augustine famously wrote: "Mary was more blessed in accepting the faith of Christ than in conceiving the flesh of Christ. To someone who said, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you,' he replied, 'Rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it.' For his brothers, his relatives according to the flesh who did not believe in him, of what advantage was that relationship? Even her maternal relationship would have done Mary no good unless she had borne Christ more happily in her heart than in her flesh."

Taking this up, Meister Eckhart said, "If I, Eckhart, had said this and if it were my word, that that person is more blessed who hears God's word and keeps it than Mary is by giving birth and being Christ's bodily mother - I repeat, if I had said this, people would be surprised. But Christ himself has said it, and therefore we must believe him that it is the truth, for Christ is the Truth.... The whole of Christendom pays our Lady great honour and respect because she is the bodily mother of Christ, and that is right and proper.... And if Christendom pays her such honour, as indeed is fitting, nevertheless Christendom should pay even greater honour and glory to that person who hears God's word and keeps it.... All that honour, and immeasurably more, is accorded to that person who hears God's word and keeps it.... The Father of heaven gives you His eternal Word, and in that same Word He gives you at once His own life, His own being and His Godhead: for the Father and the Word are two Persons but one life and one being undivided.... In this light...the Father knows no difference between you and Him and no precedence, any more or any less than between Him and His Word. For the Father and yourself and all things and the Word itself are one in this light."

14 October [28th Sunday in Ordinary Time]

Mk 10:17-30 or 10:17-27

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

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life.

The principal theme of today's Liturgy is wisdom. At first sight the Gospel reading may not seem to be part of this, but surely one's attitude to wealth is central to this theme.

What is the opposite of wisdom? Foolishness? Yes. But there is more than one opposite. *Cleverness* is also the opposite of wisdom. The rich young man was surely quite clever (unless he had merely inherited his wealth). Foolish and clever at the same time: foolish because clever.

This man (in Matthew, a *young* man) *runs* up to Jesus and with totally exaggerated courtesy (there is only one parallel to it in Jewish literature, and that in the 4th century A.D.) asks him what he must do, etc. Full marks for enthusiasm, but none for follow-through! You can imagine him running up to any and every new teacher, and turning away disappointed when they asked him to change his life. He wanted religion as entertainment; he was interested in *using* religion for his own purposes, perhaps, without being challenged by it. We all have that in us! Some of us avoid the challenge by refusing to change, others by changing all the time.

The rich young man was a true believer in the other God: Mammon. There can be no final peace between these; they are the ultimate rivals. Jesus said, "You cannot serve God and Mammon" (Mt 6:24).

Cannot serve God and Mammon...? Just watch us! We become very skilled at keeping them in combination! Sometimes we are capable of using God as a cover for our worship of Mammon. More commonly we serve God, as we imagine, but with the *mind of Mammon*, calculating in every area of life as if everything were bargains and profit. But the most common solution of all is to keep them in separate worlds; God in the world of theory and Mammon in the world of practice.

Is there any hope for us? Yes, there's always hope. As usual, Mark shows a more 'feeling' Jesus. Matthew and Luke write simply, "Jesus answered...", but Mark writes, "Jesus *looked steadily at him and loved him*, and said..." From Matthew and Luke you could get the

impression that the rich man was a write-off. True, he is never heard of again in the New Testament, but could anyone whom Jesus loved be a write-off? Jesus did not *demand* perfection of him; he just held it before him as an *invitation*. An invitation is by its nature optional; you cannot imagine Jesus taking any kind of revenge on him for refusing it. There are stages in our life, and the Lord has more patience with us than we have with ourselves or with one another. All three Gospel writers say that the rich man became "sad." They didn't need to say that Jesus was sad, because it was so obvious.

The Twelve were all called individually by Jesus, and they all followed. Even Judas followed for three years. But the rich young man is the only one in the New Testament who was called individually and did not 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, so that we no longer see the poor. That rich young man is never heard of again in the New Testament. He might have become as great an apostle as Peter or John.

15 October
Lk 11:29-32

When the crowds were increasing, Jesus began to say, 'This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation. The queen of the South will rise at the judgement with the people of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here! The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!'

The Book of Jonah is a delightful and amusing book, and short – about three pages. The introduction to it in the *Jerusalem Bible* calls it “a droll adventure...and its doctrine is one of the peaks of the Old Testament.... Broadminded, it rejects a too rigid interpretation of prophecy.... rejects, too, a narrow racialism.... All the characters of this story are likeable, the pagan sailors, the king, the populace, even the animals of Niniveh.... We are on the threshold of the Gospel.”

It is easy to imagine Jesus as a young man hearing it and laughing at the antics of Jonah, and the animals doing penance, and Jonah arguing heatedly with God (God, “Are you right to be angry?” Jonah, “I have every right to be angry!”)

In today's passage, Jesus uses Jonah as a headline for his own preaching. That's how close we are to the Gospel. Don't go to bed tonight without reading it!

16 October
Lk 11:37-41

While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee invited him to dine with him; so he went in and took his place at the table. The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner. Then the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You fools! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you...."

Insides and outsides: an eternal theme. Christians have never been allowed to forget entirely the claims of the inner life. It is impossible to read, for example, Matthew 6 or today's reading without seeing that Christian life has to have its roots in the deepest places. Here is a text from a 14th-century mystic, Johann Tauler, to this effect: "It is certain that if God is to be born in the soul, it must turn back to eternity...it must turn in towards itself with all its might, must recall itself, and concentrate all its faculties within itself, the lowest as well as the highest. All its dissipated powers must be gathered up into one, because unity is strength." But it is not a flight from the world. Tauler's next words are, "Next the soul must go out. It must travel away from itself, above itself.... There must be nothing left in us but a pure intention towards God."

John Henry Newman's famous definition (1852) of a gentleman – which is very long – has the following elements in it, "The true gentleman carefully avoids whatever may cause a jar or a jolt in the minds of those with whom he is cast: all clashing of opinion, or collision of feeling.... His great concern is to make every one at their ease and at home.... He guards against unseasonable allusions, or topics which may irritate; he is seldom prominent in conversation." Of course it is very unfair to pick out these bits, but still, it makes you think: Jesus was not a gentleman! At any rate he wasn't a Victorian gentleman.

He was invited to a meal by the Pharisees, and he didn't think that it was going to be like dining at the high table at Oxford. It was more like an interrogation. They immediately found fault with him: he hadn't observed the ritual washing of hands. Then he was not to them "like an easy chair or a good fire" (Newman), but more like a blow-torch. "You Pharisees, you clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside yourselves you are full of greed and evil."

He called them hypocrites, but he never called them the embodiment of evil. His anger came from compassion, not from hatred. Surprisingly it was the gentlemanly Newman who would use those terrible words, "embodied evil." Explaining why a heretical teacher should meet with no mercy, he wrote: "He assumes the office of the Tempter; and so far forth as his error goes, must he be dealt with by a competent authority, as if he were embodied evil."

It is very hard even for the greatest to pitch their anger right.

17 October [St Ignatius of Antioch]

Lk 11:42-46

Jesus said, "Woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others. Woe to you Pharisees! For you love to have the seat of honour in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without realising it." One of the lawyers answered him, "Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us too." And he said, "Woe also to you lawyers! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them."

There are not so many hypocrites around today, because there is no real pressure to be a hypocrite. When bad behaviour can even make you a celebrity why should you go to the trouble of pretending to be good? Hypocrisy, Nietzsche said, has its place in ages of strong belief. There are relatively few hypocrites today because in most quarters there is no pressure to believe anything or to uphold anything. In fact the pressure is in the opposite direction: there are people who pretend to be worse than they are. "I hope you have not been leading a double life," wrote Oscar Wilde, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, "pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy." It is no wonder the Victorian world rejected him: it wasn't yet ready for the new hypocrisy, being well content with the old.

It is easy for us today to pour scorn on the historical Pharisees. We feel theirs is a vice we are particularly free of. Honesty, we feel, is our greatest virtue. It is an essential virtue, but it is easy when there's little or nothing at stake. Anyone can be a tennis player when there's no net and no rules. When we denounce hypocrisy today, it is quite different from Jesus excoriating the Pharisees. He criticised them severely, but he never cut them off as a class: he made friends with some of them, and sat down to eat with them. St Paul had been a prominent Pharisee and was not ashamed of it, any more than he was ashamed of his Hebrew birth (Phil 3:5). The fire in him that burned for Christ had once burned for the Law; and it was the same fire, redirected.

Our suffering today is that we are in an age that has seen off a number of brutal ideologies, and consequently it is harder for us to believe with the kind of fire that was in Paul and in Jesus. This is our weakness, our suffering. It does not make us superior to the Pharisees.

18 October [St Luke, evangelist]

Lk 10:1-9

The Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you."

"The gospel according to St Luke has been called the loveliest book in the world," writes a commentator. "There is a legend that Luke was a skilled painter.... Certainly he had an eye for vivid things. It would not be far wrong to say that the third gospel is the best life of Christ ever written."

Luke was a Gentile, in fact the only non-Jewish writer in the New Testament. It is also clear that he wrote mainly for Gentiles. Examples of this: he seldom quotes the Old Testament, and he is not concerned to show that Jesus is the fulfilment of Jewish prophecy; he never uses the Jewish title Rabbi of Jesus (he uses a Greek word that means 'Master'); he traced the descent of Jesus not to Abraham, the founder of the Jewish race, as Matthew does, but to Adam, the 'founder' of the human race.

Other features: Luke's gospel is especially the gospel of prayer: he shows Jesus very often at prayer. He gives a very special place to women. It is above all a gospel of praise: he uses the expression "praising God" more often than all the others put together. It was he who gave us those three great canticles: the *Benedictus*, the *Magnificat* and the *Nunc Dimittis*.

19 October

Lk 12:1-7

When the crowd gathered in thousands, so that they trampled on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, 'Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops. 'I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

The Pharisee in the Temple (Lk 18:11) thanked God that he was not like other people: he felt he was much better. But for everyone who thinks in that way there must be thousands who are thankful that they are exactly like others: it makes life much easier. These are two powerful and opposite compulsions: the compulsion to feel superior to others and the compulsion to be just like them. There's no hiding anything, according to today's gospel reading, so let's shake it out. Deep down, we all want to be the best at something, even if it is only at making people laugh. But see how uneasy a comedian becomes when he or she gets an unscheduled laugh! 'Are they laughing with me or at me?' He has to remain one of the audience even while being better than them. It is a hard balancing act, and we all have to manage it in some area or other.

What fuels these opposite compulsions? The urge to be superior is fuelled by the individual ego, and the urge to conform is fuelled by the corporate ego. Every one of us has both egos working in us simultaneously but not together. It is no wonder we become confused. It is no wonder success sometimes brings the deepest loneliness. It is no wonder celebrities are loved only as long as they match our idea of them. We all try to find our true nature, but we can't even find our true ego! Is there any such thing? The ego is a kind of weathervane, sensitive to the way the wind is blowing. It usually has no real orientation of its own. In that sense we are all hypocrites in varying degrees.

The population of Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, made it very clear: they loved him while he reflected glory on them, but as soon as he began to pierce their corporate ego they wanted to throw him over a cliff. Popularity breeds a desire to remain popular, but Jesus was completely free of this desire. "Do you also wish to go away?" he said to his disciples when the crowd began to desert him (Jn 6:67). This could only come from someone who lived from a deeper source than the ego. All the tricks of the ego are ultimately transparent: more transparent to others than we dare believe, transparent to ourselves in quiet moments, but always perfectly transparent to God. All the secrets of our hearts will be revealed (Rom 2:15; 1 Cor 4:5). Meister Eckhart said, "Truly, all that Jesus has eternally heard from his Father, he has revealed and not concealed from us.... And so we should conceal nothing from God."

20 October

Lk 12:8-12

"I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say."

"Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven." This statement has given rise to a great deal of debate, particularly because Jesus contrasted it with blasphemy against himself, whose every word and deed was inspired by the Holy Spirit. It may refer to persistent rejection of Jesus rather than to a single act of rejection. The Holy Spirit is "the spirit of truth," and to reject the spirit of truth is to be left with no bearings at all. It is not a matter of taking a wrong turning; it is more like turning all the signposts around. In mathematical logic, if you accept contradictory premisses you may imagine that nothing can be concluded from them, but in fact *everything* can be concluded – everything and its opposite. Nothing is left standing because it is only by the truth that anything can stand, and you have already dispensed with the truth by accepting contradictory premisses. Everything follows, everything is 'right', and so there is no awareness of error: in fact you can show with strict logic that you have not made an error. It is something like this with the "sin against the Holy Spirit." If we dispense with the truth we will never think of asking forgiveness, and so we can never be forgiven. Sometimes you get the feeling that this is what has happened to the whole world: we have become unhinged from any kind of truth; the truth is decided by poll, and every sectional interest invents its own truth.

"Do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say." Your speeches will have been prepared too soon, like an overcooked meal. A chef said to me once: "The guests should be waiting for the meal, not the meal for the guests." Your speeches will have been prepared in a different context and at a different time, and they will be the ego's work. But there is the grace of the moment: this is when something happens so suddenly that we don't have time to gather it into our ego-plan. We often surprise ourselves by acting quickly and skilfully in an emergency. It is not so surprising after all: thinking is often just postponement. If we can do this, imagine what the Holy Spirit can do when we don't have time to rush in with our plans.

21 October [29th Sunday in Ordinary Time]

Mk 10:35-45 or 10:42-45

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

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

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

James and John picked a bad moment. "Their timing was precisely wrong," said St John Chrysostom, "for this was not the right time for crowns or prizes. It was the time for struggles, contests, toils, sweat, wrestling rings and battles." The silliness of their question stands out all the more clearly because of the gravity of the moment. They are looking for preferment. Mark's is the earliest of the gospels, and it has none of the polish that the others have; it is blunt in several revealing ways. Matthew's gospel (20:20) edits the story and has *their mother* make the embarrassing request! But he forgot to adjust the rest of the story accordingly. He has Jesus replying in the plural, not the singular; and he forgot to delete the words about the others becoming angry with the brothers. If it had been their mother who made the request, the others would have been sorry for the brothers or embarrassed for them, but certainly not angry with them. Why the cover-up? These two were to become great apostles; with Peter they were the inner group. Yet we see how crass they were in this passage. It gives us all some hope!

With irony Chrysostom noted that there were indeed great things in store for the two brothers. "Jesus foretold great things for them; that is, you shall be held worthy of martyrdom, you shall suffer the things I have suffered, you shall end your life with a death from violence, and in this also you shall be sharers with me."

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

22 October
Lk 12:13-21

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

Luke has a special interest in the poor and often cautions against greed: see 4:4; 8:14; 9:24-25; 12:22-34; 16:19-31; 18:18-30. The greedy pursuit of wealth is one of the greatest obstacles to spiritual growth.

It is common experience that those who have most want most. This must be because they don't really have what they have: it doesn't fulfil them, it is only a bait for further accumulation. Greed is a bottomless pit and nothing will ever fill it. Many misers even live very poor lives – in order to die rich. A tycoon stipulated in his will that he should be buried in his limousine, seated at the wheel, with a Havana cigar in his mouth. It was done. As the crane was lowering the limousine into the grave, one of the bystanders said to his friend, "Man, some people really know how to live!"

How do you measure your wealth? Usually we measure it by checking how much we have, but the saints tell us we should calculate it by checking how much we have given away. The psychology of possession is full of paradoxes. Wealthy people, by spending their lives accumulating wealth, prove how poor they feel; people who feel deeply enriched within themselves don't waste their life that way. Someone said about a very wealthy man once that he was just the keeper of his wealth, "only a turnkey."

Can you measure greed? Not exactly, but even a rough estimate could be very useful. Have you ever noticed that the size of a sum of money seems to change depending on whether you are getting it or giving it? The sum is the same, the difference shows your partiality. If you could measure that difference, even approximately, it would be your greed index.

Why would we want to know such an unpleasant thing about ourselves? For the same reason that we would sooner look in a real mirror than in a distorting one. We want to know the truth about ourselves, however ugly. "The truth will set you free," Jesus said (Jn 8:32). Self-flattery only knots us up in delusion.

Instead be a giver, the wise ones tell us. Know the freedom and joy of giving. This we will know only by doing it, not by thinking about it. As the French poet André Gide said, "Complete possession is proved only by giving. All you are unable to give possesses you."

23 October

Lk 12:35-38

'Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.'

Roman soldiers wore mini-skirts, which enabled them to run at full speed when they had to; they had no need to "gird up their loins", as older translations of this passage had it. But Jews, who wore full-length garments, would have to arrange themselves before taking off at speed. Garments tied up about the waist are an image of readiness in the Scriptures. See this line-out, for example: Exodus 12:11; 1 Kings 18:46; 2 Kings 4:29; 9:1....

"Be dressed for action." But there is no action! There is only waiting. This sounds like a false alarm. But it also sounds just like a description of meditation. In meditation you remain fully alert, yet completely at rest. We usually do one or the other, seldom both together. We are usually alert only when we are doing things, and when we stop doing things we get drowsy or fall asleep. When a Zen master was asked how one should meditate he said, "Sit alert in front of that rock and wait for it to grow a bit."

Jesus was constantly exhorting people to stay awake: Mt 24:42; 25:13; Mk 13:33; 13:34; 13:35; 13:37; Lk 21:36.... In regard to the present reading we have to remember that a Jewish wedding feast could last a week, so the servants had ample time to nod off. "Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes." This sounds like an additional 'Beatitude': we could add it to Luke's list in chapter 6, which is shorter in any case than Matthew's. There is an interesting twist: when the master returns and finds the servants awake, Jesus says, *he will serve them*, reversing the roles of master and servant. The Son of Man came, we remember, "to serve and not to be served" (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45).

*Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lack anything.*

(George Herbert)

24 October
Lk 12:39-48

Jesus said: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'

Peter said, 'Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?' And the Lord said, 'Who then is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. But if that slave says to himself, "My master is delayed in coming", and if he begins to beat the other slaves, men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and put him with the unfaithful. That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. But one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.'

A manager or steward was a slave who was left in charge of domestic affairs when the owner was away. His responsibility was to care for the other servants' welfare, especially to allot food to them. His job was to serve, not to exercise power.

This is a telling parable for all who hold leadership positions in the Church. When James and John were dreaming of power, "Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognise as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.'" (Mark 10:42-44). And he added that even he himself came "not to be served but to serve."

Power holds a dangerous fascination for many people, and the world has reason to know about it. Absolute power corrupts absolutely, it has been said. Now I ask (and it may seem a strange question): where does that leave God?

It is we who call God 'Almighty'. But God chose to become powerless in Jesus. "Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross" (Phil 2:6-8). God is love, and love is powerless. We have all known powerful leaders who imagined that they were "strengthening their brethren," but who were actually weakening them. This is the distinctive blind spot of the extravert. If we love God, or anyone, because they are powerful, we are alienating our own power. Love empowers, it does not disempower. St Paul learned even to talk about the powerlessness of God (1 Cor 1:25). "There is something about God," wrote Simon Tugwell, "that is better expressed in weakness than in strength."

25 October
Lk 12:49-53

Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptised, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

"A brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness." That is how Nabokov described human existence. E.M. Forster, if I remember rightly, said something similar. "They give birth astride the grave," wrote Samuel Beckett. There is no dawn, no hope, no future, no meaning. It is a broad theme in modern literature. But if there is no frame of meaning, no big picture ('meta-narrative'), then the jig-saw pieces are unrelated to one another; individual actions are arbitrary and absurd, like the actions of the young anti-hero in Camus' *L'Étranger*.

It is remarkable how frequently Jesus used the phrase "I have come..." in the gospels. "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Lk 5:32); "I came to bring fire to earth" (today's reading); "I have come in my Father's name" (Jn 5:43); "It is for this reason that I have come to this hour" (Jn 12:27); "I came not to judge the world, but to save the world" (Jn 12:47); "I came from the Father and have come into the world" (Jn 16:28); "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth" (Jn 18:37).... He knew where he came from, and why. To lack any sense of the meaning of one's life is to become weak and enervated; it is to lack passion. Jesus knew the meaning of his existence and this was why he could bring fire and passion to it.

"I have a baptism with which to be baptised, and what stress I am under until it is completed!" The word 'baptism' in Greek means a plunging. He was on fire to plunge into his life's work. His words were fire, like the words in the mouth of Jeremiah (5:15); "Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (23:29). The Prince of Peace is not bringing the kind of peace we have when nothing matters. Not that, but a sword to destroy it.

26 October

Lk 12:54-59

Jesus said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? Thus, when you go with your accuser before a magistrate, on the way make an effort to settle the case, or you may be dragged before the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer throw you in prison. I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny."

When they say on television, "Let's take a look at the weather," they show you graphics with lines and squiggles: symbols of what is coming. But in the past when you asked an old man about tomorrow's weather he would look at the sky: he would look at the real weather – the clouds, the direction of the wind shown by the movement of the trees, etc. A cloud is not a symbol of the weather, it *is* the weather, it is the rain that is coming. It hasn't fallen yet, but you can see it if you pay attention. The signs of the times are not complex interpretations and symbolic systems; they are the earliest appearances of events. Look carefully and you will see everything – even before it happens. It is not divination, it is seeing. It is not even peering into the future; it is peering into the present. A man up a tree sees further than a man sitting on the ground. He sees a lion coming, when the other doesn't. To the man on the ground the lion is in the future, but to the man in the tree it is the present.

I have an unpleasant memory that I find hard to banish: a pious bigot, eyes closed in a caricature of depth, head piously inclined to the side, dismissing all views but her own, and accusing everyone of heresy and (with particular spite, "New Age thinking"). In contrast to this, Jesus repeatedly told people to keep awake, to open their eyes, to look at what was happening around them. "Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?" he said. If you do it with your eyes closed you are not looking at the present but at the past.

27 October

Lk 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Job's 'comforters' had little comfort to offer; they kept insisting to him that his misfortunes were due to his sins. This was the standard interpretation of evil at the time. The power of the Book of Job lies in its resolute rejection of this interpretation. Job's (or rather the writer's) struggle with this problem brought him almost to the Gospel: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at last he will stand upon the earth" (Job 19:25). But 500 years (or so) later, his profound understanding of evil had not gained popular currency, so that the contemporaries of Jesus could still believe that Pilate's victims and the victims at the tower of Siloam were being punished by God for their sins.

There is no facile *answer* to the problem of evil; there is only God's *response*: the Redeemer did come and stand upon the earth. Though the words might seem to mean more or less the same thing, there is all the difference in the world between an answer and a response: an answer is from (and to) the mind alone, a response has to come in the flesh.

The second part of the reading: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard..." The logical solution would have been to cut it down, since for three years it had borne no fruit. But the gardener still held out hope for it; with the right kind of help it might still bear fruit. The final judgment is not yet; there is hope of transformation. This is not about a fig-tree, of course, but about us. There is always hope of transformation. How is a person transformed? You can do the reverse of everything you were doing before; you can stand on your head: but it is the same old you, just inverted. The head goes from one extreme to the other, but the only real transformations are when the heart melts: it is the difference between reformation and transformation.

28 October [30th Sunday in Ordinary Time]

Mk 10:46-52

As Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

This is the second of two cures of blind men in Mark's gospel. Opening the eyes of the blind was prophesied as one of the works of the Messiah: "The eyes of the blind will see" (Is 29:18; see also 32:3). In fact, in the very next scene he is being proclaimed by the crowds as Messiah.

They are approaching Jerusalem (15 miles away), where the story will reach its climax with his death and resurrection. In Jerusalem all eyes will be fixed on him, most of them still blind to what he is; or worse, they will be watching him with malevolent intent. In the meantime, Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, having received his sight, *followed him* to Jerusalem. This gospel passage is a meditation on the different kinds of blindness.

I have a friend who has become blind in her old age, but her mind is as bright as a button. She still gives lectures, but she said that what pains her especially is being unable to see people's faces. Not till we lose our sight do we know how much we depend on it: for getting around objects, yes, but also for getting on with people. The human face speaks by every feature, not only by the mouth; we know how something is meant because we see the other's face.

A blind *beggar's* misery is compounded: worse than the sum of the misery of a blind person and a beggar. He is totally at our mercy, stretching out his hand into the darkness, unable to gauge our mood, not knowing if we even see him.

Every believer is that man, most of the time. Faith is *dark knowledge*. Often we lift up our hands in prayer, and we feel no presence of the Other; we hear neither a promise nor a refusal. That is the time to remember Bartimaeus. He is placed here in the gospel story as an encouragement for us.

Let's watch him. When he heard that Jesus was passing by he began to shout, "Have pity on me!" People told him to shut up, he was making too much noise. But he shouted all the more. "Call him," Jesus said.... "Cheer up!" they told him. "On your feet, he's calling you." Then, the account continues, "*throwing* his cloak aside, he *jumped* to his feet and *came* to Jesus." He came, of course, still in the dark. Did you notice that he *threw* aside his cloak? It was a strange thing for a blind person to do: would he find it again? Blind people have great trouble finding things, they need the world to stay put. See how carefully they place things, caressing them almost. But sighted people are forever throwing things around. In throwing his cloak aside Bartimaeus acted like a sighted man. While all the sighted people held their cloaks and their possession around them with careful fingers, he alone leaped up, threw aside his cloak and ran to meet the Lord.

It is a very powerful symbol of the life of faith: he walked in the dark. Faith is a kind of knowledge, yes, but it is *dark knowledge*. Still, this dark knowledge sets us free, somehow, to move with confidence. How good it would be to move without timidity, to travel through our life with freedom and joy! A blind beggar shows us how.

We say seeing is believing. We put great stress on seeing. "Sight is our principal source of knowledge," said Aristotle, almost twenty-five centuries ago. And western culture has followed him particularly in this; it has a marked preference for sight over the other senses. Seeing is believing, we say. The meaning of today's gospel reading is best expressed by turning that phrase around. *Believing is seeing*. There is a kind of seeing that is even more basic than the sight of our eyes. That is the kind of sight that Jesus restores.

29 October
Lk 13:10-17

Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?"

When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

"He was teaching in a synagogue." This is the last time in Luke that Jesus appears in a synagogue; the rift between him and the authorities is growing wider. They were for law, he was for mercy. The difference was focused poignantly in the figure of the old woman crippled for eighteen years. Jesus healed her, though this constituted breaking the sabbath, according to the interpretation of the scribes and Pharisees. They looked and saw only a breach of rules; Jesus looked and saw God's mercy meeting human misery. Jesus was a formidable opponent: he pointed out their inconsistency in allowing people to come to the aid of an animal on the sabbath but not to the aid of a human being. People don't like been shown up in such an unflattering light, and it goes some way towards explaining their implacable hatred of him. He was not just showing another way, he was undermining theirs.

Theirs was a narrow legalistic version of the great Jewish faith; it was a thing of the mind alone, with no heart in it. What strikes you is the absence of joy: they were unable to feel any joy at the old woman's healing. Religion without joy is hollow and shows itself to be a product of the ego. The ego knows selfish gratification, but not joy. Joy is an expansion of the heart: to experience joy is to lose oneself – ultimately in God. Luke records that Jesus was filled with joy (10:21), and so were his disciples (Acts 13:52). In each case he says it is joy in the Holy Spirit. Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit, mentioned next to love by Paul (Gal 5:22). Between the religion of the ego and the religion of Jesus there is a chasm that can only be crossed in one giant leap (you cannot cross a chasm in two short leaps). It is a leap of joy in the Holy Spirit.

30 October
Lk 13:18-21

Jesus said, 'What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.' And again he said, 'To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'

At the time of Jesus, people expected that the messianic kingdom would be established with great fanfare and triumph. There would be a lot to see and hear.

The ego always looks for a big deal: this is its trademark. When you hear intense people talking big, with phrases like "I strongly believe," or "I'm deeply convinced," you can be pretty sure that the truth lies somewhere opposite. The strength of the 'conviction' shows the strength of the doubt. We don't need to have "a strong conviction" that the sun rises in the east. We just know. What we know we just know; it doesn't depend on proofs and persuasive language.

In a village there were two philosophers, one a believer and the other an atheist. People began to be weary of their endless debates about the existence of God. So it was decided that there should be a showdown, a definitive debate that would close the matter once and for all. It began in the evening and continued through the night, the people listening intently to the opposing arguments. By the time dawn began to light the sky, the atheist had become a believer and the believer had become an atheist.

Advertising companies always begin with loud talk and a big splash: saturation coverage. In our right minds we know that it is all nonsense... *but it works!* It makes people go out and buy products they don't really need. As they see us turning into idiots, the advertisers count their profits and make a science on us. They call us "consumers"! Not creators, not children of God, not wondrous beings... but consumers. It is a description of any animal, even an earthworm. But we come to accept it with horrible humility - a caricature of real humility.

There is surely more than this to human life. The Word of God became a zygote, scarcely visible to the naked eye. He was born a helpless infant. His first visitors were not religious and state dignitaries but simple shepherds from the hillside. If the entry of the Word of God into human history was so humble and simple, it is not surprising that the Kingdom of God should also begin with the smallest and the most humble. The mustard seed is very tiny, but it grows into a mighty shrub. The pinch of yeast can raise three measures (about fifty pounds) of dough. To discern the Kingdom of God we need close vision, and action close to hand – not big theories and acrimonious talk.

31 October
Lk 13:22-30

Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" He said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then in reply he will say to you, 'I do not know where you come from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!' There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."

Jesus had a way of turning questions around – changing them from theoretical questions to personal ones. “Who is my neighbour?” someone asked him; and he turned it into another question, “Who should I be neighbour to?” (See October 8). Likewise in today’s reading he changed the question from “Will the saved be few?” to “Will the saved be you?”

Will many be saved? Will everyone be saved? Christians haven't always been wise in the way they approached these questions. St Augustine lived from 354 – 430, but he was the first to claim to know that there were people in hell. That he was the first is a remarkable fact, for it shows that for 400 years Christians approached the profound mystery of salvation without the curious question, ‘How many?’ The great modern theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, summed up the matter. If you claim to know that there are people in hell, he wrote, you are claiming to know more than you can know; and if you claim to know that there is no-one in hell, you are likewise claiming to know more than you can know. In other words, our curiosity is not gratified in this matter.

Jesus responded to the question by saying what we should do if we want to be saved. He said it is a narrow door. If he had said, "It is dead easy to get into the Kingdom of heaven, don't worry, relax," no one, or very few, would consider it worth the effort. Anything that comes cheap, or for nothing, appears worthless. George Bernard Shaw said a cynic was a person who knew the price of everything and the value of nothing. We easily confuse price and value, and so we think that what has no price has no value either. In our brutal world everything can be bought, even love – or rather a semblance of it. It means that priceless things like real love, truth, goodness, virtue are thought worthless. Money will get no one into the Kingdom of heaven (Mt 19:24), but that does not mean that it requires nothing of us. On the contrary, we know that anything of real value requires everything of us. You would love, for example, to be able to give your knowledge and experience to another person automatically, like photocopying a page; you would love to transfer your knowledge of a language or a subject, but it can only be done by effort on both sides. This does not mean that you are reluctant to give; on the contrary you would give everything instantly if you could. But if you could do that, the knowledge or the experience or the language would not really become the other person's; it would remain alien material in their memories and minds.

Likewise the Kingdom of God – which means the Presence of God.

1 November [All Saints]

Mt 5:1-12

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

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

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

None of the virtues mentioned there are the virtues of superman, none are the virtues of the heroes of fiction. They are not the virtues of a person saturated with a sense of his or her own importance, but of a person saturated with the consciousness of God.

2 November [All Souls]

Jn 6:37-40

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

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

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

On this day we remember "all souls," all who have died. They have passed beyond our sight, they have gone into the invisible, they have something of the transparency of Jesus. Our judgments follow them to the grave, but they have been given for safe keeping to Jesus who received them from his Father, the Father who judges no one (Jn 5:22). The Father who "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4) does not abandon them when their world has fallen apart.

3 November
Lk 14:1, 7-11

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. 'When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, "Give this person your place", and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher"; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

There are all sorts of things you can't do for yourself, from the most basic (you can't bring yourself into the world) to the least (you can't even tickle yourself to laughter). It would be interesting to make a list of them. At the top of the list would be the familiar phrase: you can't pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. And contrary to what we often hear, I don't believe you can forgive yourself (forgiveness is essentially something you receive from another). You can't see yourself from the outside. You can't give yourself away completely (you have to be seized). And so on and on....

The longer the list becomes, the more it is borne in on you that you are not a separate department from the rest of creation. You can't do everything for yourself.

In connection with today's reading, you can't really humble yourself. You can place yourself at the end of the table, as in the parable, but that doesn't prove that your humility is genuine. Meister Eckhart's younger confrere, Johann Tauler, was very clear on this point. "Let us now see," he said, "what we must do to receive the gracious Holy Spirit. The most intimate and the best preparation for receiving Him must be made by the Holy Spirit Himself working in us. He Himself must prepare the place for Himself, and also He must receive Himself in us. What is this work by which He prepares us to receive Him? The Holy Spirit has two workings in us. The first is that He empties. The other is that He fills the emptiness, as far and as much as He finds emptiness to fill."

We can make a start with trying to 'empty ourselves', as he put it. (Here you can read all the synonyms for 'detachment'). But only the Holy Spirit can do it fully in us. We have to be seized by the Holy Spirit. "We must let ourselves be taken captive," Tauler said, "we must allow ourselves to be emptied and prepared."

"All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." In a way, those who exalt themselves are already humbled, and those who humble themselves are already exalted. Self-exaltation isn't worthy of a human being; it's a betrayal of our true dignity. "A good person never considers that he or she has advanced beyond anything," said Tauler

4 November [31st Sunday in Ordinary Time]

Mk 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard the disciples disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "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 with the two exchanges just before it in Mark's gospel. They pay each other handsome compliments. Perhaps this was put there to show that Jesus' teaching is not necessarily in conflict with the best of what was before. In other words, a bridge between the two is 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!

The scribe asked Jesus to mention one law, but he mentioned two. This was the clearest way of saying that they cannot be separated. There is a bridge between the two. There is no real love of God without love of neighbour, and no deep or lasting love of neighbour without love of God. (But many love God unawares.) If these two cannot be separated, they are really only one in practice - like two hands. In Irish a person who has lost one hand is said to be *ar leath-lámh*, "on half a hand." Try playing, say, the violin with only one hand. You might as well have only half a hand.

In fact the Jews had already made this connection. Strict orthodox Jews wore little leather sachets (phylacteries) around their wrists, containing verses from Scripture. They still do, when they are at prayer. One of these verses was, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul" (Deuteronomy 11:13). To which the scribes added, "You must love your neighbour as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). In other words, in today's gospel reading Jesus gave the *scribes'* answer.

In Luke's version of the incident, there is a further question; and it was a common one: "Who is my neighbour?" (Luke 10:29). Some Rabbis (definitely not bridge-builders) restricted it to fellow Jews; others gave a somewhat wider definition. Luke was not Jewish himself and was writing for non-Jews; perhaps this is why he alone includes this question. In Luke's handling of it, Jesus turned the question inside out. He told the parable of the Good Samaritan (also a non-Jewish figure). He did not answer the question, *Who is my neighbour?* but a different question, *Whom should I be neighbour to?* This is highly significant. The first question is about other people and how they are to be classified; the second question is about myself and how I should behave towards other people.

The mind is quite happy to look out at the world from an undisturbed position. "In its blind inertia," wrote St Augustine in the 5th century, "it loves to lie concealed, yet it wishes that nothing should be concealed from it." The consequence, he said, is that the tables are turned: you will not be able to hide yourself from the truth, but the truth will be hidden from you. It is very hard to bring the truth home to oneself.

That is the ultimate bridge: the one between myself and the rest of the world. If I don't allow such a bridge or if I am not constantly crossing it, while I may know a lot about religion, I am not a religious person.

5 November
Lk 14:12-14

Jesus said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

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

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

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

For Nietzsche, Christian morality was a perfect example of a slave morality driven by resentment of the strong. But Max Scheler disagreed, seeing the Christian saint as driven by strength and nobility, not by resentment (or rather 'ressentiment'; they both used the French word). It takes greatness to become little, strength to become weak, wisdom to embrace the folly of the Cross.

6 November

Lk 14:15-24

One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to Jesus, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room." Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

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

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

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

We can appreciate that the "leader of the Pharisees", who had invited Jesus to dinner, didn't enjoy his dinner very much that day; and we can see him wondering which character in the story was himself. We may well wonder – because the story is about us too.

7 November

Lk 14:25-33

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

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

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

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

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

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

I have met other child-like people too. A Japanese Zen Master, who had little English, was giving instruction in meditation. He just said, "Sit there, and give up everything!"