

GOSPEL COMMENTARIES

1 December

Lk 21:29-33

Jesus told the disciples a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

When someone claims to be spiritually advanced, said the Sufi mystic Ahmed Al-'Alawi, ask them about union with God. "See if his being reflects it. If he says God is distant, this is because he himself is far from God. But if he says God is near, count him most worthy."

"The Kingdom of God is near," Jesus said (Lk 21:31; Mt 3:2; 4:17; 10:7). It could not be nearer; it is among you, he said. It is present in him.

When there's no distance there's no room for rationalising or postponing, no room even for straight thinking. We set great store by thinking, and of course it is one aspect of the light that is in us. But there is a kind of light that looks at first like darkness. It is the light the mystics speak of. Read these verses from *The Dark Night*, the best known poem of St John of the Cross:

*One dark night,
fired with love's urgent longings
- ah, the sheer grace! -
I went out unseen,
my house being now all stilled.*

*In darkness, and secure,
by the secret ladder, disguised,
- ah, the sheer grace! -
in darkness and concealment,
my house being now all stilled.*

*On that glad night
in secret, for no one saw me,
nor did I look at anything
with no other light or guide
than the one that burned in my heart.*

*This guided me
more surely than the light of noon
to where he was awaiting me
- him I knew so well -
there in a place where no one appeared.*

*O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that has united
the Lover with his beloved,
transforming the beloved in her Lover....*

2 December

Lk 21:34-36

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

End-times! Today is the last day of the present liturgical year. It has not come upon us suddenly: for a while now the readings have had an ominous note, a kind of foreboding.

It is important to celebrate the end of things, and not just the beginnings. If we don't celebrate the end, it will not fully end, and therefore there will be no fresh beginning. Say goodbye to many things today! Make it your practice, all day long. Goodbye, goodbye! You are making space for a new creation. God is going to do a new thing.

I knew a man who would defend fanatically everything he had ever identified with in any way, while all the rest he regarded as rubbish. It did not matter at all that this identification was often purely accidental, or very superficial or only imagined; once he put his ego into something, no external force could separate them. If, for example, he had visited a place where no one else in the company had been, that became the only place in the world worth visiting; if he read a book, that alone promoted it to a classic; if he had shaken some politician's hand, that politician became the saviour of the nation. He was a man who was unable to die to himself, unable even to die to anything he ever said or did or thought. He was a man with a keen interest in the Liturgy. He celebrated, of course, this end-season every year – for more than sixty years – yet he never learned a single thing about ending, about dying to oneself and to all things. Still...he died!

3 December [First Sunday of Advent]

Mk 13:33-37

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

For many people two of the hardest tasks each day are to get up and to go to bed. They are not separate of course; they are really two sides of the same task. It is because we don't go to bed on time that we can't get up, and it is because we didn't get up early that we don't want to go to bed.

Would that we experienced this problem only at the beginning and the end of a day! But it repeats itself throughout the day, in our 'waking' hours. We find it hard to finish things, and so we are seldom completely ready for the next thing when it begins.

Like the great spiritual teachers of all times Jesus kept saying, "Wake up!" (Matthew 25:13; Mark 13:33; 14:38; Luke 21:36). He did not mean (as some have meant) that this life was a nightmare from which we would do well to awake; Jesus had no hatred of this life, and would never have called it "a bad dream between two awakenings." Rather he meant that by being asleep we were missing the wonder of what God was doing. He meant something like that great line in Genesis, "Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it!'" (28:16).

Advent is the season when we hear that wake-up call repeatedly, as in today's gospel reading. The master of the house, Jesus said, could come at any moment. Later, the first Christians expected the Second Coming of Jesus in their own lifetime, but as time passed they had to get used to a longer perspective. This was difficult for them, and they had to struggle to make sense of it. Peter did so by quoting Psalm 89, "To your eyes a thousand years are like yesterday, come and gone, no more than a watch in the night." (2 Peter 3:8). Paul had to tell the Thessalonians to get back to work: "We hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living" (2 Thessalonians 3:11-12).

"Oh, that you would tear the heavens open and come down!" cried Isaiah (today's first reading). Julian of Norwich (14th century) prayed to God for a deeper longing for God. She longed to long more for God. She called it a wound, "the wound of longing." Our world no longer struggles with this. On the contrary we look for complete fulfilment through our own work; and we expect nothing to happen (unless it be of a scientific nature). Many now expect nothing really from their religion, and some even see it as an obstacle to life. In *The White Peacock* D.H. Lawrence described a new friend of his. "He was very good stuff. He had hardly a single dogma, save that of pleasing himself. Religion was nothing to him. So he heard all I had to say with an open mind." The myth is to think that pleasing only oneself doesn't close the mind. Nothing closes it more effectively. By God's grace we may feel some opening of the "wound of longing" in this Advent season. We are never finished with our work, and so we are never ready for the completely new. We need to be reminded again to look up from our frenzied labour, to wake up from our dream, to awaken our spirit to the master who can come at any moment.

4 December

Mt 8:5-11

When Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralysed, in terrible distress." And he said to him, "I will come and cure him." The centurion answered, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,

Twice in the gospels Jesus is said to have been "amazed": first, at the pagan centurion's faith (today's reading), and secondly, at the contrasting lack of faith among his own townspeople (Mk 6:6). It was typical of him to turn things back to front and upside down. However, the case is not as clear-cut as it might seem.

Jesus undoubtedly had contact with Gentiles, but the outreach to Gentiles was not central to his work. When he sent out the Twelve he told them: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans" (Matthew 10:5); and on the two occasions when he healed Gentiles he did so from a distance (Matthew 8:13; 15:28). The outreach to Gentiles did not become central till after his death. So when it did, the disciples naturally combed through their memories of him for examples of his respectful treatment of Gentiles.

Matthew makes it quite clear in today's passage that discipleship demands a clean cut with religious, cultural and ethnic prejudices. He was a Jew writing for Jews, and he knew that hatred of the Romans would come natural to them – especially officers of the Roman army. This would be especially true after the destruction of the Temple and the scattering of the nation after the year 70. But Matthew goes even further and reminds his readers that Jesus even required them to *love* their enemies. "But I say to you, *Love your enemies* and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:44-45).

Some Christians with a militant turn of mind almost make hatred a measure of faith: you are a true believer if you show intense hatred towards people who are different or have different views and values. But this could not come from the gospel of Matthew.

5 December

Lk 10:21-24

Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.'

Jesus was getting a taste of success. The seventy whom he had sent out with no resources, "like lambs among wolves" (Luke 10:3), had just returned full of excitement, telling of their success. His way of powerlessness was working. "He cried out in joy and in great delight, as if attuning himself to the spirit of the little ones," wrote Clement of Alexandria (150 – 215). The things that were hidden from "the wise and the intelligent of this world" – hidden by their very wisdom and intelligence – were being made visible through these simple men, these "little ones."

We put great store by our intelligence, because the whole society puts great store by it. A teacher told me that the most terrible thing you can say to a parent is that their child is unintelligent. It is seen as a bigger disgrace than any kind of misbehaviour. Not that we should be against intelligence – intelligence is one of God's gifts, and when it is allied to love it is an unstoppable force – but we must be aware that it can be used in the service of any instinct whatsoever: greed, hatred, cruelty.... It readily becomes an arm of the ego.

The kind of mind we venerate is the adult mind: especially that of the scientist, the investigator, the barrister, the journalist. These are logical, critical, suspicious, judgmental.... You can know a lot about theology with this kind of mind, but you cannot know God. Every disciple needs to learn again to see like a child; we must be like children, Jesus said, if we are to enter the Kingdom of God – which means the *Presence of God*. We have to become like children if we are to understand God's newest deed – which is a Child.

6 December

Mt 15:29-37

Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, and went up the mountain, where he sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way." The disciples said to him, "Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?" Jesus asked them, "How many loaves have you?" They said, "Seven, and a few small fish." Then ordering the crowd to sit down on the ground, he took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all of them ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.

There's this account of the feeding of 4,000, and in the previous chapter there's an account of the feeding of 5,000. Were there two separate events, or have we two separate accounts of a single event? This question has been asked times out of number.

Both Matthew and Mark report two miracles of the loaves: Matthew 14 = Mark 6; and Matthew 15 = Mark 8. They seem to want to distinguish them, mentioning that in the first case there were "five loaves and two fish," but in the second case "seven loaves and a few fish." The first meal came at the end of his ministry in Galilee, and the second at the end of his brief ministry to the Gentiles. The third meal, the Last Supper, was at the end of his entire ministry.

St Augustine thought there must have been two separate events, "Wherever anything is done by the Lord, and the accounts of it by any two Evangelists seem irreconcilable, we may understand them as two distinct occurrences, of which one is related by one Evangelist, and one by another."

But a modern scholar (McKenzie), noting that the same doublet is found in the earliest gospel, Mark's, and that in all cases the accounts have Eucharistic overtones, writes, "That this story should have given rise to variant forms so early may indicate that it was very often told; and this in turn suggests that the connection of the story with the Eucharistic rite was present from the beginning."

It is easy to imagine this story being told over and over again to a great variety of congregations from the earliest times, as they celebrated the Eucharist. They are our ancestors in the faith. Each time they heard the story (in the version we are reading today) they heard also that the disciples came bringing "the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others." Those early Mass-goers could identify themselves with that. We are one with them in that, because in different ways we are all blind and deaf and maimed....

7 December

Mt 7:21, 24-27

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell--and great was its fall!"

"I love you, Lord, my strength, / My rock, my fortress, my saviour. / My God is the rock where I take refuge..." (Psalm 17). These are strong images of God, and there are times when that is just what we need. It is when we feel most insecure that we long for security and safety. The little orphan girl always wept when they sang *Rock of Ages*. Psalm 17 continues: "The waves of death rose about me; / The torrents of destruction assailed me." That is why the writer of the psalm calls God a rock and a fortress.

A person who feels powerless calls on a God of power, and that seems all right. But a person who feels powerful and calls on a God of power is very likely to be calling on just a bigger version of himself. (That was Nietzsche's understanding of theology.) So when you feel strong and healthy, use soft or fluid images of God. There are many of them in the Scriptures.

Sand is made of rock, but it has the characteristics of a fluid. As a foundation for a house, it doesn't have the best of both; it has the worst of both. It is neither strong nor weak, neither hard nor soft, neither fixed nor unfixed.

Sand reminds me of words. Words give the impression of fixity, but they pour like sand; and they are as numerous as grains of sand. They are no foundation for a life. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." Our life is not a spectacle to be commented on but a reality to be lived with gusto. Meister Eckhart wrote, "When St Paul had done a lot of talking to the Lord, and the Lord had reasoned much with him, that produced nothing, until he surrendered his will, and said: 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' Then the Lord showed him clearly what he ought to do. So too, when the angel appeared to our Lady, nothing either she or he had to say would ever have made her the Mother of God, but as soon as she gave up her own will, at that moment she became a true mother of the everlasting Word and she conceived God immediately, who became her Son by nature. Nor can anything make a true human being except giving up one's will."

8 December [Immaculate Conception]

Lk 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

On the face of it, today's reading seems quite like the angel's visit to Zechariah announcing the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:8-20). But when you look more closely you see that they are set in clear contrast to each other. Zechariah was standing right at the centre of the nation's place of worship, and "the whole assembly of the people was praying outside," but Mary was a tiny unknown figure, remote from all centres of power. Mary's demeanour too is contrasted with Zechariah's: she takes God at his word, unlike the argumentative Zechariah; she is seen as the model believer. It is a subtle contrast: she too had a question, similar to Zechariah's question, but there are many different kinds of 'why' (or 'how'). Zechariah's question was literally, "by what shall I know this?" (*kata ti*); as if asking for independent confirmation; while Mary's was simply "how" (*pos*). Meister Eckhart said in one of his sermons that we should not ask 'why'. At first sight this is surprising; he was an academic theologian whose business it was to ask many whys. But he was also clear about the differences. There is the 'why' that is like locking a door ("I will admit only what I can understand"), and there is the why that is like opening a door, wanting to enter more deeply. Mary's 'why', I imagine, was of the second kind.

Though Mary appears in a perfect light, it is clear that it is not her virtue that has earned her the great honour that is to come. The angel's greeting makes it clear. "Favoured one," *kecharitomene*; what is coming to her is God's gift, not reward for virtue. In the biblical passage the favour being offered was, of course, the conception of Jesus in her womb. There is nothing in the Scriptures about the beginnings of Mary's own life, and no mention of course of her conception (which is what today's feast is about), so the Liturgy takes today's passage instead.

Mary is the model of Christian discipleship. When her story is presented only as the story of her special privileges, that role is being taken from her. When we only stress her differences from us we are subtly pushing her away. There have been many aberrations of Marian piety, and we need to stay close to the authentic tradition. St Ambrose gave it luminous expression in his comment on this passage. "Every soul who has believed both conceives and generates the Word of God and recognises his works. Let the soul of Mary be in each one of you to magnify the Lord. Let the spirit of Mary be in each one to exult in Christ."

9 December

Mt 9:35—10:1, 5a, 6-8

Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest." Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

When you hear radio advertising in a language you don't understand, you could be led to believe that the world was coming to an end. Such excitement, such urgency! But when you know the language you realise it's only about soap powder, or foods that make you lose weight. It is untruthful, it's designed to lead you astray. It devalues language and human feeling. There are real urgencies and tragedies and wonders in the world, but the language in which they might be described has been used up by the advertising industry. The house is on fire and there are people everywhere shouting, "This way! This way!" as they direct us into brush-closets or attics. It's not that we have no shepherds to direct us; it's that we have millions of them who don't care what happens to us.

We are at the mercy of the advertisers when we believe that fulfilment is not to be had in the present but in the future. They exploit our dissatisfaction with life as it is. The promise they hold out to us – that we can be fulfilled in the future – is a false promise. That's how they can continue year after year, generation after generation. No one was ever fulfilled in the future; if we refuse to live in the present, we are refusing to live, and no product will ever remedy that.

We are "harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd." What is surprising, when you think about it, is that these words were first used to describe a tiny 1st-century population, hardly more than a tribe. If they were to see the confusion we are in today!

Where does hope lie? It's intriguing to think that the change we see in time does not go all the way down. What is really intriguing is what lies below that. If we have glimpses of that we have glimpses into the heart of humanity – and into the heart of God, which is called the Kingdom of God

10 December [Second Sunday of Advent]

Mk 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "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."

These are the first words of the earliest gospel. It is the gospel that will be with us most often during this present Liturgical year. Mark's is also the shortest of the four gospels, and was probably written sometime between 60 and 70 AD. In the first thirty (or so) years of its life the Church had no written gospels. What it had was an oral tradition: memories shared by people who had known Jesus, or who knew people who had known him.

It is "good news," Mark writes, even though there is a strong emphasis throughout on the suffering of Jesus, and the final third of this short gospel is devoted to the last week of his life. How such a tragic story could be good news is the mystery we are plunged into from the opening words. Clearly, it is only with hindsight that anyone could call it good news. That hindsight is provided by the resurrection.

'Provided'? We should not be too quick to provide the solution to this tragic story. The resurrection does not slip into place like the final piece of a jigsaw puzzle. Unlike all the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, the last piece is no surprise. But the resurrection is from beyond the frame, so it is right to speak of "the surprise of the resurrection." In Mark's gospel Jesus seems reluctant even to be recognised as the Messiah, the Promised One; he refers to himself only as the "Son of Man," and orders his followers to tell no one about him until after his resurrection (Mark 9:9); this is called the "Messianic Secret".

In this Advent season we are to let the story develop in its own way, so that we too can experience the surprise of the resurrection. We are not advised to skip to the end. And so, like many a story, Mark's gospel begins at a certain distance from the main subject. It begins with John the Baptist. Next Sunday's gospel reading is also about him. The point seems to be that we have to learn to wait – a difficult thing for us who move so fast, and who tend to concentrate on facts rather than their meaning, and who prefer to see results rather than contemplate their causes. Advent is a season of depth, and waiting....

11 December

Lk 5:17-26

One day, while Jesus was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. Just then some men came, carrying a paralysed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. When he saw their faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you.' Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, 'Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?' When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven you", or to say, "Stand up and walk"? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he said to the one who was paralysed—'I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.' Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, 'We have seen strange things today.'

The Pharisees and teachers of the Law were "sitting there," the account says; and the paralysed man was lying on his mat. They were as paralysed as he: they in their 'seat of learning', he in his bed of pain. Jesus said to him, "Get up!" and he got up and walked. But by the end of the story the Pharisees and teachers of the Law are still seated. Their version of their religion wasn't such as to enable, or even to allow, anyone (even themselves) to get up and move. The effect of religious teaching, all too often, is to keep some people lying down and the rest seated in judgment. The effect of real religion is to raise people up. Our faith gives us "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16): his life's work, he said, was "to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free..." (Luke 4:18).

A Christian who went to study Zen in Japan met a Zen master who asked her what was moving in her spiritual life. "I dwell a lot recently on the idea of the Kingdom of God," she replied. Instantly he said, "Show me the Kingdom of God!" You get nowhere by telling a Zen master about your ideas. That woman became a Zen master herself eventually, and she spent much of her time and energy in prison ministry – setting captives inwardly free. She *showed* us the Kingdom of God.

12 December

Mt 18:12-14

What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

A neighbour long ago had twelve children, and when the eldest emigrated to America she was heart-broken. That evening she said to the others through her tears, "It's easy to count you now!" (or, as she said it, "'Tis aisy to count ye now!"). That's how mothers think: not in numbers or percentages. That seems to be how God thinks too.

God doesn't think in percentages. The head makes distinctions and oppositions; it thinks in numbers and percentages. In Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, one of the characters, on hearing that one of the two thieves crucified with Jesus was saved, remarked, "It was a fair percentage!" The shepherd in today's Gospel passage, had he been working only with his head, would have found 99% quite satisfactory. But he was working from his heart, which knows nothing about percentages, and he went searching for the one that was lost. That's the nature of the heart.

Compare it with the following, "Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said [to the Sanhedrin], 'You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed'" (Jn 11:49-50). In other words, since it was politically expedient it was all right to put an innocent man to death. Caiaphas was the high priest, but he thought like a politician, an unscrupulous one at that. It should serve for all time as a warning to all priests, high and low. And to every Christian.

13 December

Mt 11:28-30

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

As a carpenter Jesus would have made many yokes for donkeys, mules and horses. He would know the difference between one that fitted well and one that chafed the animal's neck. A well-made yoke is called 'easy'; it is comfortable on the animal; a badly-made one must be torture. He said his way was an easy yoke. It may tire you but it does not frustrate you. He doesn't ask you to drag your life along on open wounds. He keys into your real strengths, he doesn't harp on weaknesses that you show in the course of the work.

Rabbis spoke about "the burden of the Law." "My burden is light," Jesus said. He could say this because he was not binding up heavy burdens to lay them on our shoulders – which is what he accused the scribes and Pharisees of doing (Matthew 23:4). He may ask us to bear burdens much heavier than any the scribes or Pharisees envisaged: justice and mercy. But, unlike them, he first captivates the heart.

He captivates the heart because he is himself "gentle and humble in heart." He has no strategy, no technique – those things we put such trust in. "How unnecessary is it to teach an art of loving!" wrote Mde Guyon (1648-1717). "The best way to learn the love of God is to love God. The ignorant and simple, because they have more heart and greater simplicity, often excel in it. The Spirit of God needs none of our arrangements and methods; when it pleases him, he turns shepherds into prophets: and, so far from excluding any from the Temple of Prayer, he throws wide the gates, that all may enter; while Wisdom cries aloud in the streets, 'Whoever is simple let them turn in here' (Proverbs 9:4)... And does not Jesus Christ himself thank his Father for having hidden the secrets of his kingdom from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children? (Matthew 11: 25)."

When the yoke is easy, nearly every burden seems light.

14 December

Mt 11:11-15

Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. Let anyone with ears listen!"

Jesus said, equivalently, that John the Baptist was the greatest man (or among the greatest) who ever lived. Yet, he added, "the least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than he." The expression 'the least' is the superlative form of the expression 'little one'. 'Little ones' is the term used for disciples (see 10:42; 18:6, 10, 14); so 'the least' is the least disciple. The greatest man who ever lived thundered judgment, but even the least disciple knows the greater depth and the superior power of love.

The scholars have found no satisfactory interpretation of the middle part of today's reading. Enough for us to meditate on the strange paradox that power is ultimately weak, and weakness ultimately powerful. "When I am weak, then I am strong," wrote St Paul (2 Corinthians 12:10). Expand it from your own experience: when I fail, I learn more (and more deeply) than when I win; when I am disappointed, I begin to emerge from the fog of my illusions and touch reality; when I stop trying to surpass myself, I discover only then that I have been trying to abandon the child in me who alone will enter the kingdom of heaven....

15 December

Mt 11:16-19

Jesus said, 'To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.'

Today's reading indicates that the teaching of Jesus was not getting through to his hearers. There was widespread disaffection. The people rejected John because he was too different from them and Jesus because he was not like John.

It was said of the population of ancient Rome that they were interested only in "bread and circuses." Bread to kill the real ache in the stomach, circuses to set up a fictional ache in the heart. Tolstoy (or was it Dostoyevsky?) used to be very impressed, when he was a child, by the tears his mother shed in the theatre; she must have a really compassionate nature, he thought. But later in his life he remembered the coachman who had to wait outside the theatre in sub-zero temperatures – she had no compassion for the real man, only for the fictional.

Jesus rejected the temptation to fame (Lk 4:9-12). He rejected theatre. And so he was not a success. Celebrities in our own time sacrifice their lives to fame: they have to court their fans, knowing that that these same fans could turn on them mercilessly in a moment. Yes, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Mt 21:6-11) had a touch of theatre about it; and inevitably the crowd that shouted 'Hosanna!' were soon shouting 'Crucify him!'

Jesus had no illusions. That's who he is: the one who has no illusions.

16 December
Mt 17:9, 10-13

The disciples asked Jesus, 'Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' He replied, 'Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognise him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.' Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.

Illusions are soft comfortable things usually. They are cushions against reality. Whoever thinks that faith is a flight from reality must never have read the psalms or the New Testament. What we see there is an overwhelming realism. There are few of us, probably, who wouldn't describe ourselves as realists; but you could have realism coupled with self-indulgence, or with heroic pessimism, or with cynicism.... But in the Scriptures realism is coupled with faith in God. "They will make the Son of Man suffer."

Jesus predicted his suffering, to prepare his disciples for the shock. But otherwise he never talked or complained about it. When you talk about your suffering you are creating a distance between you and it; you are not 'suffering' your suffering ('to suffer' originally meant 'to allow'). It cannot work its chemistry in you if you don't let it come near – in fact, nearer than near: you have to become one with it. When you are one with it, there is no distance and therefore no talk.

When you talk about your suffering, people are usually too polite to change the subject. How boring a subject it is! People have too much suffering of their own, and they don't know what to do with yours. If you said you had a leaking roof they could offer to fix it for you, but what can they do about your suffering if all you can do about it yourself is talk? And behind the talk they can often sense a plea for pity and sympathy; they sense that you are trying to make capital out of it. Instead we have to make a life out of it.

17 December [Third Sunday of Advent]

Jn 1:6-8, 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 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.

The first line of last Sunday's gospel reading introduced "Jesus Christ, Son of God." Today's readings (particularly the first, and also the responsorial psalm) show him as "Saviour". These together were the earliest affirmation of faith in Jesus: "Jesus Christ, Son of God and Saviour," in Greek, Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ Υἱὸς Σωτὴρ - *Iesous Christos Theou Uios Soter*. The initial letters of these words taken together – ICHTHUS – happen to mean 'fish'. And so the fish became the secret sign of being a Christian in the times of persecution. It can be seen scratched on the walls of the catacombs in Rome.



John the Baptist was a rough-cut individual, appearing from the desert, fulminating against the people, and offering a "baptism of repentance." We mustn't think yet of Christian baptism. John's was a kind of moral baptism. They were turbulent times, and people were looking for a powerful and charismatic leader. John could be the one. The people thronged the him, wanting to signal their identification with him through a symbolic cleansing of sin: immersion in the Jordan (the word 'baptism' means 'plunging').

But John was clear about the limits of his own message. He pointed to another and greater leader to come. "I baptise with water... he baptises with the Holy Spirit" (Jn 1:26, 33). In other words, I plunge you in water, but he will plunge you in God's Spirit.

There is a world of difference between what we might call 'salvation from below' and 'salvation from above'. Today there is a great attraction in the first: our world has countless self-improvement programmes, and many people are greatly helped by this or that one. However, there is some built-in limitation in all of these. What if I were to succeed in improving myself, according to own view? It is always in danger of being a Pyrrhic victory, because the 'I' that is improving itself may be entrenching itself even deeper in itself. In Zen they call it 'polishing the tile', after an anecdote about a monk who was attempting to turn a tile into a mirror by polishing it. The best things, we discover, are *given*, not *produced*. In Christian terms we speak of the "grace of God". The word 'grace' means 'gift'. A gift is from beyond, so I can receive it in simplicity of heart, without the ego's double-binds. This is 'salvation from above'. Far from excluding the other, it comes most

often when the other has been taken to its limit and has run aground. If I improve myself I can experience a certain *satisfaction*, but when the grace of God floods me I know what is meant by *joy*. Joy is from beyond.

The contrast between John the Baptist and Jesus is fascinating, and the Liturgy gives us many opportunities throughout the year to study it. Jesus once said, "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (John 11:11; Luke 7:28).

18 December

Mt 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,

Christmas is now upon us – the season in which we celebrate the Saviour's birth. But December 25th was almost certainly not the day of his birth! That date was not settled on till the year 440 A.D. I remember being severely hassled on this very point by a Jehovah's Witness. To him it summed up the tissue of lies that he took the Catholic Church to be. Would it affect your faith if you heard that Jesus was born in the middle of August, for instance, or at the end of February...? Would it at least ruin your Christmas? Would it shock you even more to know that scholars are not even sure of the year of his birth? But one thing is sure: he was not born in the year 0, because there was no such year. (1 BC was followed immediately by 1 AD.) His birth is usually put at 3 or 4 BC.

Christmas festivals, generally observed by Christians since the 4th century, incorporate pagan customs, such as the use of holly, mistletoe, Yule logs, and so on. Many things that we might have imagined deriving from Bethlehem itself are of much more recent origin. The Christmas tree, an evergreen trimmed with lights and other decorations, is derived from the so-called paradise tree, symbolising Eden, of German mystery plays. The use of a Christmas tree began in the early 1600s, in Strasbourg, France, spreading from there through Germany and then into northern Europe. In 1841 Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria, introduced the Christmas tree custom to Britain. Emigrants from Britain carried the custom to America.

Meanwhile, Dutch settlers in America had brought with them the custom of celebrating St. Nicholas' Day on December 6, and especially St. Nicholas' Eve, when gifts were given to children, of whom the saint was patron. British settlers there took over the tradition as part of their own Christmas Eve celebration. The English name of the legendary jolly, red-garbed man who delivers presents to good children at Christmas, Santa Claus, is derived from the name 'St Nicholas' (say it fast and it sounds like Santa Claus).

If any of that information disappoints you, let me assure you that our faith doesn't rest on dates or customs or folklore, but on the simple accounts of the life and death of Jesus that the gospels give us. It is true that St Luke takes care to show that the events he is recounting are precisely located in history: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas..." (3:1). But it is enough to know that the Word became flesh in human history; we don't need to put exact numbers on it.

Celebrating the birth of Jesus at the winter solstice has immense *symbolic* meaning, however, and that is why the date was chosen in the first place. When the days are shortest and it looks as if the sun is abandoning the world to darkness... suddenly the sun begins to return, and the days lengthen! The Sun is returning to us! It is the surprise of Newgrange, experienced since 3,200 B.C. But symbolically it is the surprise of the

Incarnation: the Light has come into a dark world.... "The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

19 December

Lk 1:5-25

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

Zechariah was standing in the holiest place on earth: in the Holy of Holies, the innermost part of the Temple. Standing there he began to look for an *explanation* of the message just given to him. But in the same instant he was struck dumb. Rightly so! The Holy of Holies is no place for explanations. Today we are still looking for explanations of everything in our religion, sometimes even reducing the whole thing to an explanation. When we are finished with our explanations there is no mystery left, no enchantment, no fascination...nothing but words. Why aren't we struck dumb?

Meister Eckhart, like many others, is called a mystic. The word means 'one who is silent'. Yet all these people had a lot to say! No doubt there have been many genuine mystics who seldom if ever spoke about their knowledge of God. But what all mystics have in common is a profound awareness that the mystery is deeper than their words. Underneath all their words is a great silence. Eckhart had a gift for removing names and labels from familiar things and allowing them to be mysterious again. Let's hear something from him on this familiar reading.

"If anyone were to ask me, Why...did God become incarnate? – I would answer, in order that God may be born in the soul and the soul be born in God. For that reason all the scriptures were written, for that reason God created the world and all angelic natures: so that God may be born in the soul and the soul be born in God.... The soul has no name. Just as no one can find a true name for God, so none can find the soul's true name, although mighty tomes have been written about this...."

For all his words, he was dumb. His experience of God had struck him dumb, like Zechariah in the Holy of Holies.

20 December

Lk 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Let Meister Eckhart provide the commentary on today's familiar reading. (We saw parts of this passage yesterday.)

"If anyone were to ask me, Why do we pray, why do we fast, why do we do all our works, why are we baptised, why (most important of all) did God become incarnate? – I would answer, in order that God may be born in the soul and the soul be born in God. For that reason all the scriptures were written; for that reason God created the world and all angelic natures: so that God may be born in the soul and the soul be born in God....

"The angel was called Gabriel'.... He angel took the name 'Gabriel' from the work of which he was a messenger, for 'Gabriel' means 'power of God'.... No one can know an angel's name. No master and no understanding ever got to where an angel received his name: perhaps he is nameless....

"The soul, too, has no name. Just as no one can find a true name for God, so none can find the soul's true name, although mighty tomes have been written about this. But she is given a name according as she has a regard to her activity.

"In this birth God works powerfully.... In God there is plenitude of power, therefore in his birth he produces his like. All that God is in power, truth and wisdom, he bears altogether in the soul."

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21 December

Lk 1:39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.

The dramatis personae don't lead us to expect anything revolutionary. They are an old woman and a young girl. Both are to give birth, true, and the birth of a child is always a potential revolution; but the old woman is really beyond the age of child-bearing (Luke 1:7) and the young girl wasn't expected to be there yet (Matthew 1:18).

However, the revolutionary language of Mary's Magnificat takes us by surprise. "He scatters the proud-hearted... he casts the mighty from their thrones and raises the lowly... he fills the starving with good things, sends the rich away empty..." If we really heard these words (which means hearing them addressed to oneself) we would be part of the revolution. But when we imagine them addressed only to others, we turn them into an ideology and we turn ourselves into an establishment.

Addressed to oneself. Who is 'oneself' in the Church? Our deepest identity is not our personal ego but our identity within the Body of Christ. "We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another" (Romans 12:5). The Magnificat is not only a call to the individual to turn his or her life around; it is a call to the Church to live by the Gospel.

The 'Liberation Theology' movement began in Latin America as a struggle for justice for the poor and oppressed of those countries. It has been criticised for relying on political methods to achieve its goals. It is true that the Gospel is not just a political ideology, and one is always in danger of coming to resemble one's opponents. But the oppressive regimes in many instances claim to be Christian and even enjoy the patronage of major Church leaders. It is therefore not a question of 'us' versus 'them'; it is not politics, but a call to conversion within the Church. In the context of the struggle for justice, Mary's Magnificat is a prophetic call to the Church to hear the cry of the poor. Its significance includes but goes beyond personal piety.

We all find ways of extracting the teeth of the Gospel so as to live in comfort with it. We are even capable of transforming it entirely into a source of comfort. The jibe about "pie in the sky when you die" doesn't really touch the nerve; many of us want pie here on earth. We catch ourselves using the imagery of the faith as an assurance that nothing changes. We have sentimentalised Mary, misinterpreting her compliance with the will of God as compliance with everything that we are accustomed to.

At Christmas we will sing about joy and peace and goodwill. Let's pray that we will not cheapen and corrupt these priceless realities. As the great 'liberation theologian' Gustavo Gutierrez said, "Christian joy comes from knowing God and from trying to follow God's will. Joy means rejoicing in God. But we can see from the Magnificat that, when Mary rejoices in God, she is also celebrating the liberating action of God in history. Mary rejoices in a God who is faithful to the poor. Our service of others must be wrapped in this joy."

22 December

Lk 1:46-56

Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Bring down the powerful from their thrones, and lift up the lowly! This is the war-cry of revolution. Revolution doesn't mean a change of fashion, it means a violent upheaval in society. Or as Mao Tse-tung wrote in 1927, "A revolution is not the same as inviting people to dinner, or writing an essay, or painting a picture.... A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another." He should know: he was responsible for the deaths of seventy million people.

What have those two gentle women, Mary and Elizabeth, in common with Mao Tse-tung, one of the world's most heartless dictators? Revolution! But surely not violence? Yes, violence too; that's the most obvious thing in both revolutions. The difference is that Mao inflicted violence on hundreds of millions of people, while John the Baptist and Jesus *endured* violence. And countless Christians have endured it through the centuries. Strangely, this kind of revolution goes on forever, while the other burns itself out in a few generations, or even sooner. The most radical revolutionary becomes a conservative on the day after the revolution - and more than a conservative, a dictator.

Did you notice that I misquoted the Magnificat at the beginning? It was a test! Mary did not say, "Bring down the powerful..." but "*God* has brought down the powerful..." That is the greatest difference between the two revolutions. The number one disciple, Peter, had chosen the way of violence, he was already using his sword, when Jesus said, "Put your sword back into its scabbard" (Jn 18:11). The greatest revolution is love, not violence.

23 December

Lk 1:57-66

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him. The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

In celebrating the memory of the saints, the Liturgy does not celebrate their birthday but usually the day of their death. There are only two exceptions: Mary the mother of Jesus, and John the Baptist. John gets preferential treatment in the Liturgy, which gives him two feast-days a year.

His humility has deeply impressed Christians through the ages. Before anyone had heard of Jesus of Nazareth, people were coming distances to see John the Baptist. Yet he pointed to Jesus and away from himself. "He must increase, I must decrease" (John 3:30). In John's gospel, the Baptist actually encouraged his disciples to leave him and to follow the Lamb of God.

He seems a grim figure; his dress and his way of speaking were equally rough. Yet the gospels associate him with *joy*. At the presence of Jesus and Mary, he leapt for joy in his mother's womb (Luke 1:44); and referring to him, Jesus said, "The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice" (John 3:29). The source of his joy was probably the humility that so characterised him. With power and success there comes a certain greedy satisfaction, but humility is spacious enough to contain joy. "My spirit *rejoices* in God my saviour," cried Mary, "He looks on his servant in her *lowliness*" (Luke 1:46-47).

Humility is not a fashionable virtue today; it would be seen rather as a condition calling for therapy – a mousey obsequiousness that could probably be traced back to an unhappy childhood. But the mere sight of John the Baptist ought to be enough to dispel that view!

24 December [Fourth Sunday of Advent]

Lk 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel as sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

When the prophets of Israel spoke of God's intervention in human history, they imagined it as another thunderous event like Exodus or Mount Sinai. No one imagined that it would be an event so hidden in ordinariness as the conception of a child.

There are many stories in world literature about the disappointment of expectation when the reality appears. The first play I ever saw in a theatre was called *Professor Tim*. The main character was an elderly and wealthy relative whose return from America was eagerly awaited by his family in Ireland. Their disappointment was extreme when he arrived. He staggered around day after day with a whiskey bottle, making caustic remarks about everybody. He was quickly ostracised by everyone (but perhaps there was one exception, probably a local down-and-out; I can't remember). At the end of the play he suddenly revealed that it was all an elaborate game to find out what they were really like. He disinherited the lot of them, and left all his wealth, I suppose, to the one person who didn't reject him.

All such stories have some resonance of the Incarnation. Some great religious happening on a mountain-top or in the skies would compel your attention; it would impress you greatly but would not sift your spirit or test your depth. It would match your expectation, and would therefore not bring you to a new awareness. It would be all 'out there', and to that extent only a spectacle. We have a great hankering for religious visions and transparent messages, even long after all the 'moving statues' have stopped appearing to move. Our religious sensibility has been deeply affected by television and the cinema. But the Incarnation comes closer to us than any spectacle; it comes behind the eye, so to speak.

I spent some time a few years ago in a Cistercian monastery. Monks have many choral Offices throughout the day, three of them being at 6 am (not the first of the day!), noon and 6 pm. As they stood in choir, waiting, facing the altar, the Angelus bell was rung. I expected that they would recite the Angelus, but instead they stood there in silence for a couple of minutes. Somehow it was deeply affecting. The Word became flesh - *this* flesh. The Word entered our world silently, unobserved. "When peaceful silence lay over all, and night had run the half of her swift course, down from the heavens, from the royal throne, leapt your all-powerful Word" (Wisdom 18:14-15).

In Nazareth the Catholics indicate Mary's house as the place of the Annunciation, while the Greek Orthodox indicate the site of the village well. Nobody knows where it took place, but the symbolism of both places is very affecting. The kitchen and the village well are

the most ordinary places in a most obscure village. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip asked. Yes, the greatest of all.

25 December [Christmas]

Jn 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

There is a kind of timelessness about Christmas: it takes us out of our routines; suddenly all the rush of preparation is over and there is nothing more to do. This could be the moment to experience something different from the perpetual motion that is our ordinary life. But what happens? We turn on the TV, which is what we may have been doing every single evening since last Christmas. No change. Then we say Christmas is boring, or sad, or too commercial.... Of course it is; it is just like all the other days. We have not allowed change to happen. We have not allowed space for anything new to appear. Paradoxically, all the flashing lights, the incessant television, the emailing and text-messaging...all have the effect of filling our lives and so leaving no space to move, no space for anything really different to appear; so we are enclosed in a cave of artificial lights that never lead us to the sun.

"The light shines in the darkness." But it does not shine in artificial light. We have to turn something off. We have to leave space and time for the new thing to appear.

The Child born today is God's new deed: the newest, the youngest, the most recent...the latest. But this is not announced in the excited voice of the advertisers; it is a silent deed. He is the Word made flesh, but he lies there as helpless to speak as any infant. Only in silence can this silent Word be heard. The new blade of grass does not make a scene or a noise; neither does the Word made flesh.

26 December [St Stephen]

Mt 10:17-22

Jesus said, "Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

It was no perfect world that Jesus was born into, but a harsh brutal place where violence is loved more than peace. "I love war..." said General Patton, "peace is going to be hell on me." And we make war in order to be able to make more war. Simone Weil wrote, "What a country calls its vital economic interests are not the things which enable its citizens to live, but the things which enable it to make war. Gasoline is much more likely than wheat to be a cause of international conflict."

Into this terrible world Jesus was born. He was the Prince of Peace in the kingdom of violence, and refused to live according to its logic, so he had to die. After him, Stephen was the first Christian martyr, the first of many.

27 December [St John, evangelist]

Jn 20:1:2-8

Mary ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;

In art St John is represented by an eagle, because (as St Augustine said) no one soared so near heaven as he did. Still, he had his feet on the ground too. It was he who showed us, rather than the institution of the Eucharist, Jesus washing the disciples' feet at the Last Supper and saying (equivalently), "Do this in memory of me." The most down-to-earth service of one another, it seems, is like another Eucharist – certainly a communion. As Eckhart put it, "Heaven can only work in the ground of the earth."

He became a disciple first of John the Baptist and then of Jesus, who called him to be an apostle and nicknamed him and his brother James 'Boanerges', "sons of thunder" (Mk 3:17). John, together with James and Peter, made up the inner group of disciples who were with Jesus on the heights and in the depths: they witnessed his Transfiguration and were present in Gethsemane. Next to Peter, John was the most active of the apostles in organising the early church in Palestine and, later, throughout Asia Minor. According to tradition, during a period of persecution of Christians by the Romans, John was banished to Patmos, where he wrote the Book of Revelation. Later he is said to have gone to Ephesus, where he wrote three Epistles and the fourth Gospel.

The prologue to that gospel begins with the language of sublimity, but soon we hear the heart-swelling words, "The Word was made flesh and lived among us, and we saw his glory...."

28 December [Holy Innocents]

Mt 2:13-18

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.' When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

*'A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'*

"Herod!" says the Office of Readings, "you slay those little ones because fear in your heart slays you." It was a penetrating psychological insight from an early Christian writer. Aggression is a manifestation of fear. But how is it that it looks just the opposite of fear? Why, because it is the *repression* of fear. If a person has not faced his own fear he will project it onto others and fight it there. If he hasn't fought the war within he will fight it without. And of course (because it is all about fear) he will pick the easiest target. Even school children discover it: deep down, bullies are cowards.

God help the innocent who become victims of the psychological twists of other people. God help the many millions of war victims throughout the world.

But the Christian spirit is not one of fear (2 Tim 1:7). Instead we are to draw courage from the suffering of those who went before. St John Chrysostom wrote, "At the birth of Christ you see a tyrant raging, a flight ensuing, and a departure into exile. It was because of no crime that his family was exiled into the land of Egypt. Similarly, you yourself need not be troubled if you are suffering countless dangers. Do not expect to be celebrated or crowned promptly for your troubles. Instead you may keep in mind the long-suffering example of the mother of the Child, bearing all things nobly, knowing that such a fugitive life is consistent with the ordering of spiritual things."

29 December

Lk 2:22-35

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

"Now I can die!" Here at the end of the year stands the serene figure of Simeon, in vivid contrast to the tortured Herod, slayer of the Innocents. Herod's death became legendary for its awfulness. But Simeon can teach us how to approach death: how not to see it as an enemy, "the prince of terrors," how not to define it as the destruction of life, but to welcome it as a culmination, a completion. If we have not lived fully, we will be terrified of death. If Simeon could approach death so beautifully, he must have lived a deep life: unlike Herod, he must have fought the war within, and come to peace with himself, with others and with God. "Now, Lord, you can let your servant go in peace." Simeon's canticle, the *Nunc Dimittis*, is part of the Night Prayer of the Church. It is a beautiful closing of the day: a lesson in how to end things, how to take one's leave....

30 December

Lk 2:36-40

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Simeon (yesterday's reading) and Anna are the two beautiful old people we meet every year at this time. How peaceful their presence is! We need them. They are grandparent figures. There has been an extraordinary poverty of wisdom on the subject of old age. Most of what poets said on the subject was about living in the past, or being dulled in all the senses, or dreading death.... Sometimes this was tempered by a mellow stoicism:

*"So mayest thou live; till, like ripe fruit, thou drop
Into thy mother's lap; or be with ease
Gathered, nor harshly plucked; for death mature:
This is Old Age." (John Milton)*

But a few lines later the atmosphere is gloom once more:

*"In thy blood will reign
A melancholy damp of cold and dry
To weigh thy spirits down, and last consume
The balm of life."*

Nor have our attitudes improved much since Milton's time. Old age and death are the test of our wisdom; they reveal where we really are when all our flights of fancy are over.

Simeon and Anna were among those known as "the Quiet of the Land." These were people who had no big dream of victories for Israel, but who lived in quietness and prayer, waiting for God; Anna was eighty-four years old, the account says; yet her spirit seems bright and fresh. Far from being out of touch, she seems more in touch than anyone. "She came up to them at that very moment...." She lived in the Now, not in the past.

31 December [Holy Family]

Lk 2:22-40

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

*"Master, now you are dismissing your servant
in peace, according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."*

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

"The child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him." This shows that they had no hindsight; they thought of themselves in every way as normal people. This is their connection with us. Had they thought themselves special from birth, they would be as distant from us as a royal family. But we see them following the ordinary custom of presenting the child in the Temple, and their offering is the offering of the poor.

When something is actually happening we have no hindsight on it. Of course we see things more clearly with hindsight; hindsight is always 20/20, as someone said. But in a way it can be a false and garish light. It judges people in the light of events that they could not have known about; it allows them no future, no development, because we see their future already present in everything they do and say. It flattens out their life like a sheet of paper on which everything is visible simultaneously.

It was the hindsight of the Resurrection, of course, that enabled the disciples to see the life of Jesus in a new light. But this new light of faith did not and was never meant to nullify his earthly life. The early heresies of Docetism and Monophysitism fell into this very trap. Trace elements of these early heresies lived on in mainline theology, and many theologians of the past would have held that Jesus knew all human languages and every event in future history. If that were the case he could hardly be said to be like us in all things but sin: "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). This tendency can be seen in some popular devotions, and we have to be careful lest while stressing the divinity of Christ we diminish his humanity and turn

the events of his life into a melodrama. The teaching of the Church is that he is fully divine and fully human.

It is our family that makes and keeps us human. We were welded into it before we were born; it is our anchor in human history. Scholars believe that the gospel accounts (in Matthew and Luke) of Jesus' childhood were not in the original form of the gospels but were added on at an early stage because they were needed to keep the story of Jesus anchored in this life.

In the West we now tend to think of the family as the 'nuclear family': father, mother and child. Then we project this onto the family of Jesus. But an Eastern family, even to this day, comprises a hundred people or more (this is how Jesus managed to get lost in the Temple). In today's first reading, Abram complained to God of having no children. Then "God brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.... So shall your descendants be.'" Nothing about a nuclear family.

Jesus too was part of an extended family. But that physical family was nothing compared to the spiritual family of disciples through the ages and through the whole world. We all have our part in extending it. Every time we extend a hand to a neighbour or a stranger we are extending that great family. With legitimate hindsight we can see his spiritual family continuing to extend till it includes the whole world.

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.

3 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!

4 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.

5 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.

6 January

Lk 3:23-38

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 Matthat, son of Levi, son of Melchi, son of Jannai, son of Joseph, son of Mattathias, son of Amos, son of Nahum, son of Esli, 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 Admin, 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.

7 January [Epiphany]

Mt 2:1-12

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 him 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.