

October  
2020

## GOSPEL COMMENTARIES

1 October [St Thérèse of Lisieux]

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...?" asked Cyril of Alexandria. Then he suggested an answer. "He 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 no, it is their *rejection* of suffering that has done so. Life doesn't make people hard; it is the denial of life that makes us 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 job 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."

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. New Age angels seem to all nice and harmless. 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; he spanned the spectrum from end to end. There was nothing sappy about him.

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 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'" (Revelation 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.'" (Luke 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 – because it isn't very logical and controlled, I suppose. 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."

4 October [27th Sunday in Ordinary Time]

Mt 21:33-43

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

To the Jews of old the vine was a symbol of their own race, their very identity. God took them from the land of slavery and transplanted them in new soil: "You brought a vine out of Egypt; to plant it you drove out the nations" (Psalm 79, responsorial psalm of today's Mass).

In countries where the vine does not grow, some of the detail is lost on us. The vine is a most vigorous plant and needs severe pruning. It displays a great abundance of leaves, but only some of the branches are fruit-bearing. The ones that produce only leaves have to be cut back drastically, otherwise they rob life-giving sap from the others. The wood of the vine is perfectly useless, not even making good firewood. So it was usually just put in a heap and burnt. We get the point of what Jesus once said: "Anyone who does not remain in me is like a branch that has been thrown away – they wither; these branches are collected and thrown on the fire" (John 15:6). In spiritual writing we hear a lot about growth, but very little about pruning. The aspects of our life that are not fruit-bearing are for pruning, so that we might bear fruit. Leaves are the plant thinking of itself, fruit is the plant thinking beyond itself: thinking of the next generation. We are to think beyond our own interests. The sap in us is the life of Christ. It is for fruit-bearing; we are not to turn it into stuff that is not even fit to make a fire.

The hedge (in today's Gospel) was for keeping out animals and thieves; the tower was a place from which to watch out for them. There was no doubt about where the boundaries lay.

In Tuscany, Italy, where St Catherine of Siena (1347 – 1380) was born, I saw miles and miles of vineyards, but they were not divided: all were one vast plantation of vines. The neighbours know, apparently, where one ends and another begins. St Catherine used this as an image of how we should be with others: we are ourselves, yes, we have our own space, but we are not divided from others. This seems a perfect arrangement, a perfect image of harmony. "Each one of you," she wrote, "has your own vineyard. But everyone is joined to your neighbours' vineyards without any dividing lines. They are so joined together that you cannot do good or evil for yourself without doing the same for your neighbours."



But today's Gospel story is from a world that divided property jealously: that is why the story is about violence and murder. Whenever I bar people from my life I am subscribing to the formula for violence; it is a kind of ethnic cleansing on a small scale. In the parable the tenants ended by killing the son.

Yes, there is a sense in which *I am* my neighbour. If I exclude someone from my life I am excluding myself from full humanity. But the image of vine has an even more startling thing to show us: "I am the vine, you are the branches," Jesus said (John 15:5). But the vine *is* the branches! Unlike other trees where you can distinguish clearly between trunk and branches, the vine is just all branches! "I am the vine and you are the branches": the vine *is* the branches! Jesus is more than just a neighbour who makes no distinction between what is his and what is yours. In a real sense he *is* you, and he is also your neighbour. To banish your neighbour from your life is to banish him, and even to banish yourself. To lop off a branch is to lop off Christ.

5 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 10:6), 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 others.

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 explosive way he pronounced it – *ssteuuuupit!* – made it sound much worse than stupid. Meeting him years later I could see 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" (Matthew 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.

6 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, because 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." (For the same reason, Eckhart said that motherhood is superior to virginity – because it is fruitful.)

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 14<sup>th</sup>-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."

7 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 had a special kind of prayer, but Jesus' disciples apparently did not. In answer to their request he taught them the Our Father. This makes it very special: it is not just any prayer; it is a distinctively Christian prayer.

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

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

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.*

8 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.

9 October

Lk 11:15-26

*Some people said, "He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons." Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven. But he knew what they were thinking and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? --for you say that I cast out the demons by Beelzebul. Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his 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 certainty 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 and bogus certainties, 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.

10 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."

11 October [28th Sunday in Ordinary Time]

Mt 22:1-14

*Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."*

"On this mountain the Lord of Hosts will prepare for all peoples a banquet of rich food, a banquet of fine wines..." Thus begins the first reading of today's Mass, a reading from the prophet Isaiah, who lived about seven centuries before Christ. In the literatures of most countries there is a longing for a future golden age (or sometimes nostalgia for a past one). Such a future time or place is called Utopia, a 'non-existent place' (from the Greek, *ou* = not, and *topos* = place). Practical people have always been wary of such thinking. "An acre in Middlesex," said Macaulay, "is better than a principality in Utopia." Isaiah's prophecy, however, was not based on wishful thinking but on God's promise, a promise that he expected God to fulfil, not in Utopia, but "on this mountain."

All God's promises are being fulfilled in Jesus; this is the faith of Christians. "The Son of God, Jesus Christ...was not 'Yes and No'; but in him it is always 'Yes'. For in him every one of God's promises is a Yes" (2 Corinthians 1:19-20). Isaiah's prophecy, like all the others, is fulfilled in him. He is the one who prepares the "messianic banquet" - a symbol of the joy of the "messianic kingdom", to be inaugurated by the Messiah. There is a special interest, then, when we hear Jesus begin a story with the words, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son."

We will come back to the story. The Last Supper is presented in the gospels as the messianic banquet in anticipation. Taking the cup of wine he said, "I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Mt 26:29). That will be the messianic banquet. The Mass retains this meaning of the messianic banquet in anticipation.

The story in today's reading is about this. He calls it a wedding feast, which was the most joyful time in a Jew's life. But those who were called refused to come. So he sent his servants out into the highways and byways to invite everyone they could find. "They gathered all whom they found, both good and bad." This is Jesus talking about his life's work. Many of his own people were resisting his invitation, so he was now inviting everyone, good and bad alike. This was no fiction. In real life he befriended the outcasts of society, Samaritans, tax-collectors and sinners, foreigners, pagans...and he invites even us!

What are we to make of the one who was then thrown out? He "was not wearing a wedding garment." That is to say, he had no appreciation of what he had been invited to. "Friend, why are you here?" the bridegroom asked him. Each of us has to imagine these words addressed to him or herself. It doesn't matter where we come from - the highways and the byways -

but it does matter that we know where we are, and what we have been invited to. If we bring with us a spirit of arrogance and division, a spirit of cynicism and discouragement, it is like going to a wedding in our worst clothes. As Origen said, the man who was cast out "had not put off his old behaviour."

A wedding is a celebration of love. This banquet is a love-feast. It is Christ joining himself in marriage to his Bride, the Church. St Paul took up this image. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). Johann Tauler, the 14<sup>th</sup>-century disciple of Meister Eckhart, wrote about this union. "This love is so close, so interior, so secret, so tender and so ardent as to be beyond all comprehension. All the great theologians of Paris, with all their wisdom, could never express what it is. However much they wanted to speak about it they could only keep silence.... And yet any simple persons, if they have put all their trust in God and if they are humble, may feel and taste something of this love in the depths of their souls; though even such a person will never be able to grasp what it is or express it in words."

12 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!

13 October  
Lk 11:37-41

*While he 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 14<sup>th</sup>-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," he said to them, "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.

14 October  
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.

15 October  
Lk 11:47-54

*Jesus said to the Pharisees, "Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your ancestors killed. So you are witnesses and approve of the deeds of your ancestors; for they killed them, and you build their tombs. Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,' so that this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be charged against this generation. Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering."*

*When he went outside, the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile toward him and to cross-examine him about many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.*

We have the verb 'to know' and the corresponding noun 'knowledge', but the verb 'to witten', which paired with the noun 'wisdom', is now obsolete. We retain the word 'wit', but it has to do with comedy rather than with wisdom. We are frequently reminded that we have exchanged wisdom for knowledge and knowledge for information.

Jesus accused the scribes (lawyers) of taking away the key of knowledge, which in the context meant the key of wisdom. They were barring the way to wisdom. "Wisdom has built herself a house....She has dispatched her maidservants and proclaimed from the city's heights: 'Who is ignorant? Let him step this way'" (Proverbs 9:1-4). Jeanne Guyon, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century mystic, commented on this: "So far from excluding any..., God throws wide the gates, that all may enter." But the religious lawyers, Jesus said, had used to key instead to lock people out. Keys are for opening and closing, but the scribes seem to have specialised in closing.

George Bernard Shaw said once that all professions are conspiracies against the laity. Sometimes professionals use their technical language as a kind of barrier. This happens readily in theology. Jesus opened a new way, but never used a term that his hearers could not understand. His teaching was revolutionary but his language was the language of common experience.

Teachers...! I used to be one. I had a growing feeling that what I was doing was a kind of inoculation. I felt I was injecting students with a weakened strain of philosophy, and they were developing the proper antibodies, which would give them a life-long immunity to the subject. Teaching must be one of the hardest things in the world to do. As hard as loving – because it is akin to it.

There is a new kind of teaching – or rather a new subject – and it shows the essence very clearly. Someone is showing you how to operate a new computer programme. They will probably sit in your chair and leave you standing beside them. (If you were teaching someone to drive a car, where would you sit?) They are likely to delight in showing how fast they can do things. And they are likely to speak in tongues. No one displays so much swagger, I find, as the person who can do something with a computer that you cannot do. But I've seen a few who adjust to your capacity, who have no urge to show off, who really want you to be able to do it yourself. These are the real teachers, and it is a pity that more of them are not teaching theology or philosophy or literature....

16 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 (Luke 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 lads even while being better than them. It is a hard balancing act, and we all try 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."

17 October [St Ignatius of Antioch]

Lk 12:8-12

*Jesus said, "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, by strictly correct steps. 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 when you read the newspapers 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.

18 October [29th Sunday in Ordinary Time]

Mt 22:15-21

*The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."*

Praise some powerful person for qualities he or she doesn't have, and you insult them in a subtle way. Flattery has been called the politeness of contempt. But it works! Only a very rock-like person could remain unmoved when a warm gush of flattery is playing over them. Most people suspend all critical self-examination at such a moment.

The flattery of the Pharisees was more subtle still. They probably knew that Jesus could not be flattered by lies, so they tried to flatter him with the truth. "We know you are afraid of no one, and that a man's rank means nothing to you!" But there was treachery in every word. They would entice him to bravado in speech, and then get him into serious trouble with the authorities for what he said. Taxation of Jews by the Romans (who were the occupying powers) was a burning issue; and the Romans had dealt summarily with Judas the Gaulonite who tried to raise resistance to it. Here then were these Pharisees trying to walk Jesus into the same fate. They brought some Herodians with them, to make it a perfect trap. If Jesus answered yes to their question he would be branded a collaborator; if he answered no he would be in deep trouble with the Herodians, who were collaborators with the Romans. But he was ready.

What strikes you more and more in the gospels is the sheer intelligence of Jesus. His answer was full of wit and insight. It was full of significance for the future too. The notion of separation between religion and politics (or, as it came to be known, the separation of Church and State) was unknown before him. We see today the trouble that the lack of such a distinction makes in countries with Muslim majorities, and even in countries with Muslim minorities.

This saying of his, "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar," was useful from the start: it was of great importance to the early Christians, because they were often accused of disloyalty to the state; see, for example, Acts 17:7: "These people...have broken every one of Caesar's edicts." St Paul wrote an exhortation to loyalty to the state (Romans 13:1-7, where he even says that the tax-man is doing God's work!). Clearly there is a tradition of civil loyalty that goes back to Jesus himself.

But passing beyond the particular question of taxes, it is of the greatest interest to see how Jesus faced people in authority. His way is ultimately the model for how we ourselves are to face authority, as we do every day, in one way or another. It is not a pleasant thing when a policeman approaches you and says, "Documents!" It is like being asked what right you have to exist. Jesus was asked precisely this kind of question one day in the Temple. He was approached by "the chief priests, the teachers of the Law and the Jewish authorities." He was on their ground. "By what authority do you do these things...?" they demanded. (He had been teaching, which was their job.) But he was not one to bow down before authority. He put a perfect fix on them.

Jesus defied human authorities when he had to, but he was not against authority in principle. "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." People who are against authority in principle

are often simply looking for authority themselves. But the ultimate words on authority are surely his: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve."

19 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 that you are unable to give away possesses you."

20 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, fully 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)

21 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 is 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, Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 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" (Philippians 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."

22 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.

23 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.

24 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.

25 October [30th Sunday in Ordinary Time]

Mt 22:34-40

*When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."*

Commentators on the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) amplified it into many hundreds of prescriptions; but there was an equal quest to simplify it into one, to express the essence underlying its multiplicity. This was the import of the Pharisee's question. It was a regular question to put to a rabbi.

Jesus replied by quoting the 'Shema Israel', which is practically the Creed of Judaism. It was recited at Saturday evening prayers, and written on small pieces of parchment carried in phylacteries. The words mean 'Hear, O Israel', from the opening words: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). But he added another to it, from Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." This was not quite an innovation in itself, but when you recall who he meant by 'neighbour', it certainly was. The common understanding of 'neighbour' was other Jews. In the time of Jesus, the most pious sect, the Qumran community, altered the definition a little: "You shall love all the children of light, and hate all the children of darkness." But in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus made it clear that one's neighbour is anyone in need, no matter what their race or religion. 'Neighbour', then, is an unlimited category in the teaching of Jesus, and as if to underline this from the beginning, the perfect model of this new liberating morality was a Samaritan. Samaritans were regarded by Jews as heretics and foreigners, in no way "children of the light."

The combination of the two commandments to love God and neighbour was not lost on Jesus' disciples. "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." (1 John 4:20). But there are better examples in the New Testament of the universality of 'neighbour' (John tended to think only in terms of the community of disciples). Jesus' teaching was that we must love even our enemies: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Mt 5:43-45).

"Love your neighbour as yourself," Jesus quoted. But when he spoke from himself he said "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). There is all the difference in the world between these two. I would run a mile from some people if they threatened to love me as they loved themselves! The so-called Golden Rule guarantees very little. Jesus not only tells us to love God and neighbour; by his life and death he shows us how to do it.

26 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 (Galatians 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.

27 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 clever talk.

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.

28 October [Sts Simon and Jude, apostles]

Lk 6:12-16

*Jesus went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.*

Simon and Jude could be the patrons of all anonymous people. Both of them have difficulty even in getting their names remembered! Simon is chiefly known as “not Simon Peter”. The gospel writers themselves call him by different names: Luke calls him “Simon the Zealot,” Matthew and Mark call him “Simon the Canaanite.” Nothing more than that is recorded of him. It is a slim CV. His companion Jude is likewise almost anonymous. There is difficulty about his name too: John calls him “Judas – not the Iscariot!” Luke calls him “Jude the brother of James,” Matthew calls him “Thaddeus.” Nothing is said of him in any of the gospels except that he asked a question, “Lord, what is all this about?” (Jn 14:22). The rest is silence. A New Testament letter bears his name, but scholars think it extremely unlikely that he wrote it.

Their egos left no trace – like the flight of birds in the sky. They are the patrons of the vast majority of all the Christians who have ever lived. There is a lot to be said for silence and anonymity: they can give depth. Without Simon and Jude the New Testament would be poorer; it would be all light and little shade. We might not so easily see ourselves in it.

29 October

Lk 13:31-35

*Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"*

Foxes have the name of being cleverer than dogs; but it seems they are not. They are just more careful (they have good reason to be). If we call someone 'foxy' in English we are saying that he or she is crafty or cunning (in Ireland, additionally, it means 'red-haired'). But when Jesus referred to Herod as a fox, it is understood to be a reference to his violent nature, not to his intelligence. But violence will not deter Jesus from doing his work. He knows what lies in store for him. Prophets meet their end in Jerusalem. But his ministry will continue until that time comes.

Though he will be killed, he does not see the tragedy as his but as the people's. He cried out prophetically in God's name, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" Then comes the tender image of God's mothering love.

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

30 October

Lk 14:1-6

*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. Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy. And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, "Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?" But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away. Then he said to them, "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?" And they could not reply to this.*

A scholar says that the phrase used for "watching closely" means to watch surreptitiously and menacingly. The Pharisees were giving him the stare. There was no compassion in the way they saw people; in fact they scarcely saw people at all; they saw only rules and breaches of rules.

There is a similar scene in Luke 13. There, a crippled woman attended the synagogue. Let's watch people's eyes. Jesus "saw her." He had eyes for the poor, for people who were suffering. The Pharisees had eyes too: but only for breaches of their rules. The ruler of the synagogue was furious that Jesus had healed on the sabbath (technically it was 'work', and work was forbidden on the sabbath). He couldn't look at Jesus, he couldn't meet his eyes; he addressed the people with words meant for Jesus, for he lacked courage to speak to him face to face. But Jesus certainly looked at him when he said, or perhaps shouted, "You hypocrites!" The eyes have it. The absence of compassion in their version of religion was never so clear. It is no wonder they came to fear and hate him. And it is no wonder they encompassed his death. Violence is the reaction of people who can't look you in the eye.

A girl was giving me a blow-by-blow account of a row she had with another girl. It had escalated from a disagreement to an outright shouting-match. Had they been boys the next stage would have been fisticuffs. But in this case the punch-line was, "I gave her a look!" Ever since then I've been more aware of looks. In a history of malicious looking the Pharisees would represent the golden age.

In his Gospel and Acts Luke mentions Pharisees 35 times. Scholars believe that the reason for this is that there were many Christian Pharisees in the Lucan communities, many rigorists who wanted to impose Jewish law on Christians, and it was necessary to remind everyone of how the Jewish Pharisees had opposed Jesus' work. Pharisaism is a constant temptation for Christians: this has been so from the beginning and it is still the case. It has proved very difficult to get it into one's head that our salvation is through the grace of Christ and not through observance of law. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century Danish philosopher Kierkegaard said that human beings long for a purely legal relationship with God; then they would know how to keep God behind a line, at arm's length, in a place apart: in other words, out of their life. But this kind of relationship is not possible, for God is a loving Father.

31 October

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. It would be interesting to make a list of them. At the top of the list would be the hackneyed 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 disciple, 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."

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 will 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 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? St John Chrysostom (349 AD – 407) commented, "The expression 'that the Father gives me', shows that it is no accident that one believes or does not believe, and that belief is not the result of human reason, but requires a revelation from God, and a mind open enough to receive it." Many have argued themselves right up to the door of faith, but the door has to open by itself – otherwise their faith would never be more than a philosophical argument.

Let's turn the phrase around and see what falls out of it. 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 14:15-24

*One of the dinner guests 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.'"*

Someone at table exclaimed 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. It is obvious that 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 very 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 he was. We may well wonder – because the story is about us too.

4 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!"

5 November

Lk 15:1-10

*Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

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

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

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

Better to be a bad Christian than a good Pharisee.

6 November

Lk 16:1-8

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

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

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

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

Jesus remarked that worldly people are more shrewd than people of the light (the disciples). We tend to be sharp when it comes to money, but slow and vague when it comes to matters of the spirit. Someone who is financially savvy is considered the very opposite of a fool. But Luke turns this precisely on its head.

7 November

Lk 16:9-15

*Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God."*

For 'dishonest wealth', older translations had 'the Mammon of iniquity'. It was hard to understand why we are being told to make friends with it. But when you look closely you see that we are not being told to be friends *with* it, but to make friends *by means of it*. This is what the manager did with his master's wealth. Newer translations (including the present one) avoids all that confusion.

There the clarity ends. What follows the parable is a list of barely consistent applications. A scholar says that it represents "early Christian moralising," an assortment of attempts (the first of many) to make sense of this rather unedifying story.

When interpreting parables we should restrict our attention to the single point that the parable makes. But what is that point in this case? Be astute: that's one. But then there follow all the others in today's reading! Which one did Jesus intend?

Someone said (in relation to philosophical texts) that the meaning of a text is the history of its meaning. In other words, it means all the things that people have ever thought it to mean. This seems a very unruly principle, like a hedge grown wild. But it's not as bad as it sounds: 1. our Christian instinct will be a fairly reliable guide in excluding any unchristian interpretations; and 2. it means that we really respect and listen to every interpretation it has ever received. (And that means respecting the people who went before us.)