GOSPEL COMMENTARIES

1 May [St Joseph]
Jn 3:16-21

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

“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it.” It is much easier to condemn the world than to save it, much easier to say what you disapprove of than to go and help.

For a couple of years I was receiving a newsletter from an extreme right-wing group of Catholics. The contents were pure poison: slander, calumny, detraction – all the vices whose names we learned in the penny Catechism. The local bishop was the special object of their hate. I frequently asked them to remove my name from their mailing list, but the hateful thing kept coming. A friend told me how to deal with it: don’t write ‘Return to sender’ on the envelope; write ‘Refused’. The senders then have to pay the return post! I did so, and it never came again. (Even wickedness has its price: in that case, the price of a stamp.) That group is probably still condemning everyone... but not to me.

It is easier to condemn than to do good. “In the evening of life you will be examined in love,” said John of the Cross. What you have condemned won't figure on the exam-paper at all – it’s the wrong subject. “Those who believe in him are not condemned,” John wrote... except that he didn't write English. He would be astonished at some of our uses of the word 'belief'. We speak, for example, about ‘nominal believers’. For John, such couldn't exist. Nor, I think, for earlier speakers of English. The word ‘belief’ comes from an old word, ‘lief’, used by Shakespeare but now obsolete, meaning ‘love’. There cannot be real belief without love. If John were to come back he might say to us, “Don’t tell me what you ‘believe'; tell me what you love.”
Jesus said, ‘The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobedys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath.’

“The Father loves the Son and has entrusted everything into his hands.” There are many similar phrases in John’s gospel. “The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he is doing” (5:20). “Jesus knew that the Father had put everything into his hands” (13:3). All that the Father has is mine” (16:15). “Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you” (17:7). The Son in turn gives everything to the Father, “All I have is yours, and all you have is mine” (17:10).

Jesus, in turn, has given us everything, “I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father” (15:15). “The glory you have given me, I have given them” (17:22).

The word ‘everything’ seems to be God’s kind of word; and the word ‘all’. It was the fundamental command, the ‘Schema Israel’, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut 6:5). God is not interested in how much it amounts to, so long as it is everything: the widow’s mite was “all she had to live on” (Mk 12:44). We may not have much, but we have everything! When we give everything we have we are being drawn into the life of the Trinity.
3 May [Sts Philip and James, apostles]

Jn 14:6-14

If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’ Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

Philip put words on the deepest and the universal human aspiration: to see God. In ancient times Moses said to God (Exod 33:18ff), “Show me your glory, I beg you.” And God replied, “I will let all my splendour pass in front of you...but you cannot see my face. Human beings cannot see me and live.... You must stand on the rock and when my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with my hand while I pass by. Then I will take my hand away and you shall see the back of me; but my face is not to be seen.”

But now in a new age, Jesus says to Philip, “Whoever sees me sees the Father.” Jesus is the face of God turned to us. We see God in him, to the very limit of our seeing. In John's gospel, Philip was the first person to whom Jesus said, “Follow me!” (Jn 1:45). It was somehow appropriate that it should be to Philip that Jesus made this profound revelation.

James, the other apostle whose feast is today, was kin to Jesus. He may well have been among the members of the family who didn't believe in him (Jn 7:5, “his brothers spoke like this because they didn't believe in him”). But, if so, he changed radically: James appears in Acts as the leader of the Christians in Jerusalem.
4 May
Jn 6:16-21

When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

As in other cultures, water had a double meaning for the Jews of old: it was both a benign and a destructive element. God is “a fountain of living water” (Jer 2:13); but on the other hand, the enemy can be “like an overflowing torrent” (Jer 47:2). They especially feared the chaos of the sea, which brought remembrance of the Deluge.

The associations were likely to have been of the second kind for the disciples caught in a storm at night on the Sea of Galilee. Then Jesus appeared “walking on the sea.” They were terrified, but he said, “Don’t be afraid, it is I.” It Greek, the words are ‘ego eimi’, “I am.” This recalls the divine “I am” of Exod 3:14. A constant theme in the Old Testament is the power of God over the sea. It was by such power that he delivered them from the Egyptians in the Exodus. Clearly John wants this association to be present to the reader.

What meaning can this strange story have for us today? This one occurs to me: the Lord can come to us in the least likely medium. We seat ourselves on the solid ground of common sense and logic, but he is well able to do without them.
5 May [3rd Sunday of Easter]
Jn 21:1-19

Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you."

They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

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

There on the shore of the lake Jesus asked Peter three times, “Do you love me?” People like to connect this with Peter’s triple denial of Jesus: he was being given a chance to undo the damage, layer by layer. In addition, something else is happening in the original language, something that doesn’t appear in English. There are several words for ‘love’ in Greek. Look at two of them. ‘Philein’ means to love someone as a friend; ‘agapan’ means to love someone in the distinctive way that Jesus loved: unselfishly, creatively, unconditionally, endlessly. This second kind is mysteriously deeper and wider than the first, because it doesn’t depend on like-mindedness as friendship does; it can even reach out to include one’s enemies. Now, Jesus
first asked Peter, ‘Agapas me?’ (Do you love me with this kind of love?) Peter replies, ‘Philo se’. (I love you as a friend.) The second time the words are the same. But the third time, Jesus asks him, “Phileis me?” And Peter answers as before, ‘Philo se’.

Peter wasn’t yet able to love Jesus in that heroic way; he could love him only as the friend he had known for three years. But the third time around, Jesus steps down, as it were, to accept what Peter was able to offer at that time.

Can we put it this way: all forms of love and friendship are capable of advancing gradually towards ‘agapè’, the heroic kind of love Jesus shows. (It is pronounced ‘agga-pay’). How do we go along that road? **By doing the best we can at the time.** Peter was not able to rise to heroic love on that occasion. But he understood friendship. Friendship is the best rehearsal for agapè. It is a deep mystery in itself. “I have called you friends,” Jesus said (John 15:15). But agapè is even deeper.

Peter’s first instinct, once he had turned his back on Jesus, was to go back to the past. Like Jonah he set off in the wrong direction. But also like Jonah he didn’t get very far; God’s mercy caught up with him. Then when he was brought face to face with Jesus he couldn’t quite grasp what was being brought into. He would have to be dragged into the future. "When you grow old you will stretch out your hands and somebody else will put a belt around you and take you where you would rather not go” (verse 18).

Peter’s task was to let himself be dragged into the future, even though all his instincts rebelled against it. He is a sign to every believer. My temperament may try to drag me into the past, persuading me to call cowardice by some fancy name: faith, or safety, or responsibility, or fidelity…. But there before me stands the humble figure of Peter, the crowing cock by his side. If the compassion of Christ extends to him it extends to me too. If Christ trusts him to feed his lambs, his sheep, he trust me too.

In early Christian art Peter was always portrayed with the crowing cock beside him; this identified him. It was to give courage to the many Christians who had buckled under persecution and, like Peter, had betrayed the Lord. If he was received with mercy by Christ, so, they knew, would they be received. But in later times, when the Church turned to ways of power, Peter was portrayed holding the keys of the Kingdom.

St Paul knew the paradoxical ways of God: "When I am weak," he wrote, “then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10). It is true of Peter too. Peter was told by Jesus, "Strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32). It is in his very weakness that he does it.
The next day the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there. They also saw that Jesus had not got into the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.” Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

“You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” We tend to approach everything and everyone, looking for our needs to be met. This is to be a beggar. It will certainly fall to us at times to be beggars, but we don't need to become full-time beggars. If we always come to Jesus only looking for our needs to be met, we are calling ourselves his beggars, not his brothers and sisters—God's beggars, not God's children. We are invited to come to Jesus to see the glory of God, and to God to do God's will.

In John's gospel, miracles are not so much acts of compassion (as in the other gospels) as signs of the glory of Christ. A sign points away from itself, but people weren't interested in looking beyond, he said. This is a distinctive theme of John's gospel. John's gospel was written many years after the others, and his aim was not just to recount the deeds that Jesus did (they were already familiar from oral tradition and from the other gospels) but to try further to discern their meaning. When John recounts a miracle by Jesus he follows up with a long discourse to clarify its meaning. The feeding of the five thousand, for example, is followed in today's (and tomorrow's) reading by a discourse on the Bread of Life. The healing of the blind man goes with Jesus' claim to be the Light of the World (chapter 9). The raising of Lazarus goes with his claim to be the resurrection and the life (chapter 11).

The feeding of the crowd has a deeper meaning. Jesus wants to point to a deeper hunger and thirst in us than the obvious ones. "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water" (John 4:10); "My food is to do the will of him who sent me" (John 4:34).
7 May
Jn 6:30-35
The crowd said to Jesus, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

They said, “What sign are you going to give us then?” But he had just given them a sign! — a sign that impressed them so much that they wanted to make him king (verse 15). How are we to understand this?

When you look at the original you notice that the verbs are in the present tense, not in the future as this and other translations have it. So the people do not seem to be asking for another sign, but rather for the meaning of the sign he had just given: “What is this sign you are giving us…? Explain what you are doing!” They themselves are comparing his sign with that of Moses, who likewise produced food in the wilderness. Some Jews saw Moses as a king, so these are suggesting that Jesus should allow them to make him king (verse 15).

Jesus replied, “I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.” Again the question of tenses: in this case Jesus shifts their statement about Moses from the past to the present tense. The real provider of bread in the desert was God, and it is the same God (“my Father”) who in the present moment is providing bread for his people. But Jesus is more than a provider of bread like Moses; he is himself the bread that the Father is providing.

Like the Samaritan woman (chapter 4), they misinterpreted his statement, thinking he was talking about bread in the ordinary sense, just as she thought he was talking only about well-water. Later on, when they realised he was referring to himself, and not to bread, they were rather disappointed: “They began to complain about him because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven’” (verse 41).

Including this instance, Jesus uses the phrase “I am…” seven times in John’s gospel: I am the bread of life (6:35); I am the light of the world (8:12; 9:5); I am the gate (10:7, 9); I am the Good Shepherd (10:11, 14); I am the resurrection and the life (11:25); I am the way, the truth and the life (14:6); I am the true vine (15:1, 5). It has an echo of God’s ‘I am’ in Exodus 3:14. Jesus himself is God’s present tense, God’s ‘I am’. 
Jn 6:35-40

Jesus said to crowd, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. 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.”

“Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,” he said. But they had come, and they were hungry! They had followed him up the mountain (John 6:3), bringing no food, and they were starving.

As always in John’s gospel, there is another layer of meaning. The food they had eaten was real enough, but it symbolised another kind of food that he was providing for another kind of hunger. “I am the bread of life,” he said. I am what satisfies the deepest needs of humanity. I am the most intimate reality in your life: as intimate to you, as sustaining, as the food in your mouth. I am the one who keeps your awareness bright like a lamp, your heart warm, your will healthy, strong and gentle. I am the one who enables you to raise your eyes, to see beauty and glory in the world, and to open the eye of your spirit till you see God....

In a bookshop I saw the old penny catechism, which I hadn't seen in many years. Someone with an excess of nostalgia had it republished. It was strange to turn those pages again. The words were familiar, and somehow terrible – less for what they said than for what they didn’t say. In the first section, which dealt with God, God was described as Creator and Lord of all things, who rewards the good and punishes the wicked. ‘He’ was well positioned to do this, since he “sees our most secret thoughts and actions.” There was no mention that God loved us – still less that God was love. I was suddenly aware of how damaged many of us were by that catechism. There was no knowledge of God in it. “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8). Mischief isn't only in what you say, it is also in what you fail to say. To fail to say, in a section specifically on God, that God is love, or that God loves us, is to show oneself to have been untouched by the New Testament.

“Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,” he said. That catechism left many starving, and it is not surprising that many starved to death spiritually. Today's gospel reading merits long meditation.
9 May
Jn 6:44-51

No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

“No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father,” he said. We cannot do it for ourselves – or for anyone else. It is a work of grace, God’s attractive power, not human pushing. In other times it was believed that we could be pushed into faith, or at least pushed towards it. But being pushed makes a person resist. It has often been said that if good were forbidden, more people would do it. The best way to move a person is to attract rather than push: we are more easily drawn from in front than driven from behind.

St Augustine commented on this verse, “He did not say lead, but draw. This ‘violence’ is done to the heart, not to the body....Believe and you come; love and you are drawn. Do not suppose here any rough and uneasy violence. It is gentle, it is sweet; it is the sweetness that draws you. Is not a sheep drawn when fresh grass is shown to it in its hunger? Yet I imagine that it is not driven bodily on, but bound by desire. In this way too you come to Christ: do not imagine long journeying; in the very place where you believe, there you come. For to him who is everywhere we come by love, not by sailing.”

Attraction is always less clear and often appears less satisfactory than compulsion, but that’s our life. Jesus rejected the way of compulsion and chose the way of love. It’s messier than any other, sometimes almost chaotic. But the wisdom of the Gospel tells us it is the only one that has no trap built into it.
The Jews disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

How would this be for a programme of life: see every object as if it were your own body; see every person as if he or she were yourself? It would make a great difference to your life! – even if you experienced it only momentarily. Even if you experienced it only once, you would know from that moment what our life can be.

There’s a halfway step: treat every object with much care, as if it were your own property; treat every person as if he or she were your sibling.

Jesus did not say: think about me, talk about me; he said “eat my flesh, drink my blood.” If I have done that, then when I think or talk, it will be his word sounding in me. Eating and drinking are about assimilation. We are assimilated to Christ, we are his body. St Paul comes back to this teaching again and again. Here are a few instances: “Christ is the head of the body, the Church” (Colossians 1:18). “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another” (Romans 12:4-5). “For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

To live out this teaching is the Christian’s programme of life. We have been attempting the halfway step I mentioned above. It is very commendable, but it doesn’t go beyond a moralistic method. We are invited, by the faith we profess, to go the whole way.
11 May  
Jn 6:60-69

Many of the disciples said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Commenting on John’s gospel, St John Chrysostom (347 AD – 407) wrote, “When questioning about the ‘how’ comes in, there comes in with it unbelief.” Is faith capable of standing up to careful scrutiny? Defenders of faith usually say a defiant yes, while unbelievers say an equally defiant no. Perhaps this puts it too simply.

I have a friend who is a karate expert. I once asked him how he could smash a concrete block with his forehead without injuring himself. “I can do it because I don't doubt,” he replied immediately. A doubt, a hesitation, a shadow of fear: these are all forms of withdrawal, he said. When part of your mind is withdrawing while the other part is trying to push ahead, there is an inner civil war and consequent self-defeat. It is not the concrete block that defeats you, but you yourself. If you were to quote John Chrysostom’s saying to such a man, he would nod his head in agreement.

Faith is more like karate than it is like a philosophy. (There is more to it than this, but I am saying this for the purpose of comparison only.) It is often treated in academic circles, even by its defenders, as a kind of weak philosophy, an imprecise theory of everything. But it is first and foremost a manner of living. Jesus had little time for explanations. When Nicodemus asked him how a grown man could be born again, he didn’t say, “Let me explain it to you.” He said “Unless one is born again…” (John 3:5). And when asked how he could give his body as food, he provided no explanation; again he simply said, “Unless you eat…” (John 6:53). In each case he just placed the mystery there once again.

Does this mean that we stiffen up when people ask for an explanation of some matter in the faith? (They are quite entitled to explanations of church policy!) No, explanations are fascinating; we have to follow them in order to see the point where they fail. They are at their best at the very point of failure; that is where they really have something to teach us. They are a little like koans in Zen. But don't attempt to do theology without faith – you could hurt your head!
12 May [4th Sunday of Easter]
Jn 10:27-30

Jesus said: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."

"The Father and I are one." Jesus is not saying this in a weak sense: he is not just saying that he and the Father are of like mind, etc. Had his hearers understood him in this sense they would not have taken up stones to kill him. The union of Jesus with the Father is the inexhaustible mystery of our Faith.

It is not only about Jesus; it has to do with us too. He is "the first-born of many brothers and sisters," "He is the head, we are the body." He came into the world not for himself but for us. In our age the individual is supreme: the individual is seen as the sole bearer of meaning. So when it comes to thinking about Jesus we are inclined to see him too as simply an individual - a totally exceptional one, to be sure, but still an individual. That could not be a full account of Jesus. When he says 'I' we are in the picture too.

In 1943 Pius XII wrote an encyclical letter called Mystici Corporis, The Mystical Body of Christ. In it he said, "Some people through vain fear, look upon so profound a doctrine as something dangerous, and so they shrink from it as from the beautiful but forbidden fruit of paradise...." But, he added, "Mysteries revealed by God cannot be harmful to us, nor should they remain as treasures hidden in a field, useless."

This, of course, was not a new teaching. St Paul comes back to it again and again. Here are a few instances:
- "Christ is the head of the body, the church" (Colossians 1:18)
- "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another" (Romans 12:4-5)
- For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13) St Paul's was not a lone voice. Pius XII adds, "The unbroken tradition of the Fathers from the earliest times teaches that the Divine Redeemer and the Church which is His Body form but one mystical person, that is to say, the whole Christ."

The saints and mystics down the ages have tried to draw us back to this depth of our Faith. Meister Eckhart had an overpowering sense of the union of every Christian with God in Christ. This was the passion of Eckhart's life. He and others like him have the power to rescue Christians from excessive individualism in our thinking and in our practice, and to restore us to an awareness of the Mystical Body of Christ. "The soul is one with God and not united. Here is a simile: if we fill a tub with water, the water in the tub is united but not one with it, for where there is water there is no wood, and where there is wood there is no water. Now take the wood and immerse it in the water. The wood is still only united and not one (with the water). It is different with the soul: she becomes one with God and not united, for where God is, there the soul is and where the soul is, there God is."

This is strange language - "one with God and not united" - but when people speak about this mystery their language is bound to seem strange. Clearly he did not mean that there was no difference in being between the soul and God, but that they were one in love. Julian of
Norwich in the same century (the 14th) wrote, "I saw no difference between God and our substance: but as it were all God; and yet my understanding took it that our substance is in God: that is to say, that God is God, and our substance is a creature in God."

These texts that I quoted are not the language of scientists or philosophers; they are the language of love.
13 May  
Jn 10:1-10

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Today is known as ‘Good Shepherd Sunday’, and each year the gospel reading focuses on some aspect of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. This year (Year A) it is “I am the gate of the sheepfold” (Jn 10:1-10). Year B: “The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep” (Jn 10:11-18). Year C: “My sheep hear my voice … I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish” (Jn 10:27-30).

When Jesus said, “All who came before me are thieves and bandits,” he can hardly have meant to include the great prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel…. But there were plenty of his contemporaries who deserved to be described as spiritual thieves and bandits. They are always a plentiful species – or ‘we’ if the hat fits. The expression ‘a wolf in sheep’s clothing’ we owe to Aesop, whose stories have delighted and instructed children and adults alike for 25 centuries. “A wolf found great difficulty in getting at the sheep owing to the vigilance of the shepherd and his dogs. But one day it found the skin of a sheep that had been flayed and thrown aside, so it put it on over its own pelt and strolled down among the sheep. The lamb that belonged to the sheep, whose skin the wolf was wearing, began to follow the wolf in the sheep’s clothing; so, leading the lamb a little apart, he soon made a meal of her.”

A deceiver has to look like the real thing – has to look and sound genuine. Otherwise he will deceive nobody. Someone can quote and preach the Gospel to you, making all the right sounds and looking very serious, while robbing you spiritually – robbing you even of the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit in you: your real wisdom, your understanding…your fortitude…your joy…. Jesus gives the Spirit, the deceiver steals it away. You are in far less danger from someone who doesn’t sound in the least like a Christian.

The genuine shepherd “goes ahead of the sheep and they follow him.” Perhaps that is the key to discernment. Does your shepherd go before you into the crises and the mysteries, or does he tell you what to do and then just look on? Would he suffer for you? Would he lay down his life – or even just his pride, or a generous measure of his time – for you? If he is reluctant to do this, then beware of him, even though he may utter all the right sounds and be wearing what is called in Irish the cóta bán Chríost – ‘the white garment of Christ’, sacred ordination.
14 May [St Mathias, apostle]

Jn 15:9-17

Jesus said, ‘As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.’

Matthias might seem to have arrived when it was all over. After the Ascension he was chosen by lot to fill the place left by Judas’s defection. Peter made a speech: ‘“One of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us – one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection….”’ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles” (Acts 1:15-26).

It might seem that he arrived late, but in fact he was part of it from the very beginning of Jesus’ public life till the end; however, he is not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament. He played second fiddle – a vital position. And just as he came from obscurity he vanished into it again. There was an apocryphal tradition that he preached the Gospel in Ethiopia, but it cannot be substantiated. And there was a lost apocryphal Gospel of Matthias, mentioned by Origen and other early Christian writers.

It would be interesting to know more, but when you have said that someone was a disciple of Jesus you have said the essential thing.
Jesus cried aloud: “Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge, for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me.”

Jesus constantly referred beyond himself: “whoever sees me sees the one who sent me.” Light does that; it is invisible in itself, but it makes everything else visible.

But “the one who sent me,” the Father, is also invisible! — the Father who “lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see” (1 Timothy 6:14-16). Clearly, light is just a metaphor for God. It is a particularly good one: in fact the word ‘divinity’ comes, they tell us, from a Sanskrit root meaning ‘to shine’. But it is still just a metaphor.

St Augustine wrote a very clear paragraph about it. “Urged to reflect upon myself, I entered under your [God’s] guidance the innermost places of my being; but only because you had become my helper was I able to do so. I entered, then, and with the vision of my spirit, such as it was, I saw the changeless light far above my spiritual ken and transcending my mind: not this common light which every carnal eye can see, nor any light of the same order; but greater, as though this common light were shining much more powerfully, far more brightly, and so extensively as to fill the universe. The light I saw was not the common light at all, but something different, utterly different, from all those things. Nor was it higher than my mind in the sense that oil floats on water or the sky is above the earth; it was exalted because this very light made me, and I was below it because by it I was made. Anyone who knows truth knows this light.”

This light is now our birthright. Still darkness clings to us, or rather we cling to it. We are not imprisoned; we imprison ourselves. Milton wrote somewhere about being one’s own dungeon. Like creatures kept too long in the dark, we are afraid of the light and of the open spaces. We cannot be forced out, because the dungeon is ourselves — we would bring it with us. But we are invited and charmed and coaxed out by the one who called himself “the light of the world.”
16 May
Jn 13:16-20
Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfil the scripture, ‘The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.’ I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he. Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.”

We have now reached a turning-point in John's gospel. Jesus' public ministry is finished, and he is entering the phase of his passion and death. A scholar wrote, "In the first part of the gospel, which here closes, Jesus lives in complete obedience to the Father; in the second part he will die in the same obedience."

We are at the Last Supper, and he has just washed the disciples' feet. This reversed the normal practice: it was a courtesy for a disciple to wash a rabbi's feet. Particularly because of the moment in which it was done, this was a very compelling teaching. Like the Eucharist, it was to be remembered forever. In John's gospel there is no account of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. Instead there is the washing of feet. When Jesus sat down again he said, in approximately similar words, "Do this in memory of me." It is the Eucharist overflowing into practice.

The feet are the lowliest part of the body in a literal sense, and the farthest away from the head! They are willing to go where hands would disdain to go; and when we touch something with the foot we haven't really established any personal contact with it. Yes, the feet are the most disowned part of the body. Yet they are our most fundamental and on-going contact with reality! And they are not the insensitive clods that they may appear to be: they are so highly sensitive that a foot-massage affects the whole body.

“If I do this for you,” he said, “so should you for one another.” The washing of feet stands symbolically for every lowly service we can perform for one another. The persons at the receiving end of such services can sometimes seem insensitive and ungrateful...but, as with feet, there can be sensitivity where we least expect it.
17 May  
Jn 14:1-6

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

The metaphor of ‘path’ is universal in spirituality. It is so deeply embedded that it scarcely seems a metaphor at all. The metaphor easily extends itself into ‘climbing’, and gives us the titles of many classics: The Ascent of Mount Carmel (St John of the Cross), The Ladder of Perfection (Walter Hilton), A Ladder of Four Rungs (a 15th-century translation of a book by Guigo II), etc.

In this passage Jesus spoke of a ‘place’. This too is a metaphor, of course. Eternal life has no geographical location. He also spoke of the path (the “way”) in this passage: “You know the way to the place....” But ‘place’ is a metaphor we should not pass over.

Metaphors are not strictly true or false in the way that literal speech is. For this reason they don't exclude one another – as is clear from the way Jesus used two apparently opposite ones in the same sentence.

Let’s dwell for a moment on the metaphor of place. The ‘place’ of spirituality is always here, this place – just as the time is always now. Are we not already here now? Yes and no. Physically I am always ‘here’, and the time is always ‘now’. But in every other way I can be simply absent. From this angle, spiritual development is less like making a journey than waking up from a dream. In the dream you are in San Francisco or in Paris. But to come back to reality you don’t need to book a flight, you don’t have to travel at all. All you need is someone’s elbow in your ribs!

An older translation had “In my Father’s house there are many mansions.” The word comes from Latin manere, to remain. ‘Mansion’ means a place where you stay and don't move. In a hyper-active age it is helpful to be reminded not to move. Meister Eckhart: “People say: ‘Alas, sir, I wish I stood as well with God or had as much devotion and were as much at peace with God as others are…. I can never manage it unless I am there or there, or do this or that; I must get away from it all, or go and live in a cell or a cloister.’ In fact, the reason lies entirely with yourself and with nothing else. It is self-will, though you may not know it or believe it.... Though we may think one should flee these things or seek those things – places or people or methods, or company or deeds – this is not the reason why methods or things hold you back: what prevents you is you yourself in the things, for you have a wrong attitude to things. Begin therefore with yourself and forget yourself.”
18 May
Jn 14:7-14
If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

“Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied!” One should hope so! There is nothing beyond. But perhaps what John had in mind was the echo with a passage in Exodus. There Moses said to God, “Show me your glory, I pray,” which the Septuagint translates, “Show me yourself” (Exodus 33:18). God’s reply was, “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” But Jesus’ reply to Philip stands in perfect contrast to this: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

This was a clear expression of Jesus’ intimacy with the Father. He cannot be understood apart from his relationship with his Father: “I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” On another occasion he said, “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30). But he never said, “I am the Father.” Between him and his Father is a vital relationship, and also a vital distinction.

Without imagining that we ‘explaining’ Jesus and the Father, we can say that this is what personal life is like. Inanimate things can fuse together as an amorphous whole, but union in personal life retains all vital distinctions. There is union, and simultaneously difference. Some holy person once said, “God and I are not one and we are not two.” How do we understand this? Try and figure it out! According to the head we are two; according to the heart we are one. Is that the answer? An answer can be too clear. I think we can answer it really only with our life, not with words.

“The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do.” ‘Faith’ and ‘works’ together in one phrase! There have been centuries of argument about these words. It’s clear, though, that Jesus is not referring to some sort of manipulative strategies on our part, but to action that flows directly from faith. Without such action there would be no evidence of life. As Paul put it, “the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6).

“In fact, [they] will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” Jesus’ greatest work is still to come: his death, resurrection, ascension, and his sending the Spirit. That Spirit will be poured out on them in abundance at Pentecost. Johann Tauler said, “Imagine the Rhine in flood, with all the dams and barriers cleared away. How it would come rushing down in full stream, overflowing its banks as if to drown and submerge everything, filling all the valleys and meadows in its way! That is just how the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and all those whom He found ready to receive Him. And so He still does, unceasingly at every moment.”
19 May [5th Sunday of Easter]
Jn 13:31-35
When Judas had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The following is an extract from a poem written in 1948 by the American poet Jessica Powers. I picked it because it is about love (a theme of today's Mass) – a subject that is so easy to write badly about, so hard to write well about. It takes its title from the first words: "My heart ran forth." It ran forth propagating a wonderful ideal of love for everybody to follow.

But wisdom halted it, out far afield,
asked: did you sow this seed
around your house, or in the neighbour's garden
or any nearby acreage of need?
No? then it will not grow in outer places.
Love has its proper soil, its native land;
Its first roots fasten on the near-at-hand.

Back toward the house from which I deftly fled,
down neighbours' lanes, across my father's barley
my heart brought home its charity. It said:
love is a simple plant like a Creeping Charlie;
Once it takes root its talent is to spread.

How well she captured it! - the tendency in all of us to place love (and all the things that challenge us) at a distance. We place them at a distance (1) in time, or (2) in place.
1. We are always willing to postpone good things, someone said, but bad things we do right away! We would like to postpone faith, hope and love: to put them over the horizon and into the future. But fear, greed and anger we attend to at once. Love is one of the good things: the very best, St Paul said ("the greatest of these is love." 1 Cor. 13:13). So we tend to postpone it. But somewhere deep in us there is the wisdom to know that love is for now or never.
2. And we wouldn't mind loving people who are at a safe distance, as Jessica Powers let us see. When I love I make myself vulnerable. But if I am afraid of that I won't love. I will dream and sentimentalise instead. "But sure, a body's bound to be a dreamer / When all the things he loves are far away," said the sickly song.

If only we could do the good things now, and postpone the bad things! What a world it would be if our love were as quick and as warm and as long-lasting as our hate. A wise man said a startling thing to me once: "There's no future!" I thought he was expressing despair about the country or the modern world…. But he didn't seem at all a despairing kind of person; quite the contrary. "There's no future," he repeated cheerfully. "The future exists only in your head, nowhere else. It is only an idea. So don't tell me what you're going to do in the future. Tell me what you're doing now." Who am I? What am I? I am what I'm doing now. If I don't love the people and the things around me now I am not a loving person and I can have nothing to say about love.
We don't say, "Give us tomorrow our daily bread." We want real bread, not an idea of bread. Real things are for now. And God, too, is for now. If I don’t love now I know nothing about God. "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love," wrote St John (1 John 4:8).

The poem didn’t compare love to a dainty plant but to a common weed, a Creeping Charlie. It should be as ordinary as that, and as familiar, and as irrepressible! It is for everyday use, not just for Sundays.
20 May
Jn 14:21-26
Jesus said, “They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?” Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.
“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

The word ‘abide’ is used repeatedly in the part of John's gospel that we are reading at Mass these times (10 times in verses 1 to 10 of chapter 15). It is variously translated as ‘live’ and ‘remain’ and ‘make your home’. It is a beautiful word. It was a word much beloved of Meister Eckhart. He wrote, “It is not right to love God for His heaven's sake, or for the sake of anything at all; but we should love Him for the goodness that He is in Himself. For whoever loves him for anything else does not abide in Him, but abides in the thing he is loving Him for. If, therefore, you want to abide in Him, you must love Him for nothing but Himself.”

That is how a person behaves at home: we love the people there for their own sakes, not for what we can get from them. Saint Teresa of Ávila said she would like to close down both heaven and hell, so that people would do good for its own sake, not because of greed or fear, and would love God for God's own sake. That would be abiding in God.

Equally, the Trinity abides in us. “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” He promised too to send the Holy Spirit. This means that the Trinity lives in us. And we in the Trinity.

How did we get the idea that God was distant from us? I suppose it was because many people spoke to us about God and neglected to mention that “God is love”. Love brings near. Fear separates, it makes you want to run away. How terrible that we run away from our very Source like frightened animals! How terrible that we feel like strangers and exiles from our own home, our abode.

In the immortal story that Jesus told about the Prodigal Son, the father saw his son “while he was yet a long way off…and was moved to pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly.” Then he gave him the best robe and put a ring on his finger. This ring symbolised that he was a true son, and not a servant as he wanted to be. That was Jesus describing God our Father. How then could we ever have imagined that God was distant from us? Even when we try to make ourselves distant from God, God remains close to us. To quote Meister Eckhart again, “You need not seek Him here or there, God is no further than the door of your heart; there He stands patiently awaiting whoever is ready to open up and let Him in. No need to call to Him from afar: He can hardly wait for you to open up. He longs for you a thousand times more than you long for Him.”

‘Abide’. It is a word you might use to describe what you are doing in meditation: you are abiding, you are making your home in Christ, you are within his mind. You are in God and God is in you. You are in your true home.
21 May
Jn 14:27-3
Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way.

In the Scriptures peace is always much more than a cessation of hostilities. It is a right relationship with God and with others – with others because with God. In this picture, there is no peace if there is no peace with God. But we often settle for less, calling it peace: if we are not actually fighting we say we are at peace. We always say that war “breaks out,” implying it was always there, dormant, within us, just waiting to cross over into action. Why not talk about peace breaking out? Of course it can only break out if it is first within us. But it is. “Peace I leave with you,” Jesus said, “My peace I give to you.”

The Jews of old (and still today) say, “Shalom!” – which means, “Peace!” This fine greeting too can become superficial unless we see some depth of God in it. It was not just a vague wish for the other person, “Don’t worry, be happy!” It was a prayer for full harmony with God – for salvation. Here is the original text in which Jews were told to greet and bless one another with ‘Peace’: “Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them, ‘The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace” (Numbers 6:22-26). This is a wonderful blessing, worth learning by heart, and using bravely on special occasions (instead of “Good luck!”). It is a prayer for “the peace that the world cannot give.”

An elderly German lady once asked me how we say “Grüß Gott!” in English. “We say, ‘Hello!’” I said. She looked at me in disbelief. “That is not a greeting!” she announced. “That is something one says at a microphone to see if it is working!” God has to be in our greetings, she said; otherwise they are nothing but empty words.
22 May
Jn 15:1-8

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Does society exist for the benefit of its members, as Herbert Spencer believed, or the members for the benefit of society? If you say the first, you seem to be setting the stage for complete individualism; but if you say the second are you not sponsoring fascism? So which is it going to be?

We spontaneously assume that questions are perfectly clear and correctly put, and that only answers can be true or false. (This assumption may have something to do with our early schooling.) But there can be false questions, and the question above is surely false. It is like asking whether your head is for the benefit of your body, or your body for the benefit of your head. In a living organism everything is for the benefit of everything else. The question assumes a false opposition.

St Paul said Jesus is the head of his body, the Church; he is the head, we the bodily members (see Colossians 1:18). We cannot be divided from the head and retain any life at all. Nor can a member separated from the body remain alive. A living body is an organism, not a collection of parts. We have to be careful about the images we use to describe the Church. False separations creep in subtly. The image in today’s reading is even more striking than Paul’s: a vine and its branches. Unlike a tree, 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!
23 May
Jn 15:9-11
As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

It may seem strange to find the words 'love' and 'commandment' in the same sentence. That strangeness is evidence that they have been separated in our experience. But they are not necessarily separated in themselves. To take an illustration from far afield: in the Baha'i scriptures God says, “Know assuredly that my commandments are the lamps of my loving providence among my servants, and the keys of my mercy for my creatures.” This is similar to psalm 118, “Your law is a lamp for my steps and a light for my path.”

When we want to use a word to say something about God we should first take out the poison. There’s a fair chance that everyone has had people in authority over them who did not love them. That’s the source of the poison: the absence of love. But God is love (1 John 4:8; 4:16), so God’s commandments must be acts of love. Think of a key moment in your childhood when your father or your mother showed you how to do something. I remember such a moment vividly. When I think of my father I remember that moment, though he has been dead for thirty years. There were probably many such moments with both my parents, but this is the vivid one. I believe such moments have great healing power. Perhaps that’s why they were given us. One of the most damaged parts of us is the will, and probably the worst wounds we have sustained have been inflicted by the wounded wills of others.

Love is an act of the will, the mediaeval theologians said. By that they did not mean that it was a forced thing, but that it came from the most vital and focused part of a person. We need to ‘abide’ in the love of Christ. That’s the best intensive care unit for a badly mangled will.
24 May
Jn 15:12-17
This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

A wicked man, about to die, meets an angel at the gates to Hell. The angel says to him: "It is enough for you to have done one good thing in your life, and that will save you. Think hard." The man remembers that one time, as he was walking through a forest, he saw a spider in his path and detoured so as not to step on it. The angel smiles and a spider web comes down from the sky, allowing the man to ascend to Paradise. Others among the condemned take advantage of the web, and begin to make the climb. But the man turns on them and begins to push them off, fearing that the web will break. At that moment, it breaks, and the man is once again returned to Hell. "What a pity," he hears the angel say. "Your concern with yourself turned the only good thing you ever did into evil."

Jeanne Guyon, the 17th-century French mystic, wrote: "Those in the highest state of religious experience desire nothing except that God may be glorified in them by the accomplishment of His holy will. Nor is it inconsistent with this, that saintly people possess that natural love which exists in the form of self-love. But their natural love, which in its proper measure is innocent love, is so absorbed in the love of God, that it ceases, for the most part, to be a distinct object of consciousness; and practically and truly they may be said to love themselves in and for God. Adam, in his state of innocence, loved himself, considered as the image of God and living for God. So that we may either say, that he loved God in himself, or that he loved himself in and for God. And it is because saintly people, extending their affections beyond their own limit, love their neighbour on the same principle of loving, namely, in and for God, that they may be said to love their neighbours as themselves. It does not follow that just because our self-love is lost in the love of God, that we are to take no care and to exercise no watch over ourselves. None will be so seriously and constantly watchful over themselves as those who love themselves in and for God alone."

The ego requires fight if it is to exist. If it is not fighting it cannot exist. So even when there is no one there to fight with, you fight with someone in your mind. The ego isn’t in you; it is between you and another. It is nothing in you. In real love there is no ego, because there is no fight. Yet are lovers not often fighting? Yes. Their being longs for love, their egos long for fight; so they do both, by turns.
If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, “Servants are not greater than their master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.

There must be some dividend in hate; otherwise why would so many people invest so much time and energy in such a destructive passion? There is some secret satisfaction in hatred.

There’s nothing in this world so sweet as love,
And next to love the sweetest thing is hate. (Longfellow)

When you love, you lose yourself in some sense; you forget yourself, you take leave of the ego. But hatred strengthens the ego by strengthening the sense of separation. In a word, you feel you really exist when you hate; and perhaps this is the secret dividend. And there is an illusion of being equal to the thing you hate. It is a caricature of the equality in love. If you hate an individual, you appear to be that individual’s equal. If you hate a whole class of people, you are almost an archetype.

Love needs to understand hatred if it is to escape its contagion. Much of its work consists in dismantling structures of hatred. That means dismantling the ego, and that is dangerous work.
26 May [6th Sunday of Easter]
Jn 14:23-29

Jesus said, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

"We live in a numble abode," said Uriah Heep in David Copperfield. That was in 1850; I don't think anyone refers now to his or her house as an 'abode', humble or otherwise. But the word itself is interesting. It is related to 'abide'. You abide in an abode.

The word 'abide' is used repeatedly in the part of John's gospel that we are reading at Mass these times (10 times in verses 1 - 10 of chapter 15). It is variously translated as 'live' and 'remain' and 'make your home'. It is a beautiful word. It was a word much beloved of Meister Eckhart, the 14th-century German mystic. He wrote, "It is not right to love God for His heaven's sake nor for the sake of anything at all, but we should love Him for the goodness that He is in Himself. For whoever loves Him for anything else does not abide in Him, but abides in the thing he is loving Him for. If, therefore, you want to abide in Him, you must love Him for nothing but Himself."

That is how a person behaves at home: we love the people there for their own sakes, not because they are good-looking, or clever, nor for what we can get from them. St Teresa of Ávila said she would like to close down both heaven and hell, so that people would do good for its own sake, not because of greed or fear, and love God for God's own sake. That would be 'abiding in God.'

Equally, God abides in us - abides in our humble abode. "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." (the beginning of today's gospel reading). He promised too to send the Holy Spirit. This means that the Trinity lives in us. And we in the Trinity.

How did we get the idea that God was distant from us? I suppose it was because many people spoke to us about God and neglected to mention that "God is love"; and because many of them had little love for us themselves. Recently I found a copy of the Penny Catechism that was knocked into me in my childhood, and I saw that in the first chapter, which was about God, the word 'love' did not occur at all. God was described as Creator, Ruler, Punisher of evil, Rewarder of Good; but nowhere did it say that God loved us. Love brings near; fear separates, it makes you want to run away. How terrible that we run away from our very Source like frightened animals! How terrible that we feel like strangers and exiles from our own home, our abode.

In the immortal story that Jesus told about the Prodigal Son, the father saw his son "while he was yet a long way off...and was moved to pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly." Then he gave him the best robe and put a ring on his finger. This ring symbolised that he was a true son, and not a servant as he wanted to be. That was Jesus
describing God our Father. How then could we ever have imagined that God was distant from us? Even when we try to make ourselves distant from God, God remains close to us. Meister Eckhart, whom I quoted above, wrote, “You need not seek Him here or there, He is no further than the door of your heart; there He stands patiently awaiting whoever is ready to open up and let Him in. No need to call to Him from afar: He can hardly wait for you to open up. He longs for you a thousand times more than you long for Him.”

‘Abide’. It is a word you might use to describe what you are doing in contemplation: you are abiding, you are making your home in Christ, you are within his mind. You are in God and God is in you. You are in your true home.
27 May
Jn 15:26—16:4

“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning. ‘I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me. But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them. ‘I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you.’

‘We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,’ wrote Paul (1 Corinthians 1:23). What Christians proclaim is an event that has taken place, not a religious system or simply a ‘message’. ‘The New Testament,’ said a scholar, ‘is neither a collection of thoughtful essays nor an attempt to construct a system of ethics. It bears witness to a unique history, and it discovers the truth in the history.’ Paul once tried the way of sweet reason (Acts 17), but people only laughed at him. It may have been at that moment that he found his own voice. From that point on he would proclaim ‘Christ and him crucified,’ the event that was the life and death of Jesus.

This is why eyewitness and testimony are crucial. Philosophical arguments and theories, while they may propose faith to you, can never bring you there. Some people are hindered rather than helped by them. A scholarly lady said to a confrère of mine, “It was Aquinas’s proofs for the existence of God that brought me into the Church.” “I’m happy for you,” replied my friend, “they almost drove me out of it!” Philosophical arguments, by their very nature, express skepticism and chosen limits to what one is prepared to accept. In some periods of history there was a wide streak of rationalism in theology that alienated many and boxed up the faith in a suffocating system. Traces of this still exist. The faith is not plausible, and any account of it that makes it so is throwing away the kernel of it. There is nothing plausible about existence, or the world, or God, or the Incarnation, or the death of Jesus, or his resurrection.… What we proclaim is not a plausible account of life, a ‘philosophy for the millions,’ made palatable by striking images and stories, but a series of extraordinary events: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

“You are witnesses of these things,” said Jesus (Luke 28:48). This was spoken to “the eleven and their companions.” But ultimately it is spoken to every disciple. We are to witness what the Spirit, the ‘Advocate’, has witnessed to us in our hearts and in our lives, among the community of believers. We are to speak from experience.
28 May
Jn 16:5-11
Jesus said: “Now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.”

Here Jesus sounds more like a visitor than someone who took on our nature and became one of us forever. ‘It is to your advantage that I go away.” We have to try to understand how it is to our advantage. “If I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you,” he added. Rather than clarifying it, however, this makes it more obscure. How could ‘the continued presence of Jesus’ (which is what the Advocate or Paraclete means in John’s gospel) hinder the coming of the Spirit, the Paraclete?

In John’s gospel, the Paraclete is the continued presence of Jesus. Henceforth it is through the Spirit that we know Jesus. The Spirit, the ‘Advocate’, he said, “will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (Jn 14:26). Jesus is withdrawing his visible presence, but his Spirit remains with us.

“It is to your advantage that I go away,” he said. How is it an advantage? If we assemble a few ordinary experiences we may find an approach to it.

Every teacher, sooner or later, has to stand back. If a teacher stays at your side forever, there are important things you never learn: independence, mental courage, an inner vigour that can only come from taking your own risks…. In other words, you have to learn from your own experience, and that is what a good teacher always sends you back to in the end. Parents, too, have to learn to stand back. The children of parents with very strong personalities are often passive and weak. Whenever you see a powerful leader, look at what his leadership is doing to his followers. He may think he is “strengthening the brethren,” but this is exactly the blind spot of an extravert. Jesus has the wisdom to trust us, even though we make mistakes. He wants to inspire us from within, not to control us from without.

This Spirit, Jesus said, “will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment.” Richard Rohr’s comment on this: “What you thought was sin was only your own guilt, what you thought was righteousness was self-righteousness, what you thought was justice was only your instinct for vengeance.” These distinctions can only be learned from the inside.
29 May
Jn 16:12-15
“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

Someone said hindsight is always 20/20. But hindsight is what you don’t have at the time.

In simple matters of fact hindsight is a simple thing: you can see within the hour that you backed the wrong horse – or within seconds that you said the wrong thing. But in deeper matters, hindsight is a slow process of realisation. The Holy Spirit gives hindsight on Jesus. This is the Spirit working in us, the patient inner teacher, opening our minds slowly to the light that has long since come into the world. The Spirit guides us (hodegeo) along the way; it is Jesus who is the way (hodos) itself – indeed the truth itself (Jn 14:6).

“The Spirit will guide you into all truth,” that is, all the truth about God. The Son has revealed the Father, and now the Spirit will reveal the Father by revealing the Son. We are being attracted by the Spirit into the inner life of God.

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” The disciples to whom these words were addressed had the best of excuses for not having hindsight: the event had not taken place yet. The event was the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. They could not possibly have understood him at that time, except as a remarkable man.

When disciples of any age consider Jesus without the guidance of the Spirit, that is what they find: a remarkable man. There were so many boring things written in the 19th century about the ‘moral excellence’ of Jesus…. This would only get him a place among the Pharisees. It is the Spirit alone that can draw us into the mind of Jesus.
30 May [Ascension]
Lk 24:46-53
Jesus said, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

The Ascension does not receive even treatment in the gospels. It is not mentioned at all in Matthew’s or in John’s gospels. Mark mentions it, but the reference is in a portion of the gospel from a very late manuscript and it almost certainly relies on Luke’s account. Luke is the specialist, giving two accounts of it: in his gospel, and in the Acts of the Apostles.

How are we to reach some understanding of the Ascension? There is often something rather forlorn about leave-taking, and the Ascension is a leave-taking. Yet this one seems different: “they returned to Jerusalem with great joy….” You might take leave of an enemy but how can you take leave of a beloved friend with joy?

It is true that John’s gospel does not mention the Ascension, but in John’s account of the Last Supper Jesus makes this paradoxical statement: “I am going away, and I am coming to you” (John 14:28). How is one to understand this?

“I am going away, and I am coming to you.” It is a good thing indeed to have the mind stopped in its tracks: the mind is too clever by half, and it misses much by jumping to conclusions. That paradoxical statement makes us think about ‘presence’: what the word means for us. Seeing is really no guarantee of presence. If you doubt this, just think of the last person who looked right through you without seeing you. Many people looked right through Jesus. And many tried to look right through him - which is a way of wishing him absent. Seeing is capable of being a kind of presence, but that is all. Today our minds have become attuned to television; we want to ‘see’ everything. Yet, because television carries so much fictional material, when it portrays reality, reality becomes fictionalised. A phenomenon of our age is the number of actors who have become politicians. The distinction between dreaming and waking is no longer so clear. We are increasingly conscious that ‘The News’ is never actually neutral; it is somebody’s comment on what has happened. When you can move, within seconds, from witnessing an unspeakable tragedy to hearing the sports results, nothing seems quite real any more. Reality and entertainment are no longer separate categories. Seeing is no longer believing.

Jesus says he is going away and simultaneously coming. His going away is not purely and simply a separation; it is in some sense a coming nearer. How are we to approach this?

Every day we casually meet and part with many people, and for the most part it doesn’t churn up any deep feelings in us. But when we part with someone we love, that person somehow becomes spiritually all the more present. Their very absence makes them more present in our spirit. It often happens that we appreciate someone only when they have gone away. When they were present every day we hardly noticed them, or what we noticed were insignificant passing details. But when they have gone away we see them whole. ‘Not seeing’ may be closer than seeing.
Love is not a slave to appearances; it does not cling to the thoughts and images by which we try to master one another. It sets the other free, and it can see the other in the invisible. Jesus is more present, not less, in being ascended to the Father.
Jn 16:16-20
Jesus said: ‘A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.’ Then some of his disciples said to one another, ‘What does he mean by saying to us, “A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me”; and “Because I am going to the Father”? They said, ‘What does he mean by this “a little while”? We do not know what he is talking about.’ Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, ‘Are you discussing among yourselves what I meant when I said, “A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me”? Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy.’

The word for ‘a little while’ (mikron) is used seven times in this short passage. Something is about to happen soon, but they don’t know what. This is the way to be scared. They can tell that it has something to do with death: the word here for ‘mourn’ is a word that is used for grief at a death.

“You will have sorrow, but your sorrow will turn into joy.” He did not say it would be replaced by joy, but that it would turn into joy. Joy will not come by repressing sorrow but by allowing it to be transformed.

If I repress sorrow it does not go away; it is still there, working in me like a silent cancer, sapping my vitality from within. And my ‘joy’ will have a quality of desperation; it will only be a mask for fear, like whistling in the dark. I will be in the impossible situation of someone trying to run away from himself. It is only by looking into the heart of sorrow that I can find real joy. This contradicts common sense, but that is what you can expect from the Gospel.

The Resurrection happened in the tomb. This death-and-resurrection event, which we call the Paschal Mystery, is the heart of our faith, and if the heart isn’t beating, the body is dead. We have a lot of cheap knowledge: knowledge that has not been bought at the full price of experience. It is easy to sign up to a list of beliefs; it is as easy as saying ok. But everyone knows only one or two things really. We know the dying and rising of Christ to the extent that our own life is being shaped by it, no more, no less. The disciples made an honest admission, “We don’t know what he is talking about.” That is always the first step in understanding: to understand how little we know.
1 June
Jn 16:23-28

Jesus said: ‘On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete. ‘I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father. On that day you will ask in my name. I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father.’

“On that day” (that is, ‘when you see me again’, after the resurrection) “if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.” He is saying that our prayer should be addressed to the Father, but “in my name”, that is, in the presence of Jesus. This is the pattern of prayer in the Liturgy. The Eucharistic prayer is invariably addressed to the Father, “through him (Jesus), with him and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit.” All our prayer has the pattern of the Trinity stamped on it.

This does not mean that we should never pray to anyone but the Father. In the Catholic tradition we feel free to pray to Jesus, Mary and the saints, but always in the full knowledge that the Father is the ultimate destination of all prayer – just as every stream, even the raindrops streaming down your window pane, is making its way to the sea.

‘Ask the Father,’ Jesus said. If you put the emphasis on the word ‘ask’, you get words in different languages like pray, pregare, prier, beten – all of which mean ‘ask’. But one of the Irish words for prayer is ‘paidir’, which comes from the Latin ‘Pater noster’ (Our Father). The focus is firmly on the Father.

I once met an elderly lady in the Philippines who made it her apostolate to spread devotion to the Father. Everyone else, she said, has promoters and devotees of all kinds, “but the poor Father is totally neglected already!”
2 June [Ascension] [Gospel for 7th Sunday of Easter: see June 6]
Lk 24:46-53

Jesus said, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

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Love is not a slave to appearances; it does not cling to the thoughts and images by which we try to master one another. It sets the other free, and it can see the other in the invisible. Jesus is more present, not less, in being ascended to the Father.
3 June  
Jn 16:29-33  
Jesus’ disciples said, ‘Yes, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure of speech! Now we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you; by this we believe that you came from God.’ Jesus answered them, ‘Do you now believe? The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me. I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!’

It was not the first time that disciples claimed to have perfect understanding. Earlier in the gospel Peter had said, “We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (6:69). The same Peter also claimed to be ready to lay down his life for Jesus (13:37). Both claims proved to be more than a little premature.

Ignorance is bliss, we say. It is effortless and unlimited, a calm unruffled sea. But knowledge has narrow boundaries that are the cause of endless argument and conflict. Knowledge always drives you out of some kind of paradise and sets you against your brother. Then begins the long futile struggle to regain that infinite calm... by knowing everything. It is ultimately futile because everyone, even the most learned, remains ignorant – only about different things. And so the wisest words of all are “I don’t know.” Socrates wanted to know who was the wisest person in Athens. The Delphic Oracle said, “You are!” “That is impossible,” replied Socrates, “because I am aware that I know nothing.” “That,” said the Oracle, “is why you are the wisest person in Athens.”

Those disciples of Jesus thought they had finally understood everything about him. They were full of confidence – because they had not yet seen the cross. “The cross of Christ,” as Paul would see so clearly later on, “is foolishness,” but this foolishness is God’s wisdom. “Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world...? Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (I Cor 1:18-24). Before the crucifixion the disciples thought they finally had it all together, that they had Jesus in a kind of frame; but he promised them that they would be scattered. They would all be scattered until they were gathered again beyond the cross by the Risen Christ.

In the New Community, the Church, it is a new kind of knowledge that will hold them together: a knowledge that doesn't look like knowledge at all. The mystics through the ages have spoken of it from experience. “The mind is amazed at the extent of all it can understand,” wrote St Teresa of Avila, “for God wills it to realise that it understands nothing of what he represents to it.”
4 June
Jn 17:1-11
Jesus looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

“Now I am no longer in the world” (verse 11). Yet, a few verses later he will say, “I say these things while I am still in the world” (tomorrow’s reading, verse 13). He is and isn’t in the world; he is present and yet somehow he already seems far away. He is speaking in an in-between time.

What he said was heart-warming, but also mind-numbing. He was speaking of the relationships between the Father, the Son and the Spirit, and of the disciples within this divine mystery. It is the language of love: “you in me”, and “I in you,” and “they will be one,” and “they were yours and you gave them to me,” and “the words you gave me,” and “I have given them,” etc. A short time before, the disciples were assuring him that they understood him perfectly. This would certainly remove any remaining false clarity.

Clarity can become an idol. It can become a substitute for the truth. We have to struggle so hard through the dark forest that when we see the first clearing we imagine it must be our destination. I knew a meditation teacher who always used a particular phrase when he talked about meditation. The phrase was: “dark to the mind, luminous to the heart.” False clarity tries to get a “fix” on something, and is little interested in pursuing it any further. It is usually an expression of the will to control: I want to know my bearings exactly so that my mind will not be stretched. False or premature clarity is a great enemy of the truth, because it looks like it. Confusion only looks like confusion: there’s a truthfulness about it, and the truth will set me free. But false clarity will leave me pacing around inside a small space for the rest of my life. The mind is good at putting up fences and protecting them; it is the heart that strikes out beyond them.
5 June
Jn 17:11-19
Jesus said: 'Now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

The theme of conflict between the Christian disciple and the world is very clear in this passage. Raymond Brown remarked that a passage such as this has “a message for an era that becomes naively optimistic about changing the world or even about affirming its values without change.” The 'world' in this case is not, of course, the natural world of mountains, rivers, trees… but all the worldly forces that are antagonistic to the Kingdom of God (and even to the natural world).

“If people only knew with what lack of wisdom the world is governed!” someone said long ago. Today most people do know. When greed masquerades as high-minded principle, there are people who are able to point it out. When crowds of people protest at stolen elections the world sees it (or some version of it) on TV. Today it is harder to hide than it has ever been. This is true at the individual level too. Anyone who has ever had a moment’s clear insight into their own dark side knows that we cannot afford to be naive about the struggle to live a Christian life.

The 'world' isn’t only out there; it is within us. We have within us all the powers of resistance to the Gospel. Unless I have had a clear insight into the snake-pit at the bottom of my soul, and look into that pit where fear and aggression are the same; unless I have observed how I hiss and spit when I am really cornered; and unless I see how I cover it all over with a veneer of politeness, I will not be fit to combat the evil around me. We also know about projection today: I want to fight evil out there because I don’t have the courage or honesty to look at the evil within me. And I make the world look really bad so that my ego will look correspondingly good.

This is not to privatise evil. Don’t worry: there are billions of other egos out there!

“They do not belong to the world,” Jesus said. This ego-world is not our true nature, it is not our true identity. It is a divisive spirit, and the source of all divisiveness. The ego exists always in opposition. Since it is false, it cannot establish itself except in opposition to something else. But Jesus prayed to the Father for us: “that they may be one as we are one.”
6 June
Jn 17:20-26
Jesus said: ‘I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ‘Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.’

The anthropologist Colin Turnbull lived for two years with a Ugandan tribe, the Ik, and described his experiences in a book called *The Mountain People*. They are seen as utterly brutish, selfish and loveless. They never sing, and they laugh only at one another’s misfortunes. They turn their children out to forage as soon as they can walk, and they abandon the old to starvation. Presumably they were once a normal easy-going people, but the government took over their lands to create a national park, and these hunter-gatherers were reduced to farming the poor hillside soil, at which they failed miserably. Along with their way of life they lost their culture and even their humanity. It is a depressing picture.

The biologist Lewis Thomas, in *The Lives of a Cell*, sketched a theory about them – and about human beings in any society. “The solitary Ik, isolated in the ruins of an exploded culture, has built a new defence for himself. If you live in an unworkable society you can make up one of your own…. Each Ik has become a group, a one-man tribe of its own…. This is precisely the way groups…from committees to nations, behave…. In his absolute selfishness, his incapacity to give anything away, no matter what, he is a successful committee. When he stands at the door of his hut, shouting insults at his neighbours in a loud harangue, he is a city addressing another city…. Nations are the most Ik-like of all…. For total greed, rapacity, heartlessness, and irresponsibility there is nothing to match a nation. Nations, by law, are solitary, self-centred, withdrawn into themselves.” He concludes, “We haven’t yet learned how to stay human when assembled in masses. The Ik, in his despair, is acting out this failure, and perhaps we should pay closer attention.”

There are lessons here for Christian community too. Despite hearing the Gospel, times without number, we are capable of living instead by the gospel of greed. Society breaks down around us, and we fail to create Christian community, receding into ourselves and living out our lives as solitary egos. The ego is my false identity; it is the identity I forge for myself in early childhood and build upon for the rest of my life, unless radically called into community. It is the fundamental lie about who I am. It is not really an identity, it is a strategy for survival, security and comfort. For this reason the ego cannot love, though it can produce an imitation of love, for strategic purposes. Whenever it pretends to form community with others there is a built-in flaw.

What is meaning? It is to know the fragment in relation to the whole. A madman is so-called because his talk and actions are unrelated to any wider structure. Cut a piece out of a picture and it is meaningless. Put it back and there’s a thrill of recognition. This is the small thrill of jigsaw puzzles. Today many people are like isolated fragments of a jigsaw puzzle, with no
desire to be part of anything. W.H. Auden once said, “We have to learn to love one another or die.”
7 June
Jn 21:15-19

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.’ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’

Today’s picture is the alternative to yesterday’s. Not the lk, but the community of love. Three times Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me?” People like to connect this with Peter’s triple denial of Jesus: he was being given a chance to undo the damage. In addition, something else is happening in the original language, something that doesn’t appear in English.

There are several words for ‘love’ in Greek. ‘Philein’ means to love someone as a friend; ‘agapan’ usually means to love someone in the distinctive New Testament sense: to love them unselfishly, creatively, in the way that Jesus loved. In John’s usage, this kind of love is mysteriously deeper and wider even than friendship, because it doesn’t depend on like-mindedness as friendship does; it can even reach out to include an enemy. Now, Jesus first asked Peter, ‘Agapas me?’ (Do you love me with this kind of love?) Peter replies, ‘Philo se’. (I love you as a friend.) The second time, the words are the same. But the third time, Jesus asks him, “Phileis me?” And Peter answers as before, ‘Philo se’.

There is something touching about this. Peter wasn’t yet able to love Jesus in that heroic way; he could love him only as the friend he had known for three years. But the third time around, Jesus steps down, as it were, to accept what Peter was able to offer at that time.

Friendship, though it is a precious gift, can have a built-in trap. It could mean that you never allow the other to surprise you or shock you; it can mean ‘come into my camp.’

Can we put it this way: all forms of love and friendship are capable of advancing gradually towards to ‘agapē’. How do we go along that road? Like Peter, by doing the best we can.