When Jesus came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs coming out of the tombs met him. They were so fierce that no one could pass that way. Suddenly they shouted, "What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?" Now a large herd of swine was feeding at some distance from them. The demons begged him, "If you cast us out, send us into the herd of swine." And he said to them, "Go!" So they came out and entered the swine; and suddenly, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and perished in the water. The swineherds ran off, and going into the town, they told the whole story about what had happened to the demoniacs. Then the whole town came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their neighborhood.

The city of Gadara was in pagan territory, and so it was "unclean" to Jews. It is not surprising to find pigs there: these were "unclean" animals, which no Jew would ever have on the land. In this unclean place they were met by two demoniacs who lived in the tombs. For Jews, a dead body was "unclean", so tombs were "unclean" places. To touch a tomb, even accidentally, was to become ritually unclean. Only a demoniac would think of living in one. Everything in this story, then, is unclean, untouchable. At least it was appropriate that all these unclean things and people should be in the one place. There's a kind of right order in that.

By the end of the story Jesus has rearranged everything: the demons have gone into the pigs, which in turn have gone into the water. Jews had a great fear of water – for them the sea was the abode of Leviathan, the monster of the deep – so it was appropriate that the pigs should end up there. [Jesus’ walking on water (Mt 14:26) was a symbol of his power over evil.] Besides, water was also considered fatal to demons: so it was right that they too should end up there. Meanwhile (in Mark’s account) the demoniac was “clothed and in his right mind” (5:15): he was restored to his family. Thus, in this story, Jesus restores everything to its proper place. He establishes right order.

But the other order could be said to be right too, in a sense. The local people were happy with it. They begged Jesus to go away: he had upset the arrangement of their world. Yet, does that really make it right? As Shakespeare said, "We do not keep the outward form of order, where there is deep disorder in the mind." I am bound to keep asking: what are the arrangements in my life that seem ‘right’ to me (at least in the sense of being familiar), but which are far from right...?
Mt 9:1-8

After getting into a boat Jesus crossed the water and came to his own town. And just then some people were carrying a paralysed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.’ Then some of the scribes said to themselves, ‘This man is blaspheming.’ But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, ‘Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, “Your sins are forgiven”, 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 then said to the paralytic—‘Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.’ And he stood up and went to his home. When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings.

Fergus Kerr OP, author of the highly significant book Theology after Wittgenstein (first published in 1986), identified two great pathologies of the western mind: 1. the divide between the individual and the community, and 2. the divide between body and mind; and he showed how Wittgenstein’s philosophy represents a healing of these divides.

In today’s gospel reading we see how close this is to the healing work of Jesus. In the story we see both of these divides being bridged by Jesus.

1. “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic....” He did not enquire about the paralytic’s own faith. Peter Chrysologus (380 – 450 AD) had this to say about this verse: “God does not inquire into the wants of those who are deliriously ill.... A doctor does not inquire into or examine the wishes of such a patient.” The point, I think, is that we are always a community of faith. For about four centuries now the western world has laboured under philosophies that are profoundly individualistic; all meaning is thought to repose in the individual rather than in the society or even the family. It was on this basis that the theory of Limbo (only recently disowned by the Church) was constructed. Even new-born babies, dying before they could be baptised, were thought to be on their own before God; the faith of their parents had no bearing on their destiny, and they could not be buried in consecrated ground. This, even though St Paul, writing about marriage between believers and unbelievers, had written: “The unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy” (1 Cor 7:14). We need not imagine that we have entirely cast off the individualistic mindset.

2. The other great divide in western philosophies has been that between body and soul (or, depending on the particular interest, body and mind, or body and spirit). St John Chrysostom (349 – 407 AD) wrote, “[Christ] heals the paralytic in both soul and body. The healing of the soul is made evident through the healing of the body, even while the body still remains a creature crawling on the ground.” Central to the Christian faith is the affirmation that the Word became flesh. It is surprising that in a part of the world shaped in large measure by the Christian faith we should ever have been tempted to divide body and spirit.

The two great divides were expressed together in a leaflet that was handed out at a parish mission in my childhood. On it were written the words: “Remember, man, thou hast but one soul to save. And after that, the judgment.” (There were no women in the world in those days!) There is no mention of community; and there was no life of the body. There was just one soul. And the appeal was to fear, not to love. It was a far cry from St Paul’s teaching that we are the body of Christ and members of one another: see Col 1:18; Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:13). Pius XII attempted to reinvigorate this teaching in 1943 in an encyclical letter entitled
Mystici Corporis. “The unbroken tradition of the Fathers from the earliest times,” he wrote, “teaches that the Divine Redeemer and the Church which is His Body form but one mystical person, that is to say, the whole Christ.” We still have much need for healing at these two sick places of the soul.
3 July [St Thomas, apostle]
Jn 20:24-29
Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

The others said to Thomas, “We have seen....” Thomas said, “Until I have seen....” What's the difference? None. The others believed because they had seen; why shouldn't Thomas make the same condition? Francis Bacon suggested that when you begin with certainty you end with doubt, but when you begin with doubt you end with certainty. If there's any truth in that, then Thomas should be happy to be nicknamed “Doubting Thomas.” He did indeed end with certainty – when he saw the Lord just as the others had seen him. Then the Lord encouraged his experimental method even further. He invited Thomas to “put your finger here and see my hands; stretch out your hand and put it into my side.”

Of course the gospel writer has us in mind. Like Thomas, we're late on the scene – much later. We have to be reassured; we are the real Doubting Thomases. And Thomas's method is still good. Everything has to come back at last to experience. “Today,” wrote St Bernard of Clairvaux in the 12th century, “we read the book of experience.” That sentence is so fresh that it might have been written this morning.

We need to be reassured that our experience, however painful or discouraging, has the power to bring us to Christ. Most of us know the wounds of Christ first-hand. I talked with a woman who lives, you could say, in the side of Christ. Many have lived there, throughout the ages. “We are now dying with him on his cross, in his pains and Passion,” wrote Julian of Norwich in the 14th century, “and when we deliberately remain on that same cross, holding on to the very end, with his help and grace, then suddenly we shall see his expression change and we shall be with him in heaven. Without a moment’s break we shall pass from one state the other – and we shall all be brought into joy.”
The disciples of John came to Jesus, saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘The wedding-guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.’

I heard that some famous dietician says to weight-watchers, “It isn’t what you eat, it is why you eat.” He urges them to identify that ‘why’. That is what powers you towards the biscuit tin, he tells them – or the cookie-jar if you live across the water. Unless you can switch off the power at its source, your whole life will be a war of attrition with cookies.

A good idea pops up in more places than one; it connects different things in our life. ‘Not what but why’ is a good idea for any part of our life. It throws light equally on eating and on fasting – pursuits that appear opposite.

I wonder why John the Baptist’s disciples were fasting. They were followers of a very ascetical leader, and I suppose that had a quenching effect on their appetite. But from the way they asked Jesus’ disciples about fasting, it appears that they also felt rather superior. “It is likely that the disciples of John the Baptist were thinking highly of themselves,” wrote St John Chrysostom (c. 347 AD – 407), “and because of this Jesus put down this inflated conceit through what he said.” What do you think? I don’t believe that Jesus would engage in such tit-for-tat. It would make him no better than those conceited disciples. And besides, he told them why his disciples were not fasting: they were not fasting because it was not a time of preparation but a season for joy. They were not preparing for his coming; they were celebrating it.

But to get back to the fasters. St Jerome (347 AD – 420), who knew a lot about fasting, wrote, “What Jesus is saying is this: ‘Until a person has been reborn – putting aside the old person, and putting on the new – he or she cannot fast aright.’” The ego, the old self, is the problem; it will use even fasting as a way of fattening itself. Unless we have some inkling of our own Christ-nature our fasting and all our efforts will be expressions of ego.
Mt 11:25-30

At that time Jesus 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 the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

“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.”

The French mystic, Jeanne-Marie Guyon (1648-1717), wrote, “Through being given rule and method how to love God, people have in great measure been estranged from God. How unnecessary is it to teach an art of loving! The language of love, though natural to the lover, is nonsense and barbarism to one who does not love. The best way to learn the love of God is to love God. The ignorant and simple, because they proceed with more heart and greater simplicity, often become better at 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, ‘You that are simple turn in here’ (Proverbs 9:4).”

I asked an 8-year old American in Iceland how long it took her to learn Icelandic (she was the best in the family at it). She replied, “A day or two days, or a week.” In other words she didn’t think about it at all; she just played with her Icelandic friends. Children learn spontaneously; but adults proceed “by rule and method.” We need handbooks for everything because we have lost the capacity for direct experience.

While an adult stands back to analyse something, a child just becomes one with it. We have so venerated the analytical mind that the other faculties are scarcely taken into account at all. I have known people who were intellectually gifted but incapable of looking after themselves or anyone else. Far from seeing this as an embarrassment, we make it almost a badge of honour: we may laugh at him but we secretly revere the absent-minded professor. But as Chesterton said, “A madman is not someone who has lost his mind; he is someone who has lost everything except his mind.”

Neglect of the other faculties costs us dearly. If we neglected the mind to the same degree that we neglect the other faculties, we would be called barbarians. But we tolerate, even cultivate, a barbarism of feeling and will. Look at the depravity that is held up before us in the entertainment world, and in industry, and in politics. Is not much of it barbarism?

If we neglect feeling and will, we will never learn to love; we will learn only a caricature of love: greed. To love is to respect, to care about. In its deepest meaning it is ‘to become one with’ (while the word ‘analysis’ – from the Greek ana + lyein – means just the opposite: to take apart). There seems to be a serious imbalance built into our educational systems: we destroy something that children are born with (or perhaps they would soon begin to lose it anyway), and we give them what it takes to fit well into a mad society, leaving many of them as damaged as the society itself.

It was when the towns of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum had rejected Jesus that he exclaimed, “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.” Perhaps there were many intelligent people in those towns, and he was sick of arguing with them. Their intelligence left no mark on the history of the world: of Chorazin and Bethsaida there is no trace left; and Capernaum is only a couple of ruins. But the extraordinary love that Jesus embodied will live forever.
6 July
Mt 9:18-26
While Jesus was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, ‘My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.’ And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples.

Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, ‘If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.’ Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, ‘Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.’ And instantly the woman was made well.

When Jesus came to the leader’s house and saw the flute-players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, ‘Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.’ And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district.

John Chrysostom’s comment on this: “It is possible that the man was overstating the misfortune. It is the habit among people who are in need to exaggerate their personal problems. They do this to get a more effective response.” There are days when it is not easy to love St John Chrysostom. Here he sounds rather too rational, like the demythologisers. These were modern scholars who thought that if you scraped off all the wonder and the poetry (the ‘myths’, they called it) of the Scriptures you would find the truth hiding underneath. But what if the truth lies also in the wonder and the poetry? God is a poet – a word that means ‘a maker’ – and Jesus thought and spoke like a poet, not in the least like a logician.

(If we wanted to argue with John Chrysostom we could say that Jesus still saved the little girl’s life, because prompt burial was the normal procedure: on the evening of the same day, at the latest. He saved her from being buried alive.)

What does that urge remind you of – that urge to get hold of the truth as if it were a kernel hiding behind the colour and personality and detail of the text? Isn’t it quite like the urge the woman had to steal a healing from Jesus? She wanted an anonymous healing, private and impersonal, business-like. “Who touched me?” he said, looking around (Lk 8:45). These are words to break through the strongest walls of anonymity. He wanted to be a friend to her, not just an anonymous benefactor. Likewise, we have to approach the Scriptures in an open manner, not like investigative journalists.

Mark’s gospel has more human touches than the others. Though his gospel is only 60% the length of Matthew’s, Mark gives more than twice the amount of space to the healing of the little girl. Matthew’s account (above) is rather unemotional: “He went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up.” But Mark says, “He took her by the hand and said to her, ‘Talitha kum’, which means, ‘Little girl, get up!’” And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age)” (Mark 5:41-42). The gospels are full of humanity – which is what you would expect. The truth lies right there in plain view, not hiding underneath.
7 July
Mt 9:32-38
A demoniac who was mute was brought to Jesus. And when the demon had been cast out, the one who had been mute spoke; and the crowds were amazed and said, ‘Never has anything like this been seen in Israel.’ But the Pharisees said, ‘By the ruler of the demons he casts out the demons.’

Then 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.’

St John Chrysostom wrote: “People who stop doing good because of accusations show that their good deeds have been done to impress others. But if for God's sake you do good to your fellow-servants, you will not stop doing good whatever they do.” Doing things to impress others used to be called ‘human respect’. It was badly named, because there is no real respect involved at all, neither for oneself nor for others. In Catholic spirituality many things were named in very misleading ways because they were only half translated from Latin. The word ‘respect’ here was just a bad translation of ‘respicere’, which means ‘to look back’. In this context it means checking to see how your performance is going down with the audience. A better translation today might be ‘seeking to impress’ or ‘seeking celebrity’. It is clear on every page of the gospels that Jesus was entirely free of it.

When they could find nothing to criticise in what Jesus did, they tried to dig down and discredit his motivation. This has a very modern ring to it. “He drives away demons with the help of the prince of demons.” It is what you might call ‘the explanation from below’. Some modern psychologies also offer explanations ‘from below’. We live in a culture of suspicion, in which higher motives are usually interpreted as hypocrisy. It is a seductive way of looking: it explains away goodness, and so it gives me permission to wallow where I am; it even makes wallowing look commendably honest.

There is also the ‘explanation from above’. That too has its dangers. There is the case of the history student who gave ‘God’ as the explanation of everything that happened in the past. His history papers took no time to write.

It all makes us think: what are we doing when we look for explanations? What part of our mind or being are we trying to satisfy? And what do we do with explanations when we get them? In truth: nothing! We pass on to something else.

Jesus ignored the jibe about Beelzebul. That’s undoubtedly the best thing to do with explanations, especially explanations ‘from below’. Trying to counter them only robs us of our power. I love the way the narrative just continues, “Then Jesus went about all the towns and villages....”
Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed them. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, 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.”

Jesus picked twelve followers. Straightforward? Not when commentators get at it. When you read the early commentators on the Scriptures you get the feeling that they were discovering in every word and syllable the significances they themselves had hidden there (as Oscar Wilde remarked in another context). Here is a sample of what they did with the number 12. Remigius wrote, “The number twelve is a perfect number, being made up of the number six, which has perfection because it is formed of its own parts – one, two, three – multiplied into one another; and the number six when doubled amounts to twelve.” Someone else added, “And this doubling seems to have some reference to the two precepts of charity, or to the two Testaments.” But the real impresario was Tertullian (155 AD – 222). “This number twelve,” he wrote, “is typified by many things in the Old Testament; by the twelve sons of Jacob, by the twelve princes of the children of Israel, by the twelve running springs in Helim, by the twelve stones in Aaron’s breastplate, by the twelve loaves of the shew-bread, by the twelve spies sent by Moses, by the twelve stones of which the altar was made, by the twelve stones taken out of Jordan, by the twelve oxen which bare the brazen sea. Also in the New Testament, by the twelve stars in the bride’s crown, by the twelve foundations of Jerusalem which John saw, and her twelve gates.”

When Chrysostom sees the list of apostles he looks instantly for the order of precedence (from the earliest times till the present day this is the chief sport of the clergy). “Let us observe the order of the list of disciples from the beginning…. Do you note that he does not arrange them according to their dignity? For John seems to me to be greater, not only than the others but even than his brother.” This is precisely what the disciples were squabbling about when Jesus shut them up (Mt 20:17-26). St Jerome (c. 347 AD – 420) has a more worthwhile point to make: “The other Evangelists put Matthew before Thomas, and they do not add the words ‘the tax collector’ to his name, so as not to appear to throw scorn upon the Evangelist by bringing up his former life. But writing of himself he puts Thomas first, and styles himself ‘the tax collector’.” Matthew’s gospel, he was suggesting, does credit to Matthew himself by showing him in a truthful and unflattering light. That is certainly in the Christian spirit.

Some things from the past make sense to us, others not at all. It would be very pretentious to imagine that we are capable of understanding everything in the past – and sitting in judgment on it. That would be an out-and-out lack of humility. So what do we do with things we don't understand? Well, what do we normally do? If we find a book on, say, microbiology we don't feel obliged to burn it, or to say that it is nonsense. We nod reverentially and pass on. When I tried to read my niece’s doctoral thesis in that field I failed to find even one sentence, or part of a sentence, that I could understand. Let it be! as the Beatles recommended. What do we do with Remigius and Tertullian and their number games? Let them be!

But strange to say, unlike biology to the uninitiated, something can still come through the strangeness of an ancient Christian text. We focus on what we find strange – their number play, for example – but for them it was more than number play. It was a kind of frame in which they set what they wanted to say. For example, the Venerable Bede (c. 673 AD – 735) wrote: “The number twelve, which is made up of three multiplied by four, denotes that through the four quarters of the world the apostles were to preach the faith of the holy Trinity.”
9 July
Mt 10:7-15
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. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for labourers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town.

Money, a bag, an extra shirt…. These things are for my future needs. Luggage is always for the future. In the present it is only a burden; but we carry the burden for the sake of the future. To carry luggage with me is to live, to some degree, in the future. The same is true of money: my hunger may be satisfied now, but I take money with me so that I can satisfy it again tomorrow.

It is a severe criticism to be told that you are living in the past. But strangely we think it is the highest praise to be told that you are living in the future. It is hard to see why we make such a difference between them, for one is just as unreal as the other. I knew a businessman who always went about with a ballpoint pen in his mouth, so involved was he with his work. But even in his home he still carried that pen in his mouth! Some of us cheat ourselves of life by living in the past; the rest of us do it by living in the future. (I exaggerate, I know.) Many people almost kill themselves amassing wealth; even in their old age they still want to be turning a profit. It is an endless deferral of life. But the Gospel challenges us to face it now or never.

No sandals, no staff in the hand; in other words, nothing on your feet, nothing in your hands – just you, a mere human being, with no protections. Years ago when I was enthusing to an old priest about new hi-fi and video equipment that we were beginning to use in youth retreats, he just said, “There’s no substitute for a human being up there bleeding.”
See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. 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. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

There are lots of animals in this reading: sheep, wolves, snakes and doves. Where did snakes get their reputation for cleverness? It was in the Book of Genesis. “Now the serpent was craftier than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made” (3:1). “The serpent beguiled me, and I ate,” said Eve (3:13). Never since that time have they shown any signs of an ability to plan a strategy; they just react in the moment like every other animal. And perhaps they are all the better for it….

We associate intelligence with the ability to plan. We are impressed by planning, even when the objective is silly. Many things in life require planning, but it can become a compulsive habit. If I feel I have to plan everything, it means that I don't trust myself to react correctly in some future situation. But what makes me think I can do it better now, before the situation has even arisen? How should I know what to say to some people when I haven't even seen them yet? When I do meet them I will just repeat the things I had planned before. In this way, compulsive planning ensures that I will always live in the past – which is surely very ironic. I try to live in the future before it comes, and I find myself living in the past when it does come. Intelligence isn't old hat; it is always new. We have to trust the intelligence that is in us; to distrust it is to undermine it.

“When the hour comes, you will be given what you are to say.” Not before. The things that are very alive – love, intelligence, faith – don't keep till tomorrow; they are for now. You cannot prepare for the suddenness of a wolf’s attack except by being alert. That word ‘alertness’ is probably much closer to the essence of intelligence – and of faith too – than ‘planning’. Jesus kept saying, “Stay awake!”
Mt 10:24-33

Jesus said, “A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven."

Three times in this passage, Jesus tells them not to be afraid. “Fear,” someone said, “is the love that’s due to gods and princes.” But if our love of God is really only a form a fear, then we would love the devil more than God if we came to fear him more.

It is true that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is called “fear of the Lord.” But this ‘fear of the Lord’ has nothing to do with fear in the ordinary sense of the word. It is rather a feeling of awe and reverence before the ultimate mystery. Jesus kept saying, “Don't be afraid!” (Mt 14:28; 17:7; 28: 5,10; Lk 5:10; etc.). And St John wrote, “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 Jn 4:18). God asks for our love, not our fear. It is said that those who love to be feared, fear to be loved. How could God love to be feared, or fear to be loved? “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8, 16).

“Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.” The fruit is the plain truth about the tree, and everyone can not only see it but test it and taste it for themselves. Likewise human action. Everything becomes visible sooner or later. The word 'depth' can hold us too much in thrall. When we talk too much about depth we give ourselves the impression that it is a whole inner separate world, sufficient unto itself. Wittgenstein, one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century, said once, “The depth is on the surface!” He, of all people, could not be accused of superficiality. There is a very radical truth here: the depth and the surface are one, the inside and the outside are one. In Zen literature it is said that essence and phenomenon are one. There is an early Christian writing (end of the 1st century) attributed to St Clement of Rome. Quoting the apocryphal Gospel of the Egyptians, 'Clement' writes: "When the Lord himself was asked by someone when his kingdom would come, he said: 'When the two shall be one, and the outside as the inside....' By ‘the outside as the inside’ he means this: that the inside is the soul, and the outside is the body."
That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: 'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn — and I would heal them.' But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

"Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

John Chrysostom (c. 349-407 AD) commented, "The fact that the greater part of the seed perished was not due to the sower but to the soil, that is, the mind. The Sower [Christ] made no distinction between rich and poor, wise or foolish, but spoke to all alike...." Chrysostom also noted how non-judgmental the story is. "He does not judge them openly and say, This is what the lazy received and they lost it, this is what the rich got and they choked it, this is what careless people got and they neglected it. He would not harshly reprove them, so as not to alienate them altogether."

Another ancient commentator: "The wayside is the mind trodden and hardened by the continual passage of evil thoughts; the rock, the hardness of the self-willed mind; the good soil, the gentleness of the attentive mind."

Look carefully at the word 'mind'. In mediaeval times there appeared a useful distinction between the active and the passive mind – between ratio and intellectus. The active is the analytical mind, the passive is the contemplative. In our age the active mind gets all the praise, and the passive or contemplative mind tends to be passed over in silence.

Passive means receptive or listening. Remember the last time you tried to have a conversation with someone who never listens? Perhaps you both talked a lot, but there was no conversation, your minds were not engaged with each other. At such times you feel more...
alone than when you are alone. In the total absence of the contemplative spirit, this is what the whole world would be like.

“When God undertakes the work, the mind must remain passive,” wrote Meister Eckhart. A disciple of Jesus is one who receives the seed of God's word into good soil. Soil is ‘humus’, which gives us the word ‘humility’. “God cannot work except in the ground of humility,” Eckhart continued, “for the deeper we are in humility, the more receptive to God….The more a person is sunk in the ground of true humility, the more he or she is sunk in the ground of divine being.” ‘Passive’, ‘humble’…. These are not popular words today; they are in fact counter-cultural. Men especially would be ashamed of having any of these words used of them. But try to imagine someone who had no vestige of either: he (or she) would be an embodiment of ego. But our deeper self would not be ashamed of these words. They are the language of the Beatitudes, which are like a portrait of Christ himself. This is the deeper soil from which real growth happens in us. And the seed of God's word is able to wait till the soil is right.

We are living in a deafening world. The noise of machines is sometimes hard to bear, but far more deafening is the insistence of the human voice. It is almost impossible to escape from it. Every age, no doubt, talked its full; but we have ways of storing, multiplying, amplifying, and broadcasting the voice till it fills every crevice in our lives. A new magazine was advertised as “opinionated.” This word means “thinking too highly of, or adhering persistently to, one’s opinions; conceited; obstinate in opinion; dogmatic.” How bizarre that that word should be used to advertise a magazine! How many people would like to have, say, a son-in-law who was “opinionated”? Yet it is regarded as a desirable quality in a magazine. We are in a strange place now. How will the word of God penetrate our noise? Some seed fell on tarmac, and some seed was swept away in a torrent of language from DJs and advertisers….

But even so, “Your word, O Lord, for ever stands firm in the heavens” (Psalm 118).
“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities.

St John Chrysostom wrote, “This more than anything is peace: when the disease is removed. This is peace: when the cancer is cut away.” Today’s gospel reading is one of those ‘terrible’ passages of the New Testament. Why is the Prince of Peace telling us that he has not come to bring peace but the sword?

Clearly, there are wrong kinds of peace – or rather situations that look peaceful on the outside but are full of injustice within. An appearance of peace is not peace; it may be exactly the opposite. There are people who crush life all around them and call it restoring peace. The Prince of Peace has not come to bless violence and oppression that have been so successful that the powerless have no resistance left. Look at public bodies and at business companies, certainly, but don’t forget to look at your own family too. Why are your wife and children so quiet? Are they sinking into despair? Or have you a way of making your husband feel so bad that everything he might do or say is condemned even before he says or does it?

A word about the even more terrible statement: “The one who prefers father or mother to me is not worthy of me.” The word ‘prefer’ comes from Latin praeferre, ‘to place before’. We should not place other people before Christ. It would not be fair to them, it would be too much for them, and they could not bear it. Only Christ is able to be Christ.
Mt 11:20-24
Jesus began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. ‘Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.

If the stars came out only one night in a hundred years the whole human race would look up. Some astronomers believe that eventually no stars will be visible to the naked eye because they will all be too distant from one another. So take a good look! Familiarity breeds blindness.

Tyre, Sidon and Sodom (sample cases of wickedness) would have opened their eyes, Jesus says, but God's people took Jesus' “deeds of power” for granted. This is why the Gospel has to be proclaimed to the whole world: no one can tell who is going to hear it and who is not going to hear it. Like every lover, the God of Surprises sends unexpected gifts, or leaves them hidden in unexpected places.

Nazareth was the most unexpected place of all. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (Jn 1:46). When Jesus was born, pagan astrologers came from afar to do him homage, but his fellow countryman, Herod, tried to kill him.

It was appropriate then that when he grew to be a man he had an eye for the unexpected. He praised the faith of a Roman pagan centurion (Mt 8:10) and a Canaanite pagan woman (Mt 15:28); he told an expert on Jewish law to imitate the behaviour of a pagan Samaritan (Lk 10:37); he befriended the outcasts of society, tax-collectors and sinners. Almost everything he did was unexpected: the authorities could hardly fail to see him. But when they did, they determined to kill him.

Full sensory equipment is no guarantee that we will see or hear what is right in front of us; or see and hear aright. Jesus often used the expression, “anyone who has ears to hear” (Mt 11:15; Mk 4:9, 23; 7:16; Lk 8:8; 14:35). Today we are so bombarded with sights and sounds that we have to filter out most of what strikes our senses. Dangerous times!
15 July
Mt 11:25-27
Jesus 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 the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.’

We advise children to “tell the truth and shame the devil.” Like a lot of advice, it seems to be mainly for giving away. But we could use some of that advice ourselves: most of the truth in the world is told by young children. Not far into our lives we begin to take sides on things, and then goodbye truth! To enter the kingdom of God we have to become like children again, Jesus said (Mt 18:3). ‘Infant’ comes from the Latin ‘in-fans’: non-speaking. Language helps us distinguish things, and very soon distinction becomes separation, which then turns into opposition. Potentially the most destructive opposition is between ‘I’ and ‘not-I’. In English, ‘I’ is the most frequently used pronoun; and it is written in upper case – “like God!” a Mandarin speaker once said to me. Language can seduce me into believing that I am somehow divided from everything else, and that everything in the world opposes me…. Then I spend my life mentally protecting and defending this first person singular - who in reality would last no time if left without such ‘non-I’ things as oxygen, water, shelter….

The ‘little ones’ Jesus spoke of were not just children but the humble, the helpless, the heavy-burdened, those who were ready to hear what he was saying: disciples. They are the ones who know their need of God and of everything that God gives. This knowledge may not look like knowledge at all: it can adduce no subtle arguments, no book-learning; but it is, wrote St Paul, "a wisdom that none of the masters of this age have ever known" (1 Cor. 2:8). It is the wisdom of God incarnate in Jesus.
16 July
Mt 11:28-30
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.

Commenting on this, St Augustine wrote, “If you wish to reach high, then begin at the lowest level. If you are trying to construct some mighty tall edifice, begin with the foundation. This is humility. However great the mass of the building you may wish to design or erect, the taller the building is to be, the deeper you will have to dig the foundation…. So then, you see even a building is low before it is high, and the tower is raised only after humiliation.” In another place he wrote, “God accepts offerings only from the altar of humility.” When St Bernard of Clairvaux was asked what the four cardinal virtues were, he replied “humility, humility, humility, and humility.” (See also July 12)

This is just another way of describing a life that is, even to small degree, free of the stubborn clutches of the ego. Even when it disguises itself (and perhaps especially then), the ego is incapable of humility. It has been called “the original lie.” It is a false identity, and therefore every morsel of truth has the capacity to undermine it. It has to be constantly on the alert. Humility, on the other hand, is just the unadorned truth. It is about letting the plain truth be seen. It is that “broken-open lowliness” that Rumi spoke of (see this month’s ‘Wisdom Line’).

This isn't easy, as everyone knows. We all take cover, to some extent. In the Confessions St Augustine described this tendency to hide: “In its abject shame the mind loves to lie concealed, yet it wishes that nothing should be concealed from it.” It is a perfect picture of the ego. Think of the whole world watching Big Brother. But when everything is out, he said, the situation will be exactly the reverse: “It will not be able to conceal itself from the truth, but the truth will remain hidden from it.”

My yoke is easy, my burden is light. Humility is much easier to carry than its opposite. The word humility comes from ‘humus’, meaning the ground. Think of the connotations of the word ‘ground’. It suggests rest, security, foundation, reality, source…. There is no security in the ego; to cling to it is to miss your footing.
Jesus went through the cornfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, ‘Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath.’ He said to them, ‘Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice”, you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.’

Cyril of Alexandria (375 – 444) made the wry remark: “When nothing great or noble is happening, the Pharisees remain quiet. But when they see people being healed they are deeply offended.” They were more interested in the appearances of religion than in its substance. But we shouldn’t let them have all the free publicity; we too are in the picture. Since the substance of religion is so subtle and deep, it is no surprise that we are often like them, concentrating on what is obvious and shallow.

Jesus seemed to say his own behaviour was excusable because great people in the past had done similar things. Was this an example of what we now call ‘What-about-ism’? “Have you not read what David did…?” John Chrysostom (344/354 – 407) rushes in to the rescue. He doesn’t want us to think that this was how Jesus’ mind worked: excusing himself from blame “by noting that someone else committed the same offence,” or thinking that David’s law-breaking should become a rule for everyone. No, he said, “Jesus was not satisfied with such reasoning. Instead, he said something much more radical: that the deed itself in this case was no sin at all…! For here the Giver of the law was overriding the law.”

Clearly, there was nothing obvious or shallow about this. Laws are designed to be very clear and obvious. That fully satisfies the needs of some people. But there is the matter of spirit. Laws are always trying to substitute for spirit; they try to cover every possible eventuality – to cover every angle, to go into every nook and cranny…. But it doesn't work. There are subtle and ever-arising new places where only spirit can go. We need spirit, or rather the Spirit, to guide us wisely in our actions. The Lord of the Sabbath is the one who is able to give us the Spirit.
The Pharisees went out and conspired against Jesus, how to destroy him. When Jesus became aware of this, he departed. Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them, and he ordered them not to make him known. This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

‘Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.
He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick until he brings justice to victory.
And in his name the Gentiles will hope.’

Yesterday’s discussion about law continues today. St John Chrysostom (349 AD – 407) said, “It is not as an adversary that Christ transcends the law, as if he were an enemy of the Lawgiver, but as though he were of one mind with the Lawgiver and held to the very same purposes.”

The meaning of this condensed sentence of Chrysostom’s is delightfully illustrated by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s Little Prince.

The Little Prince finds himself on a planet where there is nothing at all, except a king seated on his throne. He was a very imperious one, “for what he fundamentally insisted upon was that his authority should be respected. He tolerated no disobedience. He was an absolute monarch. But, because he was a very good man, he made his orders reasonable.

‘If I ordered a general,’ he would say, by way of example, ‘if I ordered a general to change himself into a sea bird, and if the general did not obey me, that would not be the fault of the general. It would be my fault....’

‘Sire,’ said the little prince, ‘over what do you rule?’
‘Over everything,” said the king, with magnificent simplicity.
‘Over everything?’ The king made a gesture, which took in his planet, the other planets, and all the stars.... For his rule was not only absolute: it was also universal.

‘And the stars obey you?’
‘Certainly they do,’ the king said. ‘They obey instantly. I do not permit insubordination....’

‘I should like to see a sunset.... Do me that kindness.... Order the sun to set.’
‘One must require from each one the duty which each one can perform,’ the king went on. ‘Accepted authority rests first of all on reason.... I have the right to require obedience because my orders are reasonable.”

‘Then my sunset?’ the little prince reminded him: for he never forgot a question once he had asked it.
‘You shall have your sunset. I shall command it. But, according to my science of government, I shall wait until conditions are favourable.’

‘When will that be?’ inquired the little prince.
‘Hum! Hum!’ replied the king; and before saying anything else he consulted a bulky almanac. ‘Hum! Hum! That will be about – about – that will be this evening about twenty minutes to eight. And you will see how well I am obeyed!”
19 July [16th Sunday in Ordinary Time]

Mt 13:24-43

Jesus put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world."

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

For 'Kingdom of God' you can say Presence of God. In this Sunday's gospel reading Jesus is telling us what God is like, or how we are to think of God's presence. He could have used any images in heaven above or on earth below, but he picked these.

The Presence of God is like a seed in the ground, he said; or it is like yeast in a batch of dough. Seeds are small, many of them almost invisible, they are the beginnings of things, they are unimpressive to look at, and they are thrown into the ground as if they were being thrown away. Yeast becomes invisible in the lump of dough, it is never seen again. Seeds and yeast: these are realities that don’t draw attention to themselves; if you could credit them with virtues you would have to say they are as humble as dirt. (You could say similar things about another image that Jesus used: salt; it too disappears in the food.) This, he said, is what the Kingdom (the Presence) of God is like; this is how God's presence makes itself felt in one's life.

"The field is the world," the text says. This phrase led to one of the biggest debates in the ancient Church. The Donatists were a rigorist sect in the 4th and 5th centuries, who claimed that the good seed in this parable referred to the members of the Church, and so by definition there could be no 'tares', no sinners, in it. According to them, the Church was composed entirely of good people, and the rest of the world was simply evil. This was a kind of Pharisaism come back to life. The one who engaged them definitively was St Augustine, who wrote several books against them. Not only the world, but the Church itself, he said, is a field in which there is good seed and bad. "How very many sheep there are outside it, and how very many wolves within!" And soon after, St Gregory the Great (c. 540-604) wrote, "In this
present Church there cannot be bad without good, or good without bad. They are not good who refuse to endure the bad.” The human race is not divided into children of light and children of darkness; nor is the Church. Every one of us has light and darkness in him or herself; the good grain and the tares grow together. The Church is not a club for the elite, it is a place in which sinners can grow and change by God's grace. That growth in grace may be agonisingly slow, like the growth of a grain hidden in the soil. But in that very slowness it imitates the patience of God.

There is no need to suppose that all the Donatists died out. There are some Christian sects that seem very exclusive (“Are you saved?”). By contrast with them, the Catholic Church was consciously non-elitist; there was room in it for everyone, good and bad alike. It was a kind of hospital, or a convalescent home. St Augustine said it was the inn in which the man who fell among robbers was being taken care of (Lk 10:30–37).

Remember the tax-collector in Jesus’ story, who hardly dared to lift his head, but prayed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13). How unlike the other, the Pharisee, whose prayer was a recital of his own virtues. The tax-collector was no saint, and he knew it. But the seed of God’s presence was stirring in his heart; the yeast was invisible in his downcast appearance, but it was real. Jesus put him before us as the very model of how we should pray.
Some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Jesus, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.” But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here! The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!”

“Aaron threw down his staff before Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake” (Exodus 7:10). There has always been a keen demand for miracles. In the time of Jesus there was a belief that the Messianic Age would be heralded in with a shower of them, as in the time of Moses and Aaron. Rabbi Eliezer was said to have made rivers flow backwards.…. The demand is just as keen today as then. Isn't the world wonderful enough as it is, without any contortions? Oscar Wilde, tongue in cheek, said of the Niagara Falls, “The wonder would be if the water didn’t fall!” It is about entertainment and spectacle, and the unspoken assumption is that the ordinary world is flat, with no depth, no power to bring the mind to God.

The demand for miracles and wonders is the mysticism of extroverts – or rather, it is the point from which extroverts begin. Everything has to be ‘out there’: apparitions, messages, strange occurrences and coincidences…. Highly rational people are often the most readily convinced by these. This is puzzling until you hit the key word: extrovert. For a highly rational person a ‘miracle’ is new data in the lab. It was the highly rationalistic theologies that depended most heavily on them. Meanwhile there is a whole world untouched: the world of self-deception, projection, wishful thinking…. But that is outside the frame of rationality, so it is not acknowledged: it is not ‘objective’, so it is merely ‘irrational’. When it is acknowledged at all, it is seen only as wilful self-deception. To call it wilful is the way to dismiss it. But it is far more potent when it is not wilful. That is a place where the extrovert person does not want to look.

“No sign will be given to this wicked generation,” Jesus said, “but the sign of Jonah!” Matthew interpreted this very fancifully, comparing the “three days and three nights” that Jesus was to spend in the tomb (factually inaccurate) with the three days and nights that Jonah spent in the whale’s belly. Luke does not make this comparison (11:29-32). The sign to the Ninevites was Jonah himself and his preaching. Applying this to himself, Jesus was saying, “You are seeking a sign; I, and my preaching, am God's sign!”
While Jesus was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, 'Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.' But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'

Commenting on a similar passage (Luke 11:27) Meister Eckhart said, "'The one who hears my word and keeps it is more blessed than the womb that bore me and the breasts that I sucked'. If I had said this and if it were my word, that that person is more blessed who hears God's word and keeps it than Mary is by giving birth and being Christ's bodily mother—I repeat, if I had said this, people would be surprised. But Christ himself has said it, and therefore we must believe him that it is the truth, for Christ is the Truth." And in another place, "I say that if Mary had not first borne God spiritually, he would never have been born of her physically.... It is more worth to God to be born spiritually of the individual virgin or good soul, than that he was physically born of Mary."

Some may think, 'Could this apparent put-down of Mary be right or good?'

First of all, it is not a put-down of Mary but a raising up of the disciples. Eckhart continues: "The whole of Christendom pays our Lady great honour and respect because she is the bodily mother of Christ, and that is right and proper. Holy Christendom prays to her for grace which she is able to obtain, and that is right. And if holy Christendom pays her such honour, as indeed is fitting, nevertheless holy Christendom should pay even greater honour and glory to those who hear God's word and keep it, for they are even more blessed than our Lady is through being the bodily mother of Christ, as Christ himself has told us. All that honour, and immeasurably more, is accorded to those who hear God's word and keep it."

If you are still unhappy, read what St Augustine had to say. "It is greater for Mary to have been a disciple of Christ than to have been the mother of Christ.... Mary was therefore blessed because, even before she gave birth, she bore the Master in her womb. ... Mary is holy and Mary is blessed, but the Church is greater than the Virgin Mary. And why? Because Mary is a part of the Church, a holy limb, an extraordinary limb, an outstanding limb, but she is only a limb of the whole body. If she is but a part of the whole body, greater indeed is the body than a limb. Christ is the head, and Christ is the entire head and body."
22 July [St Mary Magdalene]
Jn 20:1-2. 11-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she 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.’ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’

When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Mary Magdalene is so called because she came from a village in Galilee called Magdala. She experienced some profound healing at the hands of Jesus; the gospels tell us he cast out seven demons from her (Mk 16:9; Lk 8:2). (Illnesses were thought to be caused by demonic infestation - the popular belief was that the air was thick with them, like microbes today.) She helped him in his work and was a witness to his crucifixion.

It was customary for many centuries to identify her with the sinful woman of Lk 7:36-50, but this woman is not named, and modern scholars agree that there is no basis for the identification. The fiction began with Ephraim the Syrian in the 4th century and was reinforced by Pope Gregory the Great in the 6th. The ‘seven demons’ were then taken to refer to the seven deadly sins: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. Most people get by on one or two of these, but Mary was thought to be proficient in all seven.

In John’s gospel, Mary Magdalene is the only woman at the tomb of Jesus (in Matthew’s there are two, in Mark’s three, and in Luke’s an indeterminate number). She was the first to know of the Resurrection of Jesus. She was sent to tell the news to the brothers. The word ‘apostle’ comes from the Greek apostellein, ‘to send’. Therefore the first apostle of the distinctive Christian proclamation of the Resurrection was a woman. Indeed, Mary Magdalene is traditionally known as “the apostle to the apostles,” apostola apostolorum. She is a patroness of the Dominican Order, which is called the Order of Preachers, and for this reason many Dominican houses are called ‘St Magdalene’s’. She could also be seen as the patroness of all the women who have preached the Gospel in countless ways through the centuries.
23 July  
Mt 13:10-17 

*The disciples came and asked Jesus, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”* He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’ With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: ‘You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn – and I would heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

There are art books that superimpose a network of geometric shapes on a painting in an effort to ‘explain’ it. The more complex they are, the less credible. It is the same with all explanations. “I wish he would explain his explanations,” someone said of a philosopher. Jesus did very little explaining. He preferred to leave his parables there to do their work by themselves. You don’t have to cut open a seed (in fact you had better not) in order to explain it before putting it in the ground. It grows better if you don’t explain it that way. In spiritual matters, too, explanations generally have done more harm than good. When something is explained (the word means ‘flattened out’) we lose interest in it; it loses its power to move us or challenge us or take us beyond a certain ingrained rationalism.

There is no problem about leaving things unexplained. In the 2nd century St Irenaeus wrote: “Why should we complain if… we are able by the grace of God to explain some things [in Scripture], while we must leave others in the hands of God, and that not only in the present world, but also in the world to come, so that God should forever teach, and we should forever learn?”

In the 14th century Julian of Norwich wrote that God revealed to her “a great thing which was to come…. But what the deed would be was kept secret from me…. I saw hidden in God an exalted and wonderful mystery, which he will make plain and we shall know in heaven.”
24 July
Mt 13:18-23
‘Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.’

This passage is generally regarded by scholars not as words of Jesus but as an interpretation by the earliest Christian community. It was not Jesus’ way to explain parables. In fact, explaining a story is like explaining a joke. The parables don’t need explanation – unless it be to fill in some historical facts that have become obscured by the passage of time. But we can meditate on them, as those early Christians did, and all Christians through the ages.

The meditation of those early Christians reflects their experience, of course. Their interpretation shows that they had experience of those four kinds of listening to the word: the three fruitless ones and the one fruitful. So has the Church in every age, and so have we today.

Every one of us is a crowd – especially today when we are mobbed by so many voices coming at us through the airwaves. In the Christian Community translation of the Scriptures, the demoniac said, “My name is Mob, for we are many” (Mk 5:9). In our individual selves perhaps we can distinguish all four kinds of hearers; or we identify days when we are one of them in particular….

Here comes the mob: 1. My heart is just a public path with no interiority at all, nowhere to “abide”. I am full of restless activity, so that I never really see anyone or face anything. I am constantly ‘transmitting’, so that I can never hear what others are trying to tell me. 2. My heart is a hard stony place. I have little or no feeling for anyone who is not “one of us”, and I am wary of anyone who comes near me, in case they make demands I don't want to meet. 3. My heart is choked by the dissipation of modern life. I can't sit without turning on the TV or picking up something to read. My life is a series of disconnected events, with no vision, no direction, no passion. 4. There are occasional unguarded moments when the seed of the word falls into good soil. These are the moments to live for.
25 July [St James, apostle]
Mt 20:20-28

The mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favour of him. And he said to her, ‘What do you want?’ She said to him, ‘Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.’ But Jesus answered, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?’ They said to him, ‘We are able.’ He said to them, ‘You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.’

When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’

James, the brother of John, is an apostle we know very little about. It is clear that he had a leading position among the Twelve. In every list of the apostles he is in the first three; and he was the first apostle to be martyred. Yet, with one exception, he is never mentioned apart from his brother John. The one exception is when his martyrdom is recounted in Acts 12:2.

James and John were fishermen, sons of Zebedee. They seem to have been typical impulsive and quick-tempered Galileans, for they were nicknamed ‘Boanerges’, “sons of thunder” (Mk 3:17). They were ambitious men who wanted an assurance that they would have big jobs in the Kingdom (Mk 10:35-45).

That is all that is known of James the Apostle. He was not the author of the Letter of James. There is a legend that he went to Spain and preached the Gospel there; he is the patron saint of that country. There is a popular pilgrimage to his tomb in the city of Santiago de Compostela. It was named Europe’s Premier Cultural Itinerary by the Council of Europe in 1987 and is also listed on the Unesco World Heritage register. The Camino begins in Roncesvalles, on the French border, and covers 783 km to the Atlantic coast. Many pilgrims walk part of it, but sturdy ones walk the whole way, which takes about a month.

It was suggested that the name of the shrine of Compostela may be a corruption of Giacomo Postolo (James the Apostle). To this day there is an image of the Virgin Mary in Saragossa, before which a hundred lamps are kept forever burning, for the legend is that Mary appeared to James there to strengthen him and encourage him in his work.
26 July [17th Sunday in Ordinary Time]
Mt 13:44-52

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

‘Have you understood all this?’ They answered, ‘Yes.’ And he said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’"

A rich young man asked Jesus, “What must I do to possess eternal life?” Jesus replied, “Go sell what you have, give the money to the poor, and come follow me.” The young man went away sad because he was very wealthy. The sadness of Jesus must have been even greater. It may well have been this incident that brought today’s parables to birth in the mind of Jesus. (It is true that the incident is recounted later in the gospel (chapter 19), but then the gospels are not strictly chronological accounts.)

Have you ever met an immensely wealthy man who was culturally impoverished? He has everything and yet he has nothing. He can enjoy his meals, but he can only eat as much as a poor man (or less); and just like anyone he doesn’t dare drink too much. Books, theatres, museums, exhibitions… are all closed to him. Other countries, to him, are just poor places; historical buildings are only old houses; landscapes are just real estate; other cultures only examples of inefficiency. What is there to do? All he can do is make more money – which must be boring, since he already has too much. He can travel to exotic places, but he has to bring his dull self with him everywhere, which guarantees that everything will remain closed to him.

That is only cultural impoverishment. Imagine spiritual impoverishment. No opening, no direction, no meaning, no value except possession; time, to such a man, is an unbearable burden, except when it is money or pleasure; other people are either clients or competitors in the market; and he himself… he prefers not to think about that. Finding such a life unbearable, such people are sometimes apt to embrace an extreme right-wing version of religion, to mask their spiritual impoverishment. It takes on all the shallowness and harshness of their own inner life.

There is no account in the gospels of the subsequent career of the rich young man; he is never mentioned again. Not being open to the gift, he got only what he paid for. Jesus said about the rich, “they have had their reward.”

Carl Jung famously said that in his entire career as a psychoanalyst he had never met a person over forty whose fundamental problem was not religious. The “pearl of great price” is there within our grasp, it is being held out to us free of charge. It is free, but to take it we have to have empty hands.
Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world."

Jesus was not a politician. A politician promises a great future, and has to explain later why it didn't happen. "I've seen the future, and it works!" said Lincoln Steffens, famously, after a visit to the Soviet Union in 1919. It was a claim that no one could disprove, since no one else had seen it; nor had he. He mustn't have seen the present either, which was staring him in the face. Later on, even though he was not a politician, he had to backtrack. The Gospel is not about the future; it is news about what is present here and now. "The kingdom of God is among you," Jesus said.

The kingdom is present in a hidden unspectacular way, like seeds. The mustard seed is not actually the smallest of seeds, but proverbially it stood for the smallest thing. Seeds disappear into the ground and die. Yeast, too, is invisible when mixed into the batch. Elsewhere Jesus spoke of salt – which, like yeast, becomes invisible. In the Gospel, all spectaculars are for God to perform in the end-time. Jesus' way is the way of humility and love. He was not the expected kind of Messiah come to baptise the wicked in fire and overthrow nations. "He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory" (Mt 12:19-20). Instead of holding rallies and consolidating power and winning votes he went about healing sick and tormented people. Nothing spectacular.

The logic of the Gospel is not straightforward logic. It is the logic of paradox: the first is the last, the weak is the strong, the greatest is the least, the poorest is the richest, the weakest is the strongest, the lost is the saved, the lowest is the highest, to die is to live.... In a word, the ok are not ok, and there's more hope for us not-ok people than we dare imagine.
28 July
Mt 13:36-43
Jesus left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, ‘Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.’ He answered, ‘The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

They are looking for explanations. They want to get their minds around this parable, so that they can put it ‘out there’ from them: that's what explanations do.

Still, it must be all right to look for explanations – so long as we don’t put too much store by them, or imagine that the one we give is the only possible one.

It is about seeds. Seeds are the beginning of things, not the end. Good and evil will be separated out only at the end of time. That means, in practical terms, never. In the ultimate, yes, in eternity; but not in time – at no time. We have heard politicians talk about “stamping out evil.” I heard someone comment, “Jesus didn’t do it, the Buddha didn’t do it, but this politician is going to do it!” Only in the final sifting will it be done, and we don’t know anything about that. Let’s not be too surprised at evil deeds: we are part of the picture ourselves. Besides, many things that we call good today will be called evil tomorrow. We don’t have the full picture. Only God has. To claim to have the full picture is to claim to be God.

This thought doesn’t make evil any less evil, or less painful to its victims. But if we don’t spend all our time wondering why there is so much evil in the world, we may have a little left over for wondering why there is so much good.
29 July [St Martha]

Jn 11:19-27

Many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.’

A little beyond the end of today’s reading there is the shortest verse in the Bible. It is John 11:35, and it says simply, “Jesus wept.” It shows sensitivity in the people who first divided the Scriptures into chapters and verses. They could easily have put these words with the following line; it would even have been logical: the following line is, “So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’” It was a wise and sensitive decision. When someone weeps, you just have to give them time to weep. Weeping may be saying a lot, but it is not language, and it doesn’t require an answer or an explanation. There are two occasions in the gospel when Jesus told people not to weep (Luke 7:13; 8:52). On both occasions there was an error of fact: the persons being mourned were not dead. But in today’s story there is no doubt about Lazarus being dead. So Jesus wept. He did not take death lightly. He is sometimes made to seem a sort of magician who “leaped up on the third day.” If we make light of death we make light of the resurrection.

Nor can we make light of Martha. She is not playing second fiddle to Mary (especially not in this passage). With Peter’s, hers is the most explicit confession of Jesus as Messiah – which is the whole purpose for which the gospel was written (John 20:30ff). A scholar says that this points to the prominent role women like Martha played in the early Church.
Mt 13:47-53

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.

I can see how old things can be brought out of the store: that's where they are kept. And new things begin to be old as soon as they are put in storage. But how can you bring new things out of a store?

It must be that the old thing begins to be new again as soon as it is brought out of the store. It appears in a new light, it is constantly renewing itself as it is seen from different angles. Bringing a truth out of storage is not like hauling out a lump of dead matter from a storeroom. It is a new discovery in the present.

I had a multitude of professors in my youth who went to great pains to show how the new was caused by the old. But if the new is caused by the old, then there is nothing new. (This conclusion probably gave them some kind of reassurance.) When light comes into a dark room you don't say that the light is caused by the darkness. Instead there was an opening and the light came in. Sifting the past is moving things around so that new light can shine through them.
31 July  
Mt 13:54-58

Jesus came to his hometown and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?" And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honour except in their own country and in their own house." And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.

Like Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah, Jesus knew rejection by his own people. The family and the village are realities that cling close to you, but their loving embrace becomes a stranglehold when you disappoint them. Nazareth was a village of perhaps 500 people: just about the best size for malice. The people were happy with Jesus while he was bringing credit on them, but when he compared foreigners favourably with Israelites they wanted to throw him over a cliff (Luke 4:29).

Matthew says Jesus "did not" (would not) act because of the people's unbelief. But Mark says he "could not" do a miracle in Nazareth (Mk 6:5). A village is able to choke up the sources of life itself.

The theme of rejection runs right through the gospels. "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first" (Jn 15:18). See also Mk 6:4; Lk 4:24; Jn 4:44. It was the expected thing that prophets were rejected. "Can you name a single prophet your ancestors never persecuted?" asked Stephen, just before they killed him (Acts 7:52).

We don't get the impression that Jesus was bitterly disappointed or angry about his treatment in his hometown. Perhaps he expected it. In Luke's account he even seemed to provoke it. We start out in life with our ego-dream: we expect everyone to love us as much as our mothers did. When we discover that the world isn't like that, we become bitter and disillusioned; and so begins the rollercoaster of emotions. If we had no expectations, but also no bitterness, we would be free of two major traps on the path of discipleship.
At that time Herod the ruler heard reports about Jesus; and he said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him." For Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because John had been telling him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." Though Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded him as a prophet. But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and she pleased Herod so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given; he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. The head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, who brought it to her mother. His disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus.

John's fate prefigures that of Jesus. If John was put to death, how could Jesus—who was "a prophet without honour in his own country"—be expected to escape a like fate? In each case their teaching was interpreted by politicians as an intrusion on their sphere. To this day, this happens in the world.

At that time, nobody even nodded towards freedom of speech: to denounce a ruler's character was suicidal. Israel had a long-standing tradition exempting prophets from severe punishment for their speech, a rule that only the most vicious rulers broke. Herod was one such ruler. John reproached Herod for violating the law against incest (Lev. 18:16). We know how Herod thanked him for that.

But the story didn't end there. King Aretas, the father of Herod's repudiated wife, was aggrieved by Herod's treatment of his daughter, and he didn't hold his feelings in: he waged war and inflicted a humiliating defeat on him. This led many people to believe that God had used Aretas to punish Herod for the execution of John. The trouble with this interpretation—and all others like it—is that it sees God as part of the squabble; it sees God as just a more powerful politician.

When a politician says to a religious leader, "Stay in your own spiritual world and leave the real world to me," or "Leave science to the scientists," he is saying that religion has nothing to say on any question that he chooses to call 'political' or 'scientific'. Would he also say, "Leave medicine to the doctors," silencing everyone else on questions such as abortion, euthanasia, etc.? Or leave wars to the military? Or financial affairs to bankers? Religion has something to say to everyone, and more than a little to say to politicians. Scientists and doctors have all endured long years of arduous study; but politicians, like auctioneers, have no specific training for their job. Nobody should be intimidated by them. There is the witness of countless brave people, from John the Baptist to Oscar Romero.
Now when Jesus heard (that John the Baptist had been killed), he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” And he said, “Bring them here to me.” Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

They even spoke against God. They said: ‘Is it possible for God To prepare a table in the desert?’ (Psalm 77:19)

Jesus was doing just that in this reading: preparing a table in the desert, producing plenty, and more than plenty, in the place of utmost scarcity. But how did he do it? St John Chrysostom (c. 349-407 AD) wrote: “Observe the wisdom of the Master; he did not say to them, 'I will give them something to eat,' but, ‘you give them something to eat.’” He accepted their meagre contribution, he did not set their gift aside, but used it. Another ancient writer said, “He created no alternative food; he took what they had and gave thanks.” He allowed the bounty to appear to come from themselves.

The gift of God does not displace us from our lives; it does not take over from us and make our effort redundant. On the contrary, it is in the throes of our efforts that the gift of God appears.

Jesus said to a man who had been lying paralysed for thirty-eight years, “Do you want to be healed?” (John 5:6). At first it may seem a strange question in the circumstances, but it is not so strange when you think about it. If that man was healed he could no longer lie there passively, being carried around by other people. We often have a large stake in our own weakness: things are easier for us that way. But the man did indeed want to be healed, so Jesus said to him, “Get up!” That too sounds strange at first. Getting up was the one thing he couldn’t do! Why would he have spent thirty-eight years lying down if he could get up! But the amazing thing is that he made an effort to get up. For that, he had to reconfigure his brain, which had been sending out messages to his legs in vain for thirty-eight years. He had to believe he could get up and he had to make a mental effort to get up. When he did so he found that the minimal movement he made in his brain continued into his legs and he was able to get up. The miracle was not dropped on him; it arose, by the grace of God, from within his own effort.

Here is a kind of ‘conversation’ among the Rhineland mystics: “Whatever God gives he gives completely,” wrote Eckhart, “…and so whatever you have you have not received on loan from God, for God is your own.” Tauler wrote, “He is ours, he is all our own…” And someone else added, “And so, whatever you get you get from yourself.”

All of this, of course, is not to diminish the part of grace. On the contrary it makes grace all the more subtle and wonderful. We are respected and honoured by God, not humiliated and displaced by being given no hand in our own affairs. How hard it is to give something
without humiliating the receiver! I once heard a holy man say, “When you give something, you have to do it with such humility that the receiver forgives you for giving it.”

The Eucharist teaches us the subtle art of giving. We urgently need to learn it, because the meaning of our life lies in giving it away.
3 August
Mt 14:22-36
Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. After the people of that place recognised him, they sent word throughout the region and brought all who were sick to him, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

That little boat crossing the stormy lake is a perfect parable of our life. St Thérèse of Lisieux noticed it and took comfort from it. Describing a time of great disappointment in her life she wrote: "My soul was a like a fragile boat delivered up to the mercy of the waves and having no pilot. I knew Jesus was there sleeping in my boat, but the night was so black it was impossible to see him."

But sadness turns into joy, and soon she could write: "In place of the wind of trial, a light breeze expanded my sail and I believed I'd reach the blessed shore, now seemingly so close. It was really very close to my boat, but more than one storm was still to arise."

Fifteen centuries earlier St Augustine meditated on this same boat, and saw meaning in it for the whole Christian community, the Church. St Thérèse was born in the modern era, where the individual is seen as the primary bearer of meaning. An earlier consciousness looked at the community first. Certainly the story has meaning for the individual; but let’s see how St Augustine applies it.

"The boat carrying the disciples — that is, the Church — is rocking and shaking amid the storms of temptation, while the adverse wind rages on. That is to say, its enemy the devil strives to keep the wind from calming down. But greater is he who is persistent on our behalf, for amid the ups and downs of our life he gives us confidence. He comes to us and strengthens us, so we are not jostled in the boat and tossed overboard. For although the boat is thrown into disorder, it is still a boat. It carries the disciples and receives Christ. It is in danger indeed on the water, but there would be certain death without it. Therefore stay inside the boat and call upon God. When all good advice fails and the rudder is useless and the spread of the sails presents more of a danger than an advantage, when all human help and strength have been abandoned, the only recourse left for the sailors is to cry out to God. Would God, who helps sailors to reach port safely, abandon the Church and prevent it from arriving in peace and tranquillity?"
August
Mt 15:1-2, 10-14

Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat." Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?" He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit."

The Pharisees have been beaten to a pulp so often that their faces are no longer decipherable. That's a pity, because then we no longer recognise them as our own faces. As a group they have become identified with hypocrisy, but this is clearly an unjust verdict. They were a devout group, deeply committed to the observance of the Mosaic Law. St Paul was a Pharisee, and even after his conversion he made capital (against the Sadducees) of being “a Pharisee and a son of Pharisees” (Acts 23:6). To trivialise the Pharisees is to trivialise Jesus: they were no straw men, they were worthy opponents.

They were like people living on rubrics, concentrated on the perfection of external observance. They were convinced that this was the way to God, but Jesus accused them of locking people out. “You lock people out of the kingdom of heaven,” or in another translation, “You shut up the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces.” They had the key of knowledge of the Law, but they used it to lock people out, not to open doors for them. A key can do both things equally well. Anyone who uses specialised knowledge to exclude people in any way can recognise his or her own face in the Pharisees.

What the Pharisees lacked in spectacular fashion was any kind of interiority; their minds were turned inexorably outwards, to rules and casuistry. What matters, Jesus said, is not what goes into a person from the outside, but what comes out from the inside. Religion is not about things, it is about you! It is about the kind of response you make to the world, to others, and to God. It is about whether that wonderful ‘chemistry’ of the Gospel is happening in you: the kind of ‘chemistry’ that can turn bad stuff into good, curses into blessings, suffering into prayer.
August 5
Mt 15:21-28
Jesus went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.’ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.’ He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ He answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’ Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.

The famous Dean Inge (1860-1954) wrote, “It is becoming impossible for those who mix at all with their fellowmen to believe that the grace of God is distributed denominationally.” Or, as Edith Stein (1891 – 1942) expressed it: “It has always been far from me to think that God’s mercy allows itself to be circumscribed by the visible Church’s boundaries. God is truth. All who seek truth seek God, whether this is clear to them or not.” This was the growing realisation of the disciples as they watched how Jesus treated foreigners and pagans. Jesus praised the faith of foreigners and pagans (Mt 8, Jn 4).

In the present case, however, there seemed to be some reluctance on his part. Commentators exercise all their ingenuity to smooth this out. Here are some of the points they make:
* Jesus was in that place because he needed to rest and to have time to teach is disciples, so he was off-duty.
* He didn’t actually send the woman away, as the disciples had urged him to do.
* He didn’t try to convert her to Jewish beliefs, as other teachers would probably have done.
* In Mark’s milder account of it, he said the children of Israel had to be fed “first” (Mark 7:27).
* His reference to “dogs” may not have been the racial snub it appears to be, but a reference to children’s pet dogs, whose needs would be secondary to those of the children.
* He may have wanted to show reluctance so as to distinguish himself from the many wandering magicians who were only too willing to perform cures for the sake of fame or financial reward.
* And finally, St Augustine: “The woman was ignored, not that mercy might be denied but that desire might be enkindled; not only that desire might be enkindled but... that humility might be praised.”

Whatever force these various points may have, in the end Jesus helped this foreign pagan woman and even praised her faith. This must be a challenge to every purely intellectual definition of faith. Like the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:25-29), this Canaanite woman publicly acknowledged Jesus’ identity before any of the disciples did (Mt 16:16).
6 August [Transfiguration]

Mt 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

The Transfiguration of Christ is recorded in the first three Gospels (Matthew 17, Mark 9, Luke 9). The fourth does not recount the story, but John 1:14 could possibly be a reference to it: "We have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." And Peter wrote, "We were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain" (2 Peter 1:16-18).

This voice from heaven was heard before, at his baptism in the Jordan. The words were the same (Matthew 3:17. In Mark 1:11 and in Luke 3:22 the words are, "You are my Son, the Beloved..."). In each case a cloud overshadows him (in the Old Testament the cloud was frequently an image of God’s glorious presence: for example, in Exodus 19:9; Leviticus 16:2; etc.). So the scene is like a backward glance to the beginning of his work. It is also a glance to the future: it is like a moment's preview of the Resurrection. The beginning and the end of the story are brought together in one luminous moment.

In all three gospels this Transfiguration scene comes just after Jesus predicted his suffering and death for the first time. Death, and even the thought of death, freezes the action and brings the whole of one's life into a point. But that point is not a fading into extinction; it is a moment of Transfiguration. In this lies the meaning of our own suffering too.
Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

During the reign of the Emperor Trajan – that is, sometime between 98 AD and 117 – Ignatius, the third bishop of Antioch after St Peter, was condemned as a Christian and brought bound in chains to Rome to die in the amphitheatre. Along the way he wrote letters to several Christian communities, and sent one ahead of him to the Christians in Rome. He pleaded with them not to attempt to save his life. It is the best commentary in all literature on today's reading.

"I am wheat for him, ground fine by the lions’ teeth to be made purest bread for Christ....When there is no trace of my body left for the world to see, then I shall truly be Jesus Christ's disciple. So intercede with him for me, that by the instrumentality of the beasts I may be made a sacrifice to God...."

"All the ends of the earth, all the kingdoms of the world would be of no profit to me. So far as I am concerned, to die in Jesus Christ is better than to be monarch of earth's widest bounds. He who died for us is all that I seek; he who rose again for us is my whole desire. The pangs of birth are upon me; have patience with me, my brothers and sisters, and do not shut me out from life, do not wish me to be stillborn. Here is one who only longs to be God's; do not make a present of him to the world again, or delude him with the things of earth. Allow me to attain to light, light pure and undefiled; for only when I am come thither shall I be truly a man. Leave me to imitate the passion of my God.... Here and now, as I write in the fulness of life, I am yearning for death with all the passion of a lover. Earthly longings have been crucified; in me there is left no spark of desire for mundane things, but only a murmur of living water that whispers within me, 'Come to the Father.'"