1 January [Mary Mother of God]
Lk 2:16-21

The shepherds went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

A new year is like a new baby: it has to be given a name, and yes, today's readings are about naming. The first reading says, “They shall put my name on the people” (Numbers 6:27), and in the Gospel the child is named Jesus (verse 21). We begin the year in God’s name, and in the name of God’s Son. Who are we? We are the people who have been given the right, because of Jesus, to call God “Abba, Father” (2nd reading, verse 6). In the hymn, God addresses you: “I have called you by your name, you are mine.”

Mary’s presence marks the beginning of the year. It is appropriate to have a mother to accompany our first steps. January 1st is always her feast. Her title, ‘Mother of God, affirms equally the humanity and the divinity of Christ. The Nestorians – followers of Nestorius, the 5th-century archbishop of Constantinople – said that Christ was two persons: the man Jesus and the divine Son of God. This view was rejected at the Council of Ephesus (431 AD), which insisted that he was one person with two natures, divine and human. The most emphatic way they could say this was to affirm that Mary was not just the mother of the man Jesus, but that she was the mother of God. This was their way of saying that Christ was one person, not two. The word used of Mary was ‘Theotokos’ (Greek for ‘God-bearer’). The Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) continued the use of this term, and it has become orthodox Christian teaching. Note that it is more a statement about Christ than about Mary – or rather, equally so. Icons of the ‘Theotokos’ are common now in the West.

In a sense, when a child is born a mother is born. When a child is born, its mother begins to be a mother. Even if she was already mother to other children this new child makes her a new mother; a new chapter in her mothering begins. In the birth of the Son of God, Mary begins to be the Mother of God. When a Child is born, a Mother is born.
2 January [Sts Basil and Gregory]

Jn 1:19-28

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' ‘Are you the prophet?’ He answered, ‘No.’ Then they said to him, ‘Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’ He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Make straight the way of the Lord,”’ as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, ‘Why then are you baptising if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?’ John answered them, 'I baptise with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptising.

John the Baptist had an extensive ministry of his own, apart from his witness to Jesus (Mt 3; Lk 3), but in the fourth gospel all of this is passed over; the Baptist’s whole meaning is his pointing to Jesus. When quizzed about his identity he answers all their questions in the negative, and then he identifies himself only as “a voice.” Later, Jesus would refer to him as “a lamp”: “He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light” (John 5:35).

A voice. A lamp. They don’t call attention to themselves but to something else. The world says you have to call attention to yourself and become famous – a celebrity if possible. But in the spiritual life the ideal is to become invisible. The images that Jesus used tell the same story: salt, yeast, grain, light…. He has had countless un-famous disciples, beginning even with some of the apostles: Simon and Jude, for example, and Andrew.

Some lines from the Welsh poet R.S. Thomas:

As I had always known,  
he would come unannounced,  
remarkable merely for the absence  
of clamour. So truth must appear  
to the thinker; so, at a stage  
of the experiment, the answer  
must quietly emerge. I looked  
at him, not with the eye  
only, but with the whole  
of my being, overflowing with  
him as a chalice would  
with the sea.  

If the Master works in the invisible, so should the disciple, like John the Baptist. And every disciple.
January [Holy Name of Jesus]
Jn 1:29-34

The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, “After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.” I myself did not know him; but I came baptising with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.’ And John testified, ‘I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptise with water said to me, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit.” And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.’

John the Baptist seemed evasive about his own identity, but he was quite sure about the identity of Jesus, even though he had to admit, “I myself did not know him.” This is a remarkable admission, seeing that Jesus was his cousin. Clearly, he had known him in some sense. He recognised his appearance and knew his name and many facts about him. He must be referring now to a deeper identity, hidden from him before. It was God, “the one who sent me,” who revealed the deeper identity of Jesus to the Baptist. The Spirit was the mark of his identity.

Spirit cannot be thought, but it can be imagined. The images here are ‘dove’ and ‘lamb’. These images point to the Spirit but, unlike thoughts, they are not mistaken for it. Both images have a rich background in the Scriptures.

Like all images they have a variety of meanings, but the dove stood very often as a symbol of love. In the Song of Songs the beloved is called “my dove.” Israel is called the Lord’s dove: “Do not give Israel, your dove, to the hawk” (Psalm 73). The dove is also a symbol of innocence: “innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). In all four gospels the Spirit at Jesus’ baptism is imaged as a dove (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32). As the Church would later express it, the Spirit’s very identity is the love between the Father and the Son.

The image of lamb is everywhere present in the Old and New Testaments. It usually refers to a sacrificial victim. Jesus is the Passover lamb. You remember also the lamb provided for Abraham (Genesis 22:8), the ewe of the sin offering (Leviticus 4:32-35), and the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. In Revelation Jesus is referred to 28 times as the lamb.

Jesus refers to his disciples as lambs; he said to Peter, “Feed my lambs” (John 21:15). I may have a recognisable identity, such as lawyer, banker, even prize fighter; but my deeper identity is that I am a lamb and a dove!
January
Jn 1:35-42

John again was standing with two of his disciples and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

In John's gospel Jesus makes his first appearance as someone walking past in silence. The whole scene is characterised by great silence: there is no voice from heaven identifying Jesus (unlike Mt 3:17 and Lk 3:22). In fact, as you look you notice that many things are absent from John's gospel that are to the fore in the others. There is no reference to the temptations in the desert, no preaching of the kingdom of God, no teaching in synagogues and healing, no call for disciples. Jesus is a mysterious silent presence; and when he does speak, he does not speak in parables but in an elevated mystical tone.

In the present scene, when he sees the two following him he asks, "What are you looking for?" This was a straight question, obviously, because the two were not put off by it. Coming from a silent person, it was also a profound question. They made no answer, probably because they didn’t have an answer. Instead they asked, "Where are you staying?" He said, "Come and see." He did not say “Listen!” but “See!” It was the answer of a silent man. They remained with him that day. This is in keeping with the repeated “abide in me” or “make your home in me” much later in the gospel.

It can seem a little strange, this emphasis on silence, in a gospel whose first words are, “In the beginning was the Word.” But this Word is not like the weightless things we fill the air with; it is a Word in which to make our home. He spoke of “keeping my word” (8:51; 14:23), and of “my words abiding in you” (15:7).

There is such an emphasis today on communication that we want to pass everything on within seconds of receiving it. Abiding, making our home in him who is the Word: this is a helpful headline for us. This alone can transform us, as it transformed Peter and Andrew and all the others.
January
Jn 1:43-51
Jesus found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

Bethsaida, Cana, Nazareth: all were small country towns, little more than villages, and no doubt they had all the petty rivalries experienced in such places. “Nazareth?” said Nathanael (himself a Cana man), “can anything good come from Nazareth?” Nazareth was never mentioned in the Old Testament; how could the Messiah come from such a place? Still, he let himself be persuaded to go and meet this stranger.

The moment Nathanael met Jesus his prejudice vanished. This is normal. Prejudice thrives on ignorance and anonymity. In ‘A Prayer for my Daughter’ W.B. Yeats imagined the future years and what they might bring to his new-born child – and, more ominously, what they might take from her. He wrote of his fear that she might “lose natural kindness and maybe / The heart-revealing intimacy…. “ The mechanism of such loss is hatred and prejudice. “An intellectual hatred is the worst, / So let her think opinions are accursed…..”

Nathanael let his prejudice be overcome. This made him different from the many who seek only to have their prejudices confirmed. Jesus had seen him in the distance, under the fig tree, and perceived that he was a man “without deceit.” For Nathanael it may have been one of those non-moments when everything is clear because it has not yet been squeezed into language. Such moments were beautifully described by Yeats (to quote him again). Whether we are among the powerful of the earth or the powerless, it is in such moments that the shape of our life is determined.

Our master Caesar is in the tent
Where the maps are spread,
His eyes fixed upon nothing,
A hand under his head.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.
Today we might call it meditation. To sit under one’s fig tree seems to have been a symbol of peace. “During Solomon’s lifetime Judah and Israel lived in safety…all of them under their vines and fig trees” (1 Kings 4:25). Our houses now are so packed with electronic devices that it is hard to find any modern equivalent in them of the fig tree. It is a challenge to construct a place (or a time) in one’s own home where we can be entirely undisturbed. But a home without such a place is less a home.
Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of Heli, son of Mattha, son of Levi, son of Melchi, son of Jannai, son of Joseph, son of Mattathias, son of Amos, son of Nahum, son of Esl, son of Naggai, son of Maath, son of Mattathias, son of Semein, son of Josech, son of Joda, son of Joanan, son of Rhesa, son of Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, son of Neri, son of Melchi, son of Addi, son of Cosam, son of Elmadam, son of Er, son of Joshua, son of Eliezer, son of Jorim, son of Matthat, son of Levi, son of Simeon, son of Judah, son of Joseph, son of Jonam, son of Eliakim, son of Melea, son of Menna, son of Mattatha, son of Nathan, son of David, son of Jesse, son of Obed, son of Boaz, son of Sala, son of Nahshon, son of Amminadab, son of Adin, son of Arni, son of Hezron, son of Perez, son of Judah, son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, son of Terah, son of Nahor, son of Serug, son of Reu, son of Peleg, son of Eber, son of Shelah, son of Cainan, son of Arphaxad, son of Shem, son of Noah, son of Lamech, son of Methuselah, son of Enoch, son of Jared, son of Mahalaleel, son of Cainan, son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God.

One of my early memories is of my parents endlessly “tracing relations” in the long winter evenings around the fire. I ought to know the genealogy of every family for twenty miles around. No subject carries more interest for the insider, or more boredom for the outsider. That shows that it’s an intimate subject.

Today’s reading is a genealogy. The strangeness of the names and the people in it should put it well beyond our interest. But in the end it is about Jesus, and that makes it an intimate subject. Leo the Great (5th century) said that these genealogies “show that the first and the last Adam share the same nature.”

The names have a great deal of shock-value. All human life is there: murder, treachery, incest, adultery, prostitution…. In the first list of fourteen names there are three women, an unusual feature: Tamar, Rahab and Ruth. Tamar gave birth to twins by her father-in-law; Rahab was a prostitute, and Ruth was a Moabite, a foreigner. In the second list of fourteen, there’s another woman, Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. King David observed her bathing from the roof of his house, and invited her in and seduced her; then he had her husband killed, so that he could marry her. At the end of the third section a fifth woman is mentioned: Mary the mother of Jesus. It is an unedifying litany of names that leads us to Mary and Jesus. This is the world they entered. Nothing in the Scriptures encourages us to look at it with rose-coloured spectacles.
In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.”' Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Ours is not the first age to look east for wisdom; the East has always had a reputation for it. The word ‘magi’ is translated here as “wise men.” ‘Magus’ meant different things: a magus was a member of the Persian priestly caste; or one who possessed occult knowledge and power (this is the origin of our word ‘magic’). If people had the careless habit of throwing around the term ‘New Age’ in those times as many do now, the Magi would certainly have been called New Agers.

Herod was one of history’s great tyrants: he spared no one, not even his own family; to keep his grip on power he murdered his wife, three of his sons, his brother-in-law, an uncle, and his mother-in-law. He had been appointed “King of the Jews” by the Senate in 40 BC and he had already reigned for over thirty years. He was in no mind to hear of a new king, especially one who was no son of his. “He was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.” He was frightened to hear of a rival, and the people were frightened because they knew what he was capable of. But the chief priests and the scribes – the religious authorities of the day – were able to give him directions in locating this rival. They knew in detail about the expected arrival of “the anointed one.” They had studied the Scriptures, they knew the prophecies, they knew where to look. And they used all that knowledge to direct a killer to him. Nor was it just a momentary lapse of judgment: Herod would fail to kill him, but later on they would succeed.

The Magi were foreigners, pagans, astrologers: everything that was most base in the eyes of the religious authorities. Though they had not the benefit of the prophecies the Magi came and did the Child homage. Tradition calls them “kings” – judging, probably, by the wealth of the gifts they brought. At any rate they came looking for a king. Where do you look for a king? In a palace. Who else is likely to be there? A royal family. But the Magi came to a cave or a stable where they found a poor family, with animals and perhaps a few shepherds. All the appearances would have told them they had made a ridiculous mistake, yet “falling to their knees, they did him homage.”

We can look at the significance of this from many angles. Preparation is no guarantee that you will be ready; it may actually blind you, because you prepare according to your own idea. There is no substitute for an open heart; learning sometimes has the effect of closing the heart, and in some cases even the mind. Religious authority is the most perilous of all: the claims are absolute, the deepest things are at stake, and with the years comes the habit
of listening to no one. The most chilling feature of this story is the collusion of the religious leaders with Herod.

Later on, when simple people were shouting out their enthusiasm for John, the Pharisees said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out” (John 19:40-41). We are not to be surprised at where praise of God can spring up. It is not recorded that any of the authorities went with to Magi to search for the Child; it was the pagan astrologers who sought and found him.
8 January [Baptism of the Lord]
Mk 1:7-11

In the course of his preaching John the Baptist said, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.’ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

Jesus is there anonymously in the crowd, coming forward with the rest to meet the famous John the Baptist. It is impossible for us to see him as an anonymous person; to us he stands out from every crowd and from the whole human race: above them, beyond them; we can't imagine him not yet majestic. But there he is, the village man, Jesus, known only to his family and neighbours. He is not yet famous.

There is only one famous man there: John the Baptist. When we imagine a famous person among the crowds there is nearly always something false about it: he or she is looking for something, votes or applause or some other sort of ego-stroking. But John the Baptist isn't looking for anything; he is delivering! He is delivering a verbal lashing of extraordinary severity, calling the crowd “a brood of vipers." Jesus is there, watching, listening, anonymous. He is indistinguishable from the brood of vipers. He is one of us. This is nothing new for him; this is how he has been all the thirty years of his life.

But this meeting with John the Baptist is a turning point. Something happened. He experienced the Spirit, and it is described in the kind of language that mystics have used throughout the ages to describe their union with God: “You are my son, the beloved.”

Have you ever known that in your very bones: that God breathes to you, “You are my son, my daughter, the beloved?” If you experience God at all how could it be otherwise? God is love. Even the thundering 19th-century preacher, Spurgeon, became quiet in front of today's gospel passage. He wrote: “The wings of the dove are as soft as they are swift. Quietness seems essential to many spiritual operations; the Lord is in the still small voice, and like the dew, His grace is distilled in silence.” The unshakeable intimacy with his Father that Jesus demonstrated throughout the rest of his life bears witness to his experience of God's Spirit.

Was he now somehow 'above' the crowd? Would be no longer queue up with them? On the contrary. He was now more than ever one of them. He spent the rest of his life seeking out “the weak, the sick, the wounded, the strayed, the lost” (see Ezekiel 34). He was for the lost sheep, the outcast, the sinner. This has ever since been the mark of true greatness. Among us human beings (and not only in the farmyard) there is usually a well-enforced pecking order: people who climb up a step are sure to make it visible in some way and sometimes they will even move into a different circle of friends and abandon the old circle. But Jesus never abandons the abandoned. Again the mighty Spurgeon: "Gentleness is a sure result of the Spirit's transforming power: hearts touched by Him are meek and lowly henceforth and forever."

Can language convey this? I knew a man who conveyed it better than words ever could. When he talked with you (or, much more often, listened) and someone interrupted, he would totally ignore the interruption. His attention was unwavering. Nothing else existed for him at that moment, and you knew that he would stop at nothing to help you, and there was not the slightest hint of ego in it - he had no agenda of his own. This is a rare quality. People knew instinctively that he was a man of God. In case you've never met one, that's what meeting a saint is like.
If meeting a saint is like that, what must it be like to meet Jesus himself?
When the sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. The people were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

“The earth was literally a hell,” wrote someone describing the belief in evil spirits in Jesus' time. The air was thought to be full of them. They were believed to cause physical and mental illness when they gained access to a person. It sounds a little like what people say about microbes today, but these evil spirits were seen as sinister and malicious.

Synagogues were places of teaching; there was no music, no sacrifice (that was in the Temple). But in casting out demons, Jesus was doing something for people; he wasn't just discoursing on the Law, as the scribes did endlessly. When Jesus frequented synagogues (before they expelled him and he never returned) he didn't just preach; he healed people's tortured minds and bodies; he restored their strength to them.

Sometimes preachers disable people, by a habit of denunciation, by forever enjoining obedience, quoting rules.... But see what happens when Jesus comes near people. “He spoke as one having authority,” the gospels say. This expression ‘having authority’ usually means being authorised, having the right from some authority to act as one does. But the word ‘authority’ itself means just the opposite. It means to be oneself the source (the ‘author’) of one’s words and actions. Jesus spoke with authority; he was not quoting texts, as the scribes and Pharisees did. The best quoters are people who have no ideas of their own, just as the cruellest people often say they were acting under authority. But Jesus was his own man. That is what attracted people to him.
As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you.’ He answered, ‘Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.’ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

When fame begins to catch up with him Jesus heads for the mountains or for a lonely place (Mk 1:35; Lk 5:16; 6:12; Jn 6:3, 15). See also tomorrow’s reading. In today’s reading, when they told him everyone was looking for him he said, ‘Let’s go somewhere else.’ There is a wrong kind of fame. Many people do everything they can to be famous, and some even resort to criminal acts. Having perhaps a deficient sense of identity they crave notice: the notice of a crowd will persuade them that they exist.

But on a smaller scale we all want to have our existence noted by at least a few people. Anyone who can live even for a while in a desert must get over the need for recognition. Many have gone to live in solitude because they needed to get over it completely. Their hope is that they will discover their true identity, which is, if we are to believe Julian of Norwich, as deep as God. “I saw most surely that it is quicker for us and easier to come to the knowledge of God than it is to know our own soul. For our soul is so deeply grounded in God and so endlessly treasured that we cannot come to knowledge of it until we first have knowledge of God, who is the Creator to whom it is united.”

But for very self-conscious people, their own self is audience enough. Bishop Fénelon (1651 – 1715) wrote, “By fixing the mind wholly upon God, [abandonment to God] takes away the disposition of the soul to occupy itself with reflex acts; that is, with the undue examination and analysis of its own feelings.” And again, “‘Those who pray perfectly are never thinking how well they pray.’” External solitude is not enough; we have to get rid of the invisible audience that follows us around; we have to enter into inner solitude. It was because he was able to enter into inner solitude that Jesus was able to be so fully present to people when he came down from the mountain.
11 January
Mk 1:40-45
A leper came to Jesus begging him, and kneeling he said to him, 'If you choose, you can make me clean.' Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.' But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

I've often heard people say, “I felt like a leper!” No need to look at their skin, though, or to count their fingers; what they are saying is that they felt isolated or completely discredited. In that sense the world is still full of lepers. There are lepers in every parish and in every village. A young man said to me that he felt like a leper in his own family; people were steering around him, he said; no one ever asked him what he thought or how he felt. There are lepers all around us.

It is one thing to choose to be alone (see yesterday's reading), but to be cast into isolation is another. We are social beings by nature, and it requires great strength to be alone. Nor is it always a good thing. What can you do for someone who feels isolated but to reach out and touch them? You are more than just you when you do that: you are society, you are community, you are the Church, you are the human race. One may even say you are Jesus. “Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.”
12 January
Mk 2:1-12

When Jesus returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralysed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’

Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ‘Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, ‘Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven”, or to say, “Stand up and take your mat and walk”? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins—he said to the paralytic—’I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.’ And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’

“There is nothing hidden but it must be disclosed,” Jesus said once, “nothing kept secret except to be brought to light” (Mk 4:22). How is a thought, for example, brought to light? By becoming an action. Thought is a kind of incipient action; when it is full-blown it is an action. The Japanese Zen Master Deshimaru, who lived about fifteen years in France, said that western culture had become weak and decadent. We have been weakened, he said, by excessive use of the mind and imagination, without action. Of course we are active, but it is nervous activism, which can be a flight from real action. We don’t bring our deepest thoughts to fruition in action, we complicate them so much that we can scarcely even understand them ourselves. Thinking become so specialised that only philosophers can engage in it, and they become professors rather than doers. Meanwhile the doers dive into activism. You have lost the run of yourselves, he said.

Jesus wasn’t thinking about sin as a concept, he saw it as a crippling thing. “Is it easier to say to this paralysed man: Your sins are forgiven, or to say: Rise, take up your mat and walk?” Then he said, “Stand up!” And the man stood up and walked.
Jesus went out again beside the lake; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax-collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax-collectors, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?’ When Jesus heard this, he said to them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’

What a wonderful mix: these extraordinary powers of Jesus, and the seedy world of prostitutes and tax-collectors! It is a scandal for anyone who likes to divide the world neatly into groups: the good and the bad, the ‘right people’ and the wrong people, religion and the wicked world. The English proverb, “a cat may look at a king,” is based on the understanding that there is no parity between them. And we know, of course, that it is not really about cats and kings, but about different classes of people. Jesus had no class-consciousness; he had friends from every quarter.

Tax-collectors are frequently mentioned with prostitutes in the gospels (e.g., Mt 9:10; 21:31f; Lk 5:30); they were excluded as unclean. Levi (generally believed to be Matthew) was a tax-collector. He was still working at his rotten job when Jesus called him. It was an ugly exploitative job: he and his likes were shunned by Pharisees and befriended by nobody. But Jesus didn’t wait till he had turned his back on his old way of life. He called him while he was “sitting in his office,” totting up his profits, it may be, for he was a tax collector. What do we see next? A whole crowd of tax collectors, having a meal – and Jesus in the middle of them. And for good measure there were some public sinners there too. In those days, to sit at table with someone was to express unrestricted friendship with them. What were they talking about? Try and imagine that!
14 January [2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time]

Jn 1:35-42

John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him an said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

This reading is like rush-hour. It is full of names, there are lots of people passing by, happening to bump into one another, overhearing a few words by chance. The snippets of conversation are brief in the extreme, and practical: 'What are you looking for?' 'Where are you staying?' - like the conversation on a crowded street. And just like people in rush-hour they were conscious of the time: "it was about 4 o'clock."

Then suddenly, silence. "They remained with him that day." There is no crowd, no consciousness of time, no account of what they talked about, no description of the place where they sat together. But whatever happened that afternoon changed the lives of Andrew and his companion forever, and started a development that is still in process twenty centuries later all over the world.

"They remained with him that day." In fact they remained with him for the rest of their lives. Their relationship to him would become their new identity, as it would become the new identity of Andrew's brother Peter, and of their circle of friends. We know that, but of course they didn't know it at the time. Nor could they know that countless others through the ages would cling to this new identity and disclaim all others. The historian Eusebius of Caesarea described the martyrdom of a Christian in Gaul under Verus in the 2nd century. "He endured in an extraordinary fashion all the outrages inflicted on him. While the torturers hoped to wring something from him which he ought not to say, he girded himself against them with such firmness that he would not even tell his name, or the nation or city to which he belonged, or whether he was a slave or a freeman, but answered in the Roman tongue to all their questions, 'I am a Christian', Christianus sum. He professed this instead of name and city and race and everything besides, and the people heard from him no other word." This new identity was the only one he claimed, and it was indestructible.

It is a fundamental question for every person in every age: which of the many identities that I claim, and of the many that are thrust on me, is indestructible? The consumerist society identifies me as a consumer, politicians as a voter, lawyers as a client, shopkeepers as a customer, television companies as a viewer, and even football clubs as a fan…. All of these, singly, are highly volatile and easily destructible; but together they can be a great distraction from the real question: to what or to whom do I give my life? They are the new 'crowd', the rush-hour that never ceases. Like Andrew and his companion I need a quiet hour, a quiet evening, in which the Lord can ask me, "What are you looking for?"
15 January
Mk 2:18-22
John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, ‘Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?’ Jesus said to them, ‘The wedding-guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. ‘No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.’

Jewish weddings lasted a full week; the young couple did not go away on a honeymoon, they stayed at home and held open house for all. It was the happiest week in a person’s life, and there was a rabbinical ruling that went, “All in attendance [at the wedding] are relieved of all religious observances that would lessen their joy.” Wedding guests were dispensed from all fasting.

There are very good reasons why a Christian disciple might fast. But they are reasons; they are not a gloomy and miserly attitude that can appear very religious while being nothing of the sort. A reason applies at one time and not at another, but an attitude goes on forever. People who are capable of the deepest joy are also capable of the deepest sadness, because they are responding to life as it comes. But others become mired forever in a half-way place, experiencing neither joy nor sorrow. Joy is the chief characteristic of a Christian – “joy even in tribulation,” as Tauler said – and one of the first fruits of the Spirit (see Gal 5:2).
16 January
Mk 2:23-28

One sabbath Jesus was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?’ And he said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.’ Then he said to them, ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.’

Picking ears of standing corn with the hand (not with a sickle) as you walked through a neighbour's field was permitted in the Jewish scriptures (Deut 23:26). The Pharisees' objection, therefore, was not to the act itself, but to the fact that it was done on the sabbath. They considered this simple act of plucking a few heads of corn as a five-fold breach of the Law: reaping, threshing, winnowing, bearing a burden and preparing a meal.

To Luke's version of this incident, one manuscript adds an interesting (but the scholars say probably spurious) saying: “On the same day, seeing a man working on the sabbath day, he said to him, ‘Friend, if you know what you are doing, you are blessed; but if you do not know, you are accursed as a breaker of the Law.’” In a Zen monastery I once saw a piece of calligraphy that said, “If you break the law you will never attain freedom.” Grim, but true, I thought. But then, underneath, part two: “If you keep the law you will never attain freedom.” Compare this with Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:19, “Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” This sounds like old hat – but remember to put that verse beside today's reading (and tomorrow's) and see the paradox that arises there too, like a koan.
17 January
Mk 3:1-6
Jesus entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, ‘Come forward.’ Then he said to them, ‘Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?’ But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

The last line of today’s reading lays the shadow of the cross over Mark’s gospel. Healing on the sabbath was forbidden, and Jesus deliberately flouted this rule by healing the man with the paralysed hand. There are always multiple layers of meaning in the scriptures: he was restoring the man to his full power.

Your arm is your power to do things. Your feet are your power to go places. Later, he himself would be nailed hand and foot to the cross; he would become powerless for the powerless. Such a one will always be in trouble with the controllers. Anyone who sets people free can expect trouble.

The Gospels record a few occasions on which Jesus became angry. Once, it was in the Temple when he chased out the traders. The other occasion is the one we read about in today’s passage. He became angry because people had closed their minds. What can you do with people who have closed their minds? It is useless to argue or explain: they will not listen. You can only become angry! Even Jesus could not think of another way. There are many who think that being a good Catholic is a matter of keeping a closed mind, not listening to speakers or writers who are not approved, rejecting other people’s views in advance. They build their own image of a sweet Jesus, always meek and mild. Would that we could sometimes see his anger!
18 January
Mk 3:7-12
Jesus departed with his disciples to the lake, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him; hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon. He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him; for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, ‘You are the Son of God!’ But he sternly ordered them not to make him known.

In the world of advertising, there has to be as much initial coverage as possible, even to the point of saturation. Advertising campaigns are planned and executed like a military assault. Some companies mount the assault first, then gauge the response, and only if the response is good do they finally make the product. In other words, the advertising is literally about nothing.

The way of the Gospel is the opposite of this. Everything begins on a small scale: Jesus spoke of seeds hidden in the ground. Seeds are very small, but they are not nothing; they are a tremendous something; to understand even a single seed in its very essence would be to understand the universe.

Loud is often shallow. There is a kind of Christian advertising (let’s not call it preaching) that has none of the depth of Gospel. This is already visible in the gospels, and Jesus himself had to discourage it (as we see in today’s reading).

Thomas Hardy once remarked about someone, “That man’s silence is wonderful to listen to.”
Jesus went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons. So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. Then he went home.

“To be with him” and “to be sent out.” These phrases mean opposite things, and yet they occur beside each other on the page. If he wanted them to be with him, why did he send them out?

Mark often uses this phrase ‘to be with (him)’: 2:19; 4:36; 5:18; 14:14, 67; 15:41. It is said to be almost his definition of discipleship. Peter was Mark’s source, and Peter wrote about the time “when we were with him on the holy mountain” (2 Peter 1:18). In today’s reading, too, it is a mountain. To be a disciple is to be with him on the holy mountain of prayer and meditation. But neither he nor they stayed forever on the mountain; they “went out” to the whole world. Every disciple is called not only to be with him but to go out to others. Prayer and action, said St Catherine of Siena, are like our two feet: we need them both if we are to follow the Way.

But what about Judas? We have perhaps been too ready to write off Judas. If he is a complete write-off, then so are we all! Jesus spent the night in prayer and then called Judas (among others) to be a follower; and Judas followed. Later he made that tragic mistake – due possibly to his eagerness to get Jesus to act, rather than to a desire to betray him. If he acted only out of greed for money, then he should have been happy when he had that money in his pocket. Instead he was plunged into despair and he took his own life. A mere greed for money could never explain his suicide. He was a more complex man than that. He had not spent enough time on the mountain.
20 January
Mk 3:20-21
Jesus went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’

I knew a man who had spent some time in a psychiatric hospital. On his discharge he went drinking with a few of his old friends. When a dispute arose among them, one of them dismissed some opinion of his by saying he was only a madman anyway. “On the contrary,” he replied, “I’m the only man here who can prove that he’s sane!” “Prove it then!” they challenged. He invited bets, and when he had secured bets of several pints of Guinness he put his hand in his pocket and drew out the certificate of discharge from the psychiatric hospital. It stated there in black and white that he was sane.

Who is sane and who is mad? Today’s reading is ambiguous, though the translations all say that it was Jesus who was mad. But a scholar noted that the Greek could also be translated, “they (the family) set about controlling it (the crowd) because it was beside itself.” Was Jesus mad, or was the crowd mad?

What is madness but a definition by some group who are probably madder themselves? In the 4th century, Abba Antony, the founder of monasticism, said: “A time is coming when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him saying, ‘You are mad, you are not like us.’”
21 January [3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time]
Mk 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea — for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

In all three readings at today's Mass there is a sense of time running out. "Only forty more days..." shouted Jonah (1st reading). "Our time is growing short," wrote Paul (2nd reading). "The time has come," said Jesus (gospel reading).

Everything in this world is transitory. We are not the first people in the world to think that everything is changing and that nothing remains the same. An ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, writing about 500 B.C., said, "Everything changes and nothing remains the same.... You cannot step twice in the same river, for the waters are perpetually flowing upon you...." When modern humans first arrived in Europe 40,000 years ago they found a population of Neanderthals who had already been living there for a quarter of a million years. They were human beings, but there is no evidence that they experienced much change during the course of all those millennia. But we have the change bug. Since Alvin Toffler's Future Shock in the 1960s and his Third Wave a decade later, we have come to realise more fully that change feeds on itself: not only is change accelerating but the rate of acceleration is accelerating. Most of our new inventions (and not only computers) are in the service of greater speed.

But it is important to remember that change has always been happening for modern humans. 'Modern' doesn't just mean 'post-1960'! Jesus lived in tumultuous times, and his country was one of the cross-roads of the world. The people were on fire with revolutionary ideas. Into this atmosphere Jesus announced, "The time has come!" There is a kind of breathless haste in Mark's gospel. He tells the story as a child in crisis might. Phrases like 'straightaway' and 'immediately' occur almost 30 times; in chapter 3 there are 34 phrases and sentences one after another beginning with 'and'. He also loves to use the 'historic present': "Jesus sends two disciples and says to them..." (11:1-2). (This is not always preserved in translations.) The cumulative effect of this is a feeling that there is no time to waste.

No people were ever so well-placed as we are to realise that "the time is short," "the time is come." But what are we rushing towards? What is the future into which we are accelerating? For many, it is a launch into nowhere; it is like those expensive rockets into empty space. We are not so much intent on getting somewhere as on getting away. On the grand scale, when Iraq or Syria become unthinkable we think about Mars. On the small scale, when we get bored at home we go somewhere "just to get away." We have never had such capabilities of moving and changing, but we don't know where we are going, or why we should go anywhere.

As in last Sunday's readings, the question the Lord would ask us is, "What are you looking for?"
22 January
Mk 3:22-30

The scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He [Jesus] has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’ And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, ‘How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

In yesterday’s reading Jesus was thought to be mad; in today’s he is thought to be possessed by the devil. There’s no telling what people will say; public opinion, someone said, is a lottery. A lottery is a random selection. Language itself is a kind of lottery. You can say the first thing that comes into your mind, and the words stand there as self-assured as if they had been thoughtfully selected. Sometimes the only factor that narrows the selection is the malice of the person speaking. If people called Jesus mad and possessed by the devil, what can they not say about all of us fragile and compromised human beings?

We all have this fatal capacity to speak in ways that injure other people. We have the ingredients of the explosive device: language + malice. Language is the explosive material, and malice is the detonator. (Election campaigns sometimes resemble the conditions of war.)

Or, to change the metaphor once again, language is like a city population. It is a mass of individuals milling in every direction, apparently at random but in fact with a million different purposes, some of which merge but many of which collide. When an individual collides with another the problem is just local. The real problem is when there is a merging of many individuals for an evil purpose. This kind of lower merging has all the attractions of community: mutual esteem and support, banishing painful feelings of self-doubt. Religious fundamentalism of all kinds gives us clear examples of this today. Angry words seem confirmed when many others are repeating them, and when the whole thing gains momentum it screams, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

Jesus was able to step out of society. He would spend nights alone on the mountain. We all need to do something similar – a retreat, a meditation practice, even a long solitary walk – if we are to hold our own against the random floods of language that threaten our sanity. We need it nowadays more than ever before. Meditation is about becoming silent, dropping out of language to some degree. “Anyone who has the word of Jesus as a true possession can also hear his silence.”
23 January
Mk 3:31-35
Jesus’ mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’

If indeed Jesus’ family thought he was mad (see Jan. 20), then they belonged to those who “stood outside.” Belonging to the same family or race as Jesus does not make one a disciple (see Mt 3:9). Not that, but doing the will of God. This was the passion of his life; anyone who was not part of that was not part of him. In the agony of Gethsemani he was able to say, “Not my will but yours be done.” In him the passion to do the Father’s will was deeper than death; it is not surprising then that it should also be deeper than birth and natural life.

How many things are deeper than birth and death? Or more practically, what would I live and die for? “Nothing to live or die for,” sang John Lennon, imagining an ideal world. It was a sort of negative ideal. Ideals can be a crushing weight, and they make us painfully aware of our own fragility. When Vincent McNabb was asked in Hyde Park, London, what he would do if he was faced with martyrdom, he replied, “I’d probably deny the Faith immediately!” He knew that in the real world, as distinct from the ideal, everything is grace when it comes to the crunch. “Nothing to live and die for” is not a description of an ideal world but precisely the opposite: a world without an ideal. Better to be a failure (under grace) in the real world than to imagine one where it is impossible to fail because there is nothing at which to succeed.
Jesus began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the lake on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: ‘Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.’ And he said, ‘Let anyone with ears to hear listen!’

In a later verse of this passage (not quoted above), Jesus said to the disciples, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables." Notice once again the reference to “those outside” (see yesterday's reading). But he will not reject those outsiders and shape his own followers into a narrow circle, a cult. No, he will teach them in parables: that is, with stories, images. Jesus was a consummate story-teller; some of his stories are among the greatest in any literature, and would be remembered even if he wasn't who he was.

Abstract statements you either understand at once, or you fail to understand them at all. You have to catch them in the air when they’re flying; you get no second chance. But a story stays with you even if you don’t grasp its full meaning all at once. It waits for you, it gives you time. It is the part of courtesy to wait for people who cannot move fast. Think of parables as part of the courtesy of Jesus. He is waiting for our minds to open, our spirits to deepen. And that is the point of this parable: the readiness of the soil makes all the difference.
25 January [Conversion of St Paul]
Mk 16:15-18
Jesus said, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptised will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.’

Jews look to Jerusalem, Muslims to Mecca, but Christians are not asked to regard any city as more sacred than another (Rome has quite a different meaning for Christians than has Jerusalem for Jews or Mecca for Muslims). Christians were sent out to the whole world and were not told to look back. We are free in many more ways than we want to know. There is a hymn that says, “Let us build the city of God....” Your own village is the city of God. The city of God is not made of stones but of people, “living stones,” St Peter said (1 Peter 2:5).

What are we to make of those “signs that will accompany those who believe”? St Augustine (354 – 430) gave a broad imaginative interpretation of them. “What else are hearing, reading and copiously depositing things in the memory, than several stages of drinking in thoughts? The Lord, however, foretold concerning his faithful followers, that even ‘if they should drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them.’” Then he adds that if they read with discrimination, even if what they read is false, it will not poison them. “Even if they commit to their memory heretical statements which are declared to be worthy of disapproval, they receive no harm from the poisonous and depraved nature of these sentences.” The implication is that they can go out not only to the whole geographical world but also to the whole intellectual and cultural world without fear.

Gregory the Great (540 - 604) was at pains to play down the importance of these signs. “Is it, my brethren, because we do not have these signs that you do not believe? These were needed at the church’s beginning. The new faith needed to be nourished by miracles to grow. When we plant a vineyard, we must water the plants till we see they have begun to grow in the earth, and when they have once taken root we cease to water them constantly.... But true life cannot be obtained by means of these outward signs by those who perform them. For though corporeal works of this kind sometimes do proclaim an inner holiness of life, they do not bring it about.”
Jesus said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’ He also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.’

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

For ‘kingdom’ say ‘presence’. Then read it again. “The presence of God is like this: a man scatters seed upon the soil. Whether he is asleep or awake, be it day or night, the seed sprouts and grows, he knows not how.” The seeds of awareness of God are in us. They will not suddenly leap into the air, bypassing all stages of growth, and fill the grain-loft to the door. Instead they will lie in the damp earth, lost and forgotten, seeming dead. But the miracle of life is happening there where no one can see and no one can understand or explain it. Then the most vulnerable part appears just above the ground. It has no defences, it doesn’t find itself in a glasshouse; it is exposed to everything that could happen to it. That's life. Only love could take such risks.

In this parable Jesus says that the presence of God is like that. Now, for ‘presence of God’ just say ‘God’. God doesn’t appear with flashes of lightning and claps of thunder. God appears slowly, microscopically, humbly, tenderly…. Our part is to wait, to listen, to have the wise humility of the earth, and to have faith and hope and love.
27 January
Mk 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said, ‘Let us go across to the other side.’ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, ‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’

If you asked us today to state what the opposite of faith was, we would be inclined to say, Doubt. But in this passage (as in many other passages in the New Testament) it seems to be fear, or rather a certain kind of fear. See this contrast of fear and faith in the verse, “Why are you frightened? Do you still have no faith?”

Our natural instincts are our friends; they are our equipment for survival as individuals and as a species. So this must be true of fear. But like all our instincts it can become neurotic and turn against us. Then it becomes a crippling force, preventing us from doing anything, good or bad. It can cripple us visibly and invisibly: if my knees are knocking and my face is pale, I am visibly in the grip of fear; but I am invisibly in its grip if I have easily put aside – or not even considered – challenges and openings that were lying there for me. I can be frightened without appearing to be so.

That little boat crossing a storm-tossed lake is a symbol of our life. Many things tell us – and we tell one another – to be afraid. But “do we still have no faith?”
Jesus taught "with authority," that is, he was the author of what he said; it never became his habit to quote rabbis and other authors, as the scribes used to do. His message itself too must have had its own inherent authority (though Mark does not tell us anything here about its content). What he said, if we are to guess from all the gospels, went straight to the hearts of his listeners. The only rhetorical devise we know he used was the parable. A parable is not an interpretation of some text, it is a fresh way of looking at ordinary experience. His parables were drawn from the world of farming, fishing, viniculture…their world. It is inherently subversive to show people that their ordinary experience can be an open path to God; the scribes of every age would prefer that only their sacred text should do this. People realised that here was a teacher who understood and respected them, and not a scribe discharging his erudition over them. They were "astonished," because this was so unusual.

His teaching had authority in a further sense: it made things happen. He cast out demons. In other words he liberated people who were tormented and demented in every way. "Poetry makes nothing happen," wrote W.H. Auden, in a poem about Yeats. But it does, as Yeats himself knew when he wrote, "Did that play of mine send out certain men the English shot?" When preaching is only commentary it seldom makes anything happen. But when Jesus preaches "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (Luke 7:22). In Matthew 11:5 the description is identical, word for word. These were of the Messianic age: in other words, they were indications that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited one, the Messiah.

In today's reading, the demon which is being cast out shouts, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." This may sound like a profession of faith, but how could it be? Instead it was a reflection of the belief that if you could name someone you had power over them. This was the significance of Jesus’ asking a particularly intractable demon, later on in Mark's gospel, "What is your name?" (5:9).

Jesus did not disrespect the Scriptures; he used them for their intended purpose, to set people free, not to tie them up. "To be ignorant of the Scriptures is to be ignorant of Christ," wrote St Jerome (c. 347 - 419 AD). We could add that the converse is equally true: to be ignorant of Christ is to be ignorant of the Scriptures. If we did not read them in the spirit of Christ we would be certain to misuse them. "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).
The disciples came to the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him anymore, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.' For he had said to him, 'Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!' Then Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?' He replied, 'My name is Legion; for we are many.' He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, 'Send us into the swine; let us enter them.' So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the lake, and were drowned in the lake.

"My name is Legion." Another translation has 'Mob'. ‘Mob’ suits a madman: it conveys the sense of being invaded by chaotic forces (legions are all discipline). Which madmen does it suit especially? All of us! A good way to read the Scriptures is to put oneself in the shoes of every person in the story.

It is certainly a dramatic story. In his book, Why I am Not a Christian, Bertrand Russell brought up this story to support his claim that Jesus was not a perfect man. The philosopher was focusing on the pigs and the fate they met at the hands of Jesus. But there are other characters in the story too: in particular, a deeply troubled human being. St Jerome thought there must have been two thousand demons, since there were two thousand pigs. One pig one demon. The text doesn't quite say that. Never mind: no-one could be so interested in demons – or in pigs – as to keep an exact tally of them. No one, that is, except Tertullian (3rd century), who wrote: “Even the bristles of the pigs were counted by God, just as were the hairs of the heads of the just.” That would have consoled Bertrand Russell. He was certainly partial to pigs: he was no vegetarian, and probably never came face to face with a pig that wasn't cooked. Ninety-nine years of bacon and sausages would account for quite a large herd of pigs, possibly even two thousand; and all of them suffered more gruesome deaths than their distant relatives in the story.

Mark’s focus is the sorely tormented human being. It is a story full of symbolic meanings. Every element is significant. The story is full of unclean things. Demons, of course, were unclean. Jews could not touch a dead body or a tomb without becoming ritually unclean (this is why sepulchres were whitened; because of their greater visibility, people were less likely to bump into them accidentally); but this man even lived in the tombs. Pigs were regarded as unclean animals, and would never be found in Jewish territory. In addition, Jews had a great fear of water; they were no sailors; for them the sea was the abode of Leviathan, the monster of the deep. So the possessed man was surrounded and invaded by vile forces.

By the end of the story the demons have left the man and taken up residence in the pigs, the most appropriate place for them; and the pigs have plunged into the water to join Leviathan. Meanwhile, the man is “clothed and in his right mind,” and is told by Jesus to go home to his family and friends. Everything has returned to its proper place.... If it were a film it would fade out with a shot of Bertrand Russell seated at home enjoying a fry.
When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.' So he went with him.

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

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader’s house to say, ‘Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?’ But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, ‘Do not fear, only believe.’ He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, ‘Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.’ And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, ‘Talitha cum’, which means, ‘Little girl, get up!’ And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

The Old Testament took thousands of years to unfold, but the events recounted in the gospels unfolded in just a couple of years. Mark’s gospel in particular leaves an impression of breathless haste; it is like a child telling a story. Many sentences begin with “And”; he often uses phrases like “straight away”, “and immediately”; he uses the ‘historic present’ (“Jesus says to them,” not “said”), which gives a feeling of urgency. He also ‘sandwiches’ events, adding to the feeling of urgency: in today’s reading, for example, Jesus healed the woman while he was on his way to save the little girl. There is an urgency about the whole gospel that makes it quite clear it is not just for reading but for doing.

Coming back to the beginning of the passage: look at the synagogue official. Synagogue officials differ – or rather their circumstances differ. In Lk 13:14 we saw an angry one: he was angry that Jesus healed an old lady on the sabbath. But in today’s reading we see one who “threw himself at Jesus’ feet and asked him earnestly” to heal his little daughter who was dying. It would be wonderful if we knew that it was the same official! There is nothing like a crisis to restore our humanity: not any kind of crisis but one of the heart. Any crisis that only challenges your mind is not deeply challenging; you are not really open till your heart is open. Your real inside is not your mind but your heart. Culture and travel and training can open your mind, but that isn’t much. You are not open till your heart is exposed. As soon as the official had a sick child he ceased to be an official and became a father.

The words Jesus spoke to the little girl in the ‘outer layer’ story are quoted in Aramaic, his native language: *talitha kumi*, “little girl, get up!” The New Testament is written in Greek, but the writers kept just a few words in Hebrew and Aramaic: *Abba!* for example, and at the
very end of the New Testament, maranatha. And *talitha kumi*, an expression of great gentleness and tenderness. It must have been as distinctive as his prayer; they remembered it forever in its own language. *Talitha kumi.*
31 January
Mk 6:1-6
Jesus came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offence at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching.

“They took offence at him.” What was his offence? His background was the same as theirs; he was just like them: “Is not this the carpenter?” But he had not remained in the role the village had assigned to him. Villages can be intensely conservative places. The word ‘conservative’ is in itself a good word: to conserve is to keep intact, to guard. But everything depends on what one is trying to conserve: the best or the worst. Because of the human capacity for self-deception, we can use a fine word to make mean things look good. In the reaction of the villagers to Jesus a narrow village mentality showed itself.

The smaller the society, the more controlling this narrow spirit. “Beneath the charm of the rural town or village, there often lurks a lethal intolerance.” Nazareth was such a place. People who have known you all your life see you as the child you were, even when you are a middle-aged man or woman. They see where you came from and they remember all your youthful mistakes. If they are villagers they also want to make sure you are not getting above yourself; “who does he think he is?” This is a sort of envy, or perhaps something more primitive: a tribal spirit. It tries to destroy you, or at least to discredit you, if you are not just like everyone else.

So we are safe if we don’t live in villages? Unfortunately no. A whole section of society, or even a whole society, can lock itself into a village mentality. Listen for the worst accents of the village in some television programmes, or from some politicians; look for them in the printed media. There we can see, for better and for worse alike, the global village.

The terrible fact is that it works. It tied Jesus's hands: “he could work no miracles there” (v.5). It is a frightful thought that we have the ability to prevent miracles. The villagers wanted to keep him within his limitations: he was a carpenter and the son of a carpenter. But elsewhere the gospel says “he broke through their midst and went his way” (Lk 4:30). We have to break through the midst of many things in order to become adult Christians. Many people, even in the Church, will try to keep us in a pre-adult state. Yes, Jesus said we must be like children: we must have their qualities of simplicity, honesty, freshness…. “Like children,” he said. We must be adults who are like children, not children who are like adults.