

FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY: LOCKDOWN IN CATHOLIC HENDRED

The Revd Mgr Andrew Burnham

DURING 'the Lockdown' in 2020, East Hendred Catholic Parish, in common with everywhere else, had no church services. Instead, as in many other places, we live-streamed the Mass and some other liturgies. Unlike the great centres, there were no stirring audience figures but there were many and various who tuned in to watch and take part. Many were from other parts of the country, and some from other parts of the world. There were many more who used the Daily Bulletin for their own private prayer: it was sent daily, Sunday to Friday, to all those on the parish's Bulletin e-list.

Each day there was a psalm, a reading, a reflection, and a collect, together with the resources for an Act of Spiritual Communion. All of this was under the heading 'Food for the Journey'. This collection here is the anthology of reflections. By 'reflection' I do not quite mean 'homily' – these reflections are slightly different. Each day we have usually taken one of the readings appointed for Mass as the basis for the reflection. Sometimes the reflection is more of a bible commentary, sometimes more of a homily.

2020 is the 10th anniversary of *Verbum Domini* – Pope Benedict XVI's Apostolic Exhortation on 'The Word of the Lord' - and the 1,600 anniversary of St Jerome's death. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales have dedicated this year to focus on the Bible and 'The God Who Speaks'. The Covid-19 Plague might have disrupted that to some extent but, in that there is plenty of opportunity to engage with Scripture in the privacy of our own homes, initiatives like 'Food for the Journey' have borne much spiritual fruit.

Andrew Burnham, Parish Priest, East Hendred

Monday in the Third Week of Lent

16th March

Lk 4:24-30

IN TODAY'S Gospel, Jesus explains that the Gospel is for a wider audience than his own people – the locals of Nazareth and Israel. As Simeon foretold at the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, the child is destined for the rise and fall of many in Israel. He is the Light to lighten the Gentiles as well as the glory of his own people. Jesus' homily enrages the synagogue congregation and they want to kill him. Interesting that Jesus makes his point about the prophet not being acceptable in his own country by referring to two old stories. One concerns the prophet Elijah who (1 Kings 17:14) ministers to a widow from near Sidon – not therefore an Israelite – and the other the prophet Elisha who in today's first (2 Kings 5:1-15) heals Naaman, a Syrian army commander, of leprosy.

These stories from the ninth century BC – the famine in Elijah's time and the problem of leprosy in the time of Elisha, on whom the mantle of Elijah fell – have an urgent modern relevance. Our problems, in this part of the world, don't include famine – whatever the queuing shopping trollies outside supermarkets suggest – but we are beset by the fear of disease. My guess is that many who become socially isolated at this time will join with the verses from Psalm 42 and 43, set as today's psalm.

St Patrick

Tuesday 17th March

1 Pet 4:7-11

WE DON'T quite know the circumstances in which this letter was written but we do know from the text that those who received it – not to mention us who form a later readership – were under severe pressure from persecution of some kind. In our own world, we reflect that Christians worldwide are under tremendous pressure from hostile forces and, along with everyone else, from the COVID-19 threat. So, where RSV has 'keep sane and sober for your prayers', the Jerusalem Bible has 'keep a calm and sober mind'. This is the time for a great spiritual taking of stock – or, as someone half-jokingly put it, a time where God has put the whole world

into a season of Lent. Nothing will ever be the same again and that includes, if we 'keep a calm and sober mind', much that could be transformed for the better. To think of a few examples, we shall see immense changes in health care provision, in education, and (judging from the turmoil in the markets) in the economic order. Will the government rise to the challenge of protecting the vulnerable?

We have to adapt the message of Scripture for our times. So practising hospitality and rendering service, which the reading encourages, has particular demands if our opportunities to meet one another socially are drastically curtailed. So another transformation – though the medium has its limits – is also about electronic communication and how we use it.

Wednesday in the Third Week of Lent

18th March

Deut 4:1-9

TODAY'S passage from Deuteronomy appears to suggest that those who perish are those who, like the Israelites who chased after foreign gods at Baal-peor. Apostasy brings death. This is a dangerous thought for us at a time of plague. In fact, the at Mass omits the difficult verses 2-4. Jesus himself deals with this question. In Lk 13:4 he has this to say:

Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Silo'am fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem?

He is clearly referring to a contemporary event, and speaking to disciples, troubled much as we were by the terrible accident at the decommissioning of Didcot Power Station a couple of years ago.

What Moses is referring too principally is the link between Life and Fidelity. God is faithful to his promises and to those who love him. This teaching is further developed by Jesus in St John's Gospel, where he links abundant life with following him and abiding in his Love (Jn 15:9-10).

St Paul gives us a ringing reassurance of God's love in his letter to the Romans (8:37-39).

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life,

nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Mother Julian of Norwich, the remarkable fourteenth century mystic, said the same thing in her *Revelations of Divine Love*:

**All shall be well, and all shall be well
and all manner of thing shall be well.**

ST JOSEPH

Thursday 19th March

Heb 11:1-16

The Meaning of Faith

TODAY'S 'Food for the Journey' takes some of its shape from the Divine Office, the daily prayer of the Church. I think we shall find, as time goes on, that more and more people are drawn into the saying of the Office as public Mass remains scarce. The Office is a large and varied tapestry of ages, so different bits of it will suit different dispositions and needs.

So, following the Office pattern, you will notice that we began with the *Deus in adjutorium* (O God come to our aid) – what could be more appropriate in these difficult days? – and the *Gloria Patri* (Glory be) comes in the introduction and after the psalm. What you are less likely to notice is that the today is not from Mass but from the Office of St. Joseph. In this, from the Letter to the Hebrews, St Joseph comes at the end of a very long list of faithful people in the Old Testament who trusted in God's promises. Under the New Covenant, we play our part in that continuing task of faithfulness – trusting in God's promises. We too are strangers and exiles on the earth, seeking a homeland.

Friday in the Third Week of Lent

20th March

Mk 12:28-34

The Two Great Commandments

IT'S HARD to keep our practice of the Faith in balance. We know that we are to love God – say our prayers, obey his will – and we know that we have a duty towards our neighbour – caring for others and their well-being. Yet it is easy for us, in a cocoon of holiness, to ignore the needs of others. It is easy too to do everything we can think of for others and forget the love of God and the importance of prayer as the resource for all we do. At this time, when we seek to protect our families and friends, we can also build our own cocoon, and not see too far beyond. We face the twin challenge: how to be sustained in our spiritual lives without the comfort of corporate worship and the sacraments, and how truly to serve others, especially those beyond our 'social isolation'. I say this not to criticise anyone: the real devotion of our communities and their willingness to look after one another is a real inspiration to me and I am sure to you too. May people know and see the love of God and his blessings at this time.

Fourth Sunday in Lent

22nd March

Jn 9:1-41

The Man born blind

THE LONG story of the Man born Blind who receives his sight is one of the masterpieces of St John's Gospel. It is a mistake to read it just as a disagreement between Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities of his day – though it is that. More importantly it is the story of how someone blind receives not only sight but also insight. The man journeys from being cured of his blindness to recognising Jesus not just as healer and teacher but as Lord. This is the faith-journey each one of us, in our own way, makes and the incident is therefore part of the journey of those preparing for Baptism and Confirmation at Easter. The world is full of people who regard the teaching of Jesus as admirable and who can even see that those who focus on the search for healing often find peace and relief. But this story takes

us – each one of us – further than that and it challenges us to take a view of how we are doing. Can we get beyond Jesus the Good Rabbi and First-Century Healer to Jesus the Living Lord, who brings us out of darkness into his marvellous light?

Monday in the Fourth Week of Lent

23rd March

Is 65:17-21

The Glorious New Creation

THE LAST couple of chapters of the Book of Isaiah give us a vision of a new world, a world where a just social and moral order will prevail over mere temple ritual. So the prophecies take us beyond the local to the universal, beyond a religious system to the way the whole world is ordered. Heaven is God's throne and the earth his footstool: he cannot be contained or defined by any temple. Jerusalem ceases to be the domain of a group of adherents but, reconfigured, becomes the mother to all believers. As the old Epistle for Mothering Sunday reminded us, 'the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother'. (Gal 4:26) In our journey through life, we are heading for the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven (Rev. 21:1-3), and God's New Creation, a place of houses and vineyards. Houses are the place of secure homes. Vineyards are the place where a settled community grows and flourishes. Talk of 'the new heavens and the new earth' is a reminder to the Church under persecution – whether from hostile forces or from plague – that our homeland is indeed in heaven (Phil 3:20) that 'here we have no lasting city' for 'we seek the city which is to come.' (Heb 13:14)

Tuesday in the Fourth Week of Lent

24th March

Ezek 47:1-9, 12

The Stream of Water Flowing from the Temple

WHEN we come across the passage from Ezekiel 47, about the stream of water flowing out from the temple, and irrigating a wide area, so that fruit trees and medicinal plants may grow by the riverside, we are reminded of a similar passage at the end of the Book of Revelation. Here the river of the Water of Life flows not from the threshold of the temple – as it does in Ezekiel – but from the throne of God and of the Lamb. We are also reminded of the *Vidi aquam* sung in Eastertide: 'I saw water flowing from the Temple.' The Paschal Mystery is when the prophecy of Ezekiel is fulfilled. Christ is the Water of Life, which we encounter in the miracle at Cana, where water from the purification jars becomes the new wine of the marriage feast. We encounter it too in the story of Jesus and the woman of Samaria, as they meet and draw water at the well. The Water of Life is not only fresh water, enabling things to grow and thrive, but water which quenches our spiritual thirst. As we journey on through Lent, towards Passiontide and Easter, we seek, through Christ, to grow and thrive, and we seek, in Christ, to encounter him who quenches our thirst.

[No Reflections for 25th -30th March]

Tuesday in the Fifth Week of Lent

31st March

Num 21:4-9

Whoever looks at the Bronze Serpent on the Pole will live.

AT FIRST sight, today's reading from Numbers offends our religious sensibilities. For one thing, how does setting up a bronze serpent survive the prohibition of graven images? The golden calf at Horeb (Exodus 32 and Psalm 106:19) caused great offence and disaster, whereas the bronze serpent, a later episode in Israel's journey, was the way of averting disaster. And can we really go along with the idea of looking at something

and being healed and restored? Well, Jesus does! In Jn 3:14 we hear that the bronze serpent is a type of the saving Cross. There are important differences between the golden calf and the bronze serpent: the calf was manufactured by a rebellious people, pooling their gold, and forsaking the God with whom their leader, Moses, was communing. It was an act of disobedience. The bronze serpent, possibly the standard or symbol of the tribe of Levi, to which Moses and Aaron belonged, was God's instrument, rescuing a wounded and frightened people. Just like the Cross! Both bronze serpent and Cross are symbols of obedience. In our own troubled times, into which the psalm, used in full, speaks so eloquently, we shall find peace only in the Cross. Colossians 1:20 tells us that Christ reconciles 'to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his Cross'.

Wednesday in the Fifth Week of Lent

1st April

Dan 3

The Burning, Fiery Furnace

TODAY'S from the Book of Daniel is a tale of derring-do – that wonderful phrase from Chaucer. Our three heroes defy the King of Babylon, during the Exile in Babylon, and follow their leader, Daniel, in refusing to bow down to idols. They are cast into a 'burning, fiery furnace', heated to seven times its normal heat, and, unscathed, they are joined by a fourth in the flames – one 'like a son of the gods'. The Story of the Three Young Men is one of the Old Testament incidents which –, story-telling rather than historical record, show God's love and protection for his Holy Ones and thus prefigure Christ. We are reminded of that psalm verse (16:10) - 'thou didst not suffer thy holy one to see corruption' - which in Handel's Messiah speaks of God the Father's preservation of his Son.

There is particular relevance of the burning, fiery furnace to our present difficulties, as we live through what feels like a disaster movie. God cares for, and ultimately preserves, those who place their trust in him, but, in our present circumstances, many face illness and death. In other parts of the world, many also face grave deprivation, disease, and starvation. The New Testament scholar, Tom Wright, in *Time* magazine, recently reminded us

that Christianity has nothing to say to help us understand plague and pestilence. All we can do, as God's people, as history teaches us, is join in lamentation. The Holy Father said something similar in *Urbi et Orbi* in St Peter's Square last Friday, when he stood alone, like Moses or Elijah, and argued with God.

Some words of St Teresa of Avila (sixteenth century) may help us at this time:

**Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing frighten you.
All things pass away.
God never changes.
Patience obtains all things.
The one who has God lacks nothing.
God alone suffices.**

For our further comfort, in the *Revelations of Divine Love*, Jesus is recorded as saying to the fourteenth century mystic Mother Julian of Norwich:

**All shall be well, and all shall be well,
and all manner of thing shall be well.**

Thursday in the Fifth Week of Lent

2nd April

Jn 8:51-59

Abraham rejoiced that he would see Jesus' Day

THE BITTERNESS of the conflict between Jesus and those whom St John refers to as 'the Jews' is best reframed as a conflict between Jesus and first century Jewish leaders. The claims of this rabbi, who is being seen by many to be 'the Messiah', God's Anointed One, don't match up to what the religious authorities expect or recognise. More than that, this new-fangled rabbi is using language about himself which can be explained only by himself being God. He talks of himself as being present at the time of Abraham and existing before Abraham – 'before Abraham was I am'. The conflict, as we know, would lead to Jesus being handed over to the Roman authorities, who crucified him as a political troublemaker. Some scholars think that what the conflict describes is more than the disagreement that

happened between Jesus and a hostile audience. They think that what is being described is a bitter row in first century Judaism between the community which accepted Jesus and became known in due course (at Antioch) as 'Christians' and those who remained traditional Jews, even after the sack of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in AD70.

Friday in the Fifth Week of Lent

3rd April

Jer 20:10-13

The Lord is at my side, a mighty hero

THE PROPHECY of Jeremiah comes immediately before the downfall of Jerusalem in 597BC and his constant warnings about imminent destruction at the hands of the Babylonians fall on deaf ears. People want to hear a prophet but only one who reassures them that all will be well. In today's passage, Jeremiah is alone and at the end of his tether but nonetheless places his trust in God. We can imagine justifiably some such passage – perhaps one learnt by memory – being said by Jesus during his Passion. He would not have said 'let me see your vengeance upon them', but he would have said 'for to you have I committed my cause.' In this passage, as we read it, we are not only looking at the Way of the Cross, which we shall follow next week, but entrusting our lives to God.

Palm Sunday

5th April

Mt 21:1-11

ON PALM Sunday we remember the Triumphal Entry of the Lord into Jerusalem. He came not as a warrior-king, as some were expecting their Messiah to appear, but 'humble, and mounted on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of an ass' as the prophet Zechariah had foretold (Zech 9:9). This is how the final week of Jesus' life began, before his death and resurrection. After the Triumphal Entry (which some of us might re-enact in our own homes this year), we have a Mass of the Passion. We use blood-red vestments, the same vestments we use on Good Friday. This Mass is usually an overview of what is to come, with the very long reading of the Passion – this year St Matthew. Since it is too long for a single-voice broadcast Mass, I shall not be reading the Passion at Mass but will record it as a separate item. At Mass today – unusually – we shall stay with the Triumphal Entry, hence the reading of the Gospel which normally goes with the distribution of palms as the Gospel of the Mass. We remind ourselves that the crowd who shouted 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' fell silent during the week and, by Friday, were shouting 'Crucify him!'. That crowd was ordinary human beings, people like us.

Monday in Holy Week

6th April

Jn 12:1-11

The Anointing at Bethany

JOHN'S Gospel lays out the final week of Jesus' life spaciouly, just as he had done with the first week of Jesus' ministry. In today's Gospel we have an incident told differently in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Matthew and Mark have a similar incident in the final week (Matthew 26, Mark 14), whereas Luke sites it earlier (Luke 7). There is presumably a link between the anointing of the feet of Jesus at Bethany and his washing of the disciples' feet later in the week on Maundy Thursday. St Clement of Alexandria and some modern scholars see the fragrance of the ointment filling the house as not only a sign of the Christ, the Anointed One, but also a reference to

Jesus' remark in Mk 14:9: 'wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her'. The fragrance of the Gospel fills not only the house where Jesus is present but the whole of the Gentile world. This fragrance is of an ointment used to prepare a body for burial, as Jesus explains, but it is to be the fragrance of the glorified body of the Messiah, raised from the dead.

Tuesday in Holy Week

7th April

Jn 13:21-38

Jesus foretells his Betrayal

IN TODAY'S Gospel, we learn about the betrayal of Jesus that will lead to his arrest, trial, passion, and death. Somewhat surprisingly, none of the disciples – even the Beloved Disciple who is singled out in this passage for the first time – knew which of them will be the betrayer. We can't even be sure that Judas Iscariot himself knew. Those hearing the Gospel learnt at the Anointing at Bethany – yesterday's incident – not only was Judas a thief but also that he would be the betrayer. At that stage, that was for us to know and for the disciples to find out later.

It is only after Jesus hands him the morsel at the Last Supper that 'Satan enters [Judas]'. Simon Peter persuades John, the Beloved Disciple, to find out from Jesus who is the betrayer, and John (and presumably Peter) privately witness the handing over the morsel and its significance. The morsel reminds us of the Eucharist – not everyone who partakes is a worthy partaker – and of the warning about treachery in Ps. 41:9: 'Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted his heel against me'. Even when Judas goes out, everyone assumes that he has just gone shopping.

This is no human struggle that is taking place: it is a battle between God and Satan. Simon Peter thinks he can play a part in the struggle – and lay down his life in defending the Master – but Jesus warns him that he will deny him three times before cockcrow. So much for human bravery! God, in the glorification of Christ, will be victorious and win the costly and supernatural victory.

Wednesday in Holy Week

8th April

Mt 26:14-25

The Betrayal is plotted and the Passover Meal begins

THIRTY pieces of silver was the value placed on a slave, gored by an ox (Exodus 21:32). It was also the wage of the shepherd cast back into the Treasury (Zech 11:13). No doubt Jesus – and St Matthew (who alone gives us the precise sum) – is aware of these ironies, as are we. Judas' motive – greed, disappointment in what the Messiah turned out to be, or agitator to make the Messiah act as he should – remains unclear. In seeking an opportune time to betray Jesus, Judas settles upon the Passover, and theologically there could not be a more appropriate time for the death of a slave and the price of a shepherd. It is the *Kairos*, for the death and resurrection. 'My time is at hand', says Jesus.

Matthew's account is slightly different from John's. In Matthew, the disciples anxiously each ask if he is the betrayer. Judas joins in last – perhaps to disguise his plans – and gets the answer 'You have said so'.

Scholars continue to speculate about when the Last Supper took place. Matthew, Mark, and Luke appear to suggest Wednesday evening but John (and the Church thereafter) go for Thursday. There are complicated questions about which Calendar is being followed – so there may be more unanimity than we think – and, in favour of Wednesday, that does permit more time for the intense schedule of events in the unfolding of the Passion, involving variously Arrest, Trial by Sanhedrin, Trial by Herod, Trial by Roman Procurator. The advantage of John's timing is not least that it allows us on this, 'Spy Wednesday', to stay with – and meditate on – the plot to destroy Jesus. It is a plot of the sinful against the Innocent One and therefore it is a plot in which we are all implicated.

Maundy Thursday

9th April

The Triduum during Lockdown

USUALLY we keep Holy Week very actively – waving palms and processing to 'Jerusalem', having our feet washed or watching others have their feet washed, eating and drinking of the Supper of the Lord, going out to 'the Mount of Olives' to watch in the Garden of Gethsemane, making the Stations of the Cross, venerating the Cross, receiving Holy Communion as we commemorate the Lord's death, sensing the bereavement of Holy Saturday and busying ourselves ready for Easter, gathering at the new fire and watching the lighting of the Paschal Candle, spread its light amongst us, singing our hearts out as we celebrate the Resurrection of Christ from the dead and our own hope of immortality. All of this 'enactive' stuff, teaching us, year by year, in the ways of discipleship. Then along comes a year when we can do almost none of it. I am not speaking of individual absence from community celebrations – we at least know then that someone is doing it all – but the whole Church remaining locked in social isolation. Has this happened before? Not in England, apparently, since the thirteenth century, the time of King John. And yet our recusant heritage, splendidly highlighted by the chapel at Hendred House (for a time disguised as a log shed), and the chapel at Milton Manor (discreetly hidden away upstairs), remind us that there were many years when the corporate gathering we have always taken for granted in our lifetime was not possible. And this reminds us of many places in the world – even when there is no plague – where Christians cannot publicly gather to celebrate their faith.

In the light of all this we should perhaps look at this year's muted celebrations as a rare privilege. Not only can we all share something of the privation of the persecuted Church, but we have the opportunity not previously experienced in our context to approach the mysteries of Holy Week and Easter almost entirely contemplatively. Many have had the experience of learning what the domestic church really is – a household perhaps in lockdown but sharing a faith. Some have had the maybe rather daunting experience of learning to be a hermit. For some, anxiety, bereavement, loneliness, or sickness will have made this Holy Week particularly hard and it is too glib simply to say unite your sorrows with Christ on Calvary or with his Blessed Mother standing by. And yet, what else can we say? May we all learn and know the victory of the Cross.

GOOD FRIDAY

10th April

The Mystery of the Cross

GOOD Friday tells us of the suffering, death, and burial of the one who entered the Holy City of Jerusalem amidst great jubilation only five days earlier. At any reckoning, it is a story of human tragedy, but it is not only the tragedy of a young man, who was brutally executed, after showing so much brilliance as a religious teacher and healer. That would be true in a universe without God. I remember an undergraduate whom I met in university days who had a striking portrayal of the crucifixion over his mantelpiece. He wasn't himself a believer but he valued the picture as an example of good behaviour. The human tragedy is much more than the loss of innocent life. It is well-expressed in the desolation of the bereaved disciples on the Emmaus Road after the Crucifixion. 'But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel' (Lk 24:21), they told the mysterious stranger. It's the Redeemer who has died.

We can draw much from the good behaviour. Here is one who is perfectly obedient. The reading from Hebrews puts it this way:

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

So, at the very least, salvation is derived from the obedience of one who is perfect. We obey him just as he obeyed the will of his Father. But the one to redeem Israel is not just obedient. He suffers representatively. When we read Isaiah and encounter the 'Suffering Servant' – which we repeatedly do – we can never be sure whether we are talking about one man or a whole people. Or, to be more precise, we can do justice to the sayings only if we bear in mind that this is both a man and a people. A man who suffers. A people who suffer. Such has the complex destiny of Israel appeared over the years, particularly in the last 75 years.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us

whole, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

So the one who is obedient also suffers representatively, and we have to embrace the mystery that he is 'stricken, smitten by God'. We also have to embrace the mystery that his chastisement makes us whole, we are healed by his stripes. That, as Isaiah says, the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. His life is poured out as a fragrant offering, a sacrifice to God, the one sacrifice which ends any need on our part to offer other sacrifices.

None of this is at all easy to understand, and simplistic explanations won't do. We have to wait for Easter, and for the stranger on the Emmaus Road to explain himself, if we are really to begin to understand. Meanwhile the Letter to the Hebrews helps us on our way. Here is the 'great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God....not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.'

EASTER DAY

12th April

Jn 20:1-9

Alleluia! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

THIS beautiful story, introducing us in the Fourth Gospel to a series of resurrection appearances, is very carefully crafted. For St John, darkness is unbelief and light is belief. The Light of Christ shatters the darkness in which we dwell. So we see Mary Magdalen coming along, in the dark. She sees the stone rolled away and runs away afraid. She seeks out Simon Peter and John the Beloved Disciple, who run towards the tomb. By now day is dawning. Their haste, in the right direction, is a move toward the light. The theologian von Balthasar sees John as Love – the Beloved Disciple who spoke frequently about Love – and Simon Peter, leader of the apostolic band, as Authority. In the race to the tomb, Love outpaces Authority. But we notice John – representing Love – stepping aside, allowing Peter – representing Authority, to take precedence.

Food for the Journey: Lockdown in Catholic Hendred (2020)

With the dawning of light and the increase in belief, more and more is seen. So, from a distance away, Mary Magdalen saw the stone out of place. John, from the doorway of the tomb, saw the linen burial cloths. Simon Peter, entering the tomb, saw the linen cloths too but also, separately, the napkin in which the head of Jesus had been wrapped. In this passage we have the two male witnesses, required by law and custom, but the next incident, which we don't get quite to in this morning's Gospel, will be the first real resurrection appearance, the encounter of Mary Magdalen – a single witness, a woman – with her risen Lord.

Staying with the two ideas of Love and Authority, we see a negotiation here between history and narrative. We have a beautiful story crafted with great care, which makes our hearts glow. We also have the sharp critique of history. Are we really sure that a man died, and rose from the dead, that the tomb which contained his dead body was found to be empty, that he himself appeared to Mary Magdalen and his disciples? Does this narrative of love stand up as authoritative history?

When the world seems a particularly dark place – as it does in our present emergency – the word 'Gospel' (Good News) is more searching than ever. Is there a 'Gospel'? Is there 'Good News'? Is there a 'narrative of love'? It is shocking for us in the advanced industrial West to encounter ourselves what is commonplace in other parts of the world and was commonplace throughout the world until the extraordinary economic and technological transformation of recent days. We used to speak in hushed tones about the Flu epidemic which followed the First World War and caused even more deaths than that war. We now know that such disasters are not permanently banished even from our comfortable circumstances. The Gospel – the triumph of Jesus Christ over sin and death – is either Good News nowhere or it is Good News everywhere. We see signs of it in the extraordinary dedication and kindness of health workers and volunteers. We see signs of it in the emergence of new forms of communication during social isolation. We see signs of it in the resourcefulness of scientists and their fearless search for truth and the way they co-operate together. The world is darker than we thought but that surely makes the Gospel brighter. Certainly the 'narrative of love' seems to be flourishing.

Earlier I said 'negotiation' between history and narrative, because, in the end, nothing is 'either-or'. Everything is 'both-and'. We push and pull at the narrative and discover that it has the ring of truth, that it convinced

enough people at the same, and subsequently, and in ensuing generations, in lives lived, and experience of the resurrection faith as the basis for hope. So this narrative of love can be trusted as a historical story, at least according to the test of love. Nothing to do with love can be painstakingly verified. The beauty of a painting. The quality of a piece of music. The nature of a human relationship. Nothing that can be painstakingly verified ends up being significant enough to inspire love.

Many of the debates and discussions in the Church end up being about Love and Authority. Sometimes Authority versus Love, and phrases like 'Law and Gospel', 'Dead Letter and Spirit' fly around. Of the three people who gathered at the tomb that morning, it was the most vulnerable – Mary Magdalen – who first ran away yet who came back and went on subsequently to have the richest encounter. The two disciples who came along to verify the evidence needed to learn to give way to each other. John the Beloved readily gave way to Peter: Love is better at giving away to Authority than the other way round. But without Authority we have chaos and the rapid decay of the content of the Gospel. May we progress from darkness to light, from superficial belief – which is not very far from unbelief – to profound belief. From death to resurrection. Alleluia! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Monday in Easter Week

13th April

Acts 2:14. 22-33

Peter preaches the Resurrection on the Day of Pentecost

IN TODAY'S reading from Acts, we encounter Peter, leading of the apostolic band, preaching in Jerusalem. It's the Day of Pentecost, the day when the apostles received the gift of the Holy Spirit 'like the rush of a mighty wind' and with what appeared as 'tongues of fire' (Acts 2:2, 3). Frightened men are emboldened to proclaim the Gospel of the Resurrection.

We might be surprised that, in a city like Jerusalem, there would be anyone who hadn't heard about the Death and Resurrection of Jesus. After all, we are speaking of what were recent events in a particular location. But in the Pentecost account we hear that there are Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and a whole list of other places. At the time of the Pentecost

festival, Jews from the diaspora would crowd into Jerusalem. So begins the Gospel mission to people of every country and language.

Peter has something of a hard job to do. There were plenty of clever interpreters of Jewish scripture and tradition. How would he, a fisherman, manage to speak into this culture with an authentic message, re-interpreting some Scriptural texts to show that they pointed to the Good News of Jesus Christ? Our passage comes after the prophecy of Joel, with which Peter begins, and we see Peter tackling the difficult message that the Messiah who was slain is resurrected to life. This he does using Psalm 16, today's psalm, as an explanation of how God rescues his Holy One from Hades and preserves his body incorrupt.

Tuesday in Easter Week

14th April

Jn 20:11-18

Christ appears to Mary Magdalen

ON EASTER Day the Gospel told us of Mary Magdalen's bewilderment on when, coming to the tomb on the first day of the week, whilst it was still dark, she saw the stone rolled away. She was frightened and fetched Peter and John, who investigated further and provided us with the two male witnesses (as required for testimony by Jewish Law). Subsequently, as we hear in today's Gospel, Mary encounters Christ and it is the first of the Resurrection appearances. There is some strangeness: she mistakes the figure looking out of the mist of the garden and thinks he is the gardener; only when he speaks and calls her by name does she recognise him. There is then the famous *noli tangere* exchange: Jesus warns Mary not to cling to him – not to touch him – because he has 'not yet ascended to the Father'. One explanation of this is that, though Christ rose 'on the third day', that is, Sunday, early on Sunday morning is at best only a couple of days since Good Friday afternoon. In short, this 'Resurrection appearance' might be as yet incomplete. It is the Sunday evening, when the disciples are gathered together at supper in the Upper Room, when the Risen Christ appears to them.

Wednesday in Easter Week

15th April

Lk 24:13-35

The Road to Emmaus

THE ENCOUNTER on the road to Emmaus on the evening of the first Easter Day is one of the loveliest of the Gospel stories. It is perfectly told: the walk of two bereaved and bewildered disciples; an encounter with a mysterious stranger to whom they pour out their grief; his counsel and encouragement, as he explains the Scriptures to them; the *mane nobiscum* (remain with us) incident; the meal and the discovery of the Risen Christ 'in the breaking of the bread'. It is not only a journey of exploration and discovery – another instance of the darkness of unbelief to the light of faith – but an acting out of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, where two or three are gathered together (Matt 18:20) 'on the Way', we discover Jesus accompanying us. He expounds the Scriptures – the Liturgy of the Word – and we find our hearts burning within us. We prepare the Supper, inviting him to remain with us. We then discover him in the breaking of the bread. The eucharistic liturgy does not end there: we find ourselves impelled to go out and tell others the Good News. In this way the Resurrection Faith is spread and communicated to the world.

Thursday in Easter Week

16th April

Lk 24:35-48

The Risen Christ again appears

FOLLOWING the Emmaus Road encounter, yesterday's Gospel, St Luke tells us of another appearance. This time the Risen Christ appears to the assembled disciples in Jerusalem. It is the final appearance in the Gospel itself but St Luke tells us in Acts that Jesus appeared to his followers for forty days, and as a vision to Stephen (Acts 7:55-56) and Paul (Acts 9:1-9, 27). This is no ghost: before the Ascension the Risen Christ speaks to them and eats broiled fish (Lk 24:42-43). He shows them his hands and his feet. These are details similar to those recorded by St John (20-21). St Luke is telling us – in sequence – that the passion prophecies of Jesus

were fulfilled (the Empty Tomb), that Moses and the prophets had foretold the suffering and resurrection of the Messiah (Emmaus Road) and now, in his address to them in the Upper Room, that it is the Risen Lord who teaches them (and us) about the resurrection and the forgiveness of sins and empowers them (and us) to be witnesses of these things, which are to be proclaimed to the nations (the mission which ensues in the Acts of the Apostles, St Luke's second volume).

Friday in Easter Week

17th April

Jn 21:1-14

The Risen Christ appears to Seven Disciples

LOOKING at the Resurrection accounts in St John's Gospel, we find in Chapter 21 what many scholars regard as an 'Afterword' or Epilogue. The Gospel seemed to have ended at Chapter 20:29: Jesus' appearance to the disciples in the Upper Room for the second Sunday evening running. All the manuscripts, however, contain Chapter 21 with its two further episodes. The first (verses 1-14) is a third appearance of the Risen Christ, this time by the Sea of Tiberias. The second (as we shall see later) is the rehabilitation of Peter. In today's episode, the fishermen-apostles have gone back to fishing, their livelihood. They catch nothing: their life's work before they met Jesus is now turning out to be entirely unproductive. When they come once more under the sway of the Lord, they catch so much fish that it breaks their nets. In fact there are 153 fish altogether. Lots of theories about this ranging from the actual number: somebody counted them to this being the number of fish species known in the ancient world. Whatever the interpretation, clearly the apostles are called once more to be 'fishers of men' rather than 'fishermen'. We might make something of the breakfast – bread and fish both being highly symbolic and even eucharistic – but most important that here we have no ghost but One, who in his Resurrection body, can eat and drink.

Second Sunday of Easter

19th April

Jn 20:19-31

Alleluia! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

THE FINAL verse of this morning's Gospel – 'Now Jesus did many other signs...which are not written in this book' – rather suggests that Chapter 20 is the original ending of John's Gospel. In fact, as we saw on Friday, and shall see again, there is a Chapter 21, with two further incidents. One is the Risen Lord, breakfasting with his disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, after a gigantic catch of fish. The other is the incident when, three times, the Risen Lord invites Peter to express his love for him, a three-fold affirmation which puts right the three-fold denial when Jesus was on trial.

In today's Gospel, Chapter 20, we see the disciples in the Upper Room, behind locked doors. It is the evening of Easter Day and the Risen Christ comes into their midst and greets them with the Sign of Peace. He shows them his hands and his feet so that they can see from the marks of the nails that it really is he. He breathes on them and, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, ordains them to carry out his apostolic work. They are not quite all there. Obviously they are one down, with the traitor Iscariot no longer in their midst, but they are missing a second one of the Twelve, Thomas, called the Twin. He is clearly of the introvert disposition, finding it easier to do his mourning in isolation. When he hears that the others have had an encounter with the Risen Christ he is incredulous and demands proof. He needs himself to touch the hands and the feet of the man who was crucified and who had died.

Eight days later – the following Sunday (so this evening, in a manner of speaking), they are again in the Upper Room and this time Thomas is with them. He receives the assurances he needs and the Lord is able to say to the apostles – and indeed, through the Gospel, to us: 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.' Obviously, later disciples who are not witnesses to the physical Resurrection of Christ need to be encouraged to

believe without seeing. Pope St Leo the Great, the fifth century Pope, helps us understand. He writes:

In a mysterious way [Christ] began to be more present to them in his godhead once he had become more distant in his humanity....The faith of the believers was being drawn to touch, not with the hand of the flesh but with the understanding of the Spirit, the only-begotten Son, the equal of his Father.

(Sermo LXXIV De Ascensione Domini II:4)

Alleluia! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

[No Reflections for 20th – 25th April]

Third Sunday of Easter

26th April

Lk 24:13-35

The Road to Emmaus

THE ENCOUNTER on the road to Emmaus on the evening of the first Easter Day is one of the loveliest of the Gospel stories. It bears repetition: those following the Daily Bulletin will have come across it on Wednesday 15th and it is now read today as the Sunday Gospel. Forgive me if I draw a little on my reflection of eleven days ago!

One of the things I have listened to this week – and tend to each year at this time – is the Bach cantata *Bleib bei uns, denn es will Abend werden*. (BWV 6). ‘Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent’. That verse, from the Emmaus story, encapsulates our desire not only to meet Jesus but to have him remain with us. The Latin tag – *mane nobiscum* (remain with us) expresses that longing. As does the prayer of Henry Vaughan, the seventeenth century Welsh mystical poet:

Abide with us, O most blessed and merciful Saviour, for it is

toward evening and the day is far spent. As long as thou art present with us, we are in the light. When thou art present all is brightness, all is sweetness. We discourse with thee, watch with thee, live with thee and lie down with thee. Abide then with us, O thou whom our soul loveth, thou Sun of righteousness with healing under thy wings arise in our hearts; make thy light then to shine in darkness as a perfect day in the dead of night.

The Emmaus Road story is perfectly told: the walk of two bereaved and bewildered disciples; an encounter with a mysterious stranger to whom they pour out their grief; his counsel and encouragement, as he explains the Scriptures to them; the *mane nobiscum* (remain with us) incident; the meal and the discovery of the Risen Christ 'in the breaking of the bread'. It is not only a journey of exploration and discovery – another instance of the darkness of unbelief to the light of faith – but an acting out of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, where two or three are gathered together (Matt 18:20) 'on the Way', we discover Jesus accompanying us. He expounds the Scriptures – the Liturgy of the Word – and we find our hearts burning within us. We prepare the Supper, inviting him to remain with us. We then discover him in the breaking of the bread. The eucharistic liturgy does not end there: in conclusion we find ourselves impelled to go out and tell others the Good News. In this way the Resurrection Faith is spread and communicated to the world.

The lay folk of the Church – and that, of course, is far and away the largest part of the Church – are in the middle of a eucharistic famine. The priests, meanwhile, continue day by day, as best they can, to offer Mass and receive Holy Communion for and on behalf of the laity. Eucharistic famine isn't easy: I remember the experience in the month of December 2010, after I had left the Church of England and before I was received on 1st January 2011. Christmas without Holy Communion must be a bit like Easter without Holy Communion. The disciples on the Road to Emmaus that first Easter Day were experiencing the loss of their Lord – the loss of communion and fellowship with him. Once they had encountered the mysterious stranger and begun to hang onto his every word, they needed him to stay with them. *Mane nobiscum. Bleib bei uns.* 'Stay with us'. What we cling on to now is the promise that Jesus made as he finally parted from his disciples. The promise is fulfilled in his indwelling presence in the tabernacle in Church

and forms the last few words of St Matthew's Gospel: 'I am with you always, to the close of the age.' We pray 'Stay with us' and he does just that.

Monday in the Third Week of Easter

27th April

Acts 6:8-15

The Arrest of Stephen

WE READ the Acts of the Apostles during Eastertide with a keen sense of the excitement and joy of the earliest Christian community. Yet quite early on we meet some of the crises that young community experienced. One of these is the story of the shiny new deacon, Stephen, one of seven appointed to look after the day to day life of the church ('to serve tables' is the phrase). No sooner than Stephen is appointed (Acts 6:5), he is arrested and put on trial. He is an eloquent preacher, as we hear in Acts 7, but by the end of the chapter, as we shall hear tomorrow, he is stoned to death.

There are some versions of Christianity where life is presented as a kind of enchanted garden, where nothing goes wrong, and everyone is kept happy and safe. In their extreme form, these versions offer material prosperity, and many an American pastor has built a luxury life-style on this model. These versions are not the ones we find in the New Testament or in the history of the Church. Often God's faithful people experience suffering and setbacks. We are reminded of this not least by our present difficulties.

Yet, as William Cowper's hymn reminds us, 'Behind a frowning Providence/ [God] hides a smiling face'. There is a complex relationship between a General Providence and Particular Providence. The one is about how a loving God has ordered all things. The other is about how you and I experience him amidst the ups and downs of my life. So, in the great scheme of things, we are alive on the one planet in a remote corner of the universe which can sustain life. We are surrounded by beauty and our lives are graced by love and kindness. We are adopted by God as his children and invited to live with him for ever in the Eternal Life of the Resurrection. That is how 'General Providence' works. As for Particular Providence, this is much more mysterious. As I look back on my life, I can easily count my blessings but I can't begin to figure out how they work. It's even harder when I try to look at others' lives. Particular is certainly particular!

So, the story of Stephen brings us up short both after Christmas – Boxing Day is St Stephen's Day and we suddenly put on red vestments – and now soon after Easter. The Early Church is a remarkable phenomenon – the way things so quickly spread – but, without the stories of adversity, without the martyrdoms, it would seem like an enchanted garden. The two lines of 'God moves in a mysterious way' which precede those quoted earlier gives us this salutary warning: 'Judge not the Lord by feeble sense/ But trust Him for His grace'.

Tuesday in the Third Week of Easter

28th April

Acts 7:51 – 8:1

The Stoning of Stephen

YESTERDAY we looked at the first part of the story of Stephen and today we look at the second part. The psalm links the murder of Stephen and the crucifixion of Christ by including the verse that St Luke tells us that Jesus prayed on the Cross - 'Into your hand I commit my spirit'. That verse is echoed by the serene words of Stephen: 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Many times, in the history of the martyrs, we discover something like the story of Stephen. Not only the commending of the soul but also the vision of glory: Stephen 'full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.'

One of the earliest accounts of martyrdom, following Christ's Passion and Stephen's stoning, is the martyrdom of St Polycarp (23rd February in the Calendar). Polycarp was 86 when he was put to death by burning (AD 155) but in the account from the Church in Smyrna we learn not only of his serene self-offering but that the body in the midst of the fire 'did not appear like burning flesh, but rather...like bread being baked, or like gold and silver being refined in a furnace.' There was the fragrant smell as if of frankincense. A generation after Polycarp, Tertullian (AD 197) famously echoes the wheat metaphor 'We multiply when you reap us. The blood of Christians is seed,' a saying which nowadays is more loosely translated as 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church'.

We used to think that the days of martyrdom were over. In his 1964 homily canonizing the 19th century Ugandan Martyrs, Pope St Paul VI remarked

'Whoever would have thought that [accounts of ancient African martyrs] would be followed today by new accounts of deeds no less brave and no less glorious?' Sadly, what the Pope called 'a free and independent Africa' was overshadowed by the atrocities of Idi Amin's Uganda in the following decade. Martyrdom is a current topic as well as a matter of history.

Most Christians' lives, thankfully, don't lead to a martyr's death, though our discomforts, our pain, and our suffering can be offered up and united with the suffering of Christ on the Cross. As St Paul said to the Colossians (1:24), 'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church'. Since the rise of monasticism in the fourth century, the Church has known and valued that martyrdom – bearing witness – is more often a feature of holy lives, lived to the glory of God and in service of others, than an untimely end.

St Catherine of Siena

Wednesday 29th April

1 Jn 1:5 – 2:2

Christ is our Advocate with the Father

WHO IS this formidable saint? Catherine of Siena is nowadays one of the Patrons of Europe and a Doctor of the Church. She lived in the fourteenth century (1347-1380) and is most famous, perhaps, for having persuaded Pope Gregory XI to return from Avignon to Rome. She herself moved from Siena to Rome and tried her best to bring about the reunion of the Church, East and West. One of 25 children, she resisted efforts to marry her off and became instead a Dominican tertiary. Her short life of 33 years mirrored that of the Saviour, and her writings and stigmata reveal her intimate spiritual bond with God. The reading from the first chapter of the First Letter of Saint John speaks of God as being light. In him is no darkness at all. In her Dialogue *On Divine Revelation*, St Catherine expresses herself to God as 'eager in your light to see you, who are light.' She continues, 'With the light of my understanding, in your light I have tasted and seen the abyss which you are, eternal Trinity, and the beauty of your creation.' Later she tells God, 'By your light you have brought me to know your truth. In this light I know you.'

There is other imagery too in the Dialogue. Our from the First Letter of St John speaks of the power of the blood of Jesus to cleanse us from sin and St Catherine too speaks of the eternal Trinity in its godhead, in its divine nature, making immensely precious the blood of the only-begotten Son. She herself is a 'new creation....in the blood of [God's] Son.' She tells God that he is 'in love with the beauty of [his] creature.' Again, she tells us that Jesus is the expiation for our sins and St Catherine uses different but similar analogies, describing God not only as 'an abyss', 'a deep sea in which the more I seek, the more I find', but also 'a fire, ever-burning and never consumed, consuming in[his] heart all the self-love of the soul'.

These images – the light, the deep sea, the new creation, the precious blood, the never-consumed fire – stay with us as we struggle with the call to holiness, the call to understand that we live and move and have our being in the life of the eternal Trinity.

Thursday in the Third Week of Easter

30th April

Jn 6:44-51

The Living Bread come down from heaven

IN THE Gospel passages this week we are looking at extracts from John 6, an encounter with Jesus' teaching about the Bread from Heaven. This, says Jesus, is 'the bread of God...which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world' (Jn 6:33). It was not Moses who (past tense) **gave** this bread, but the Father who (present tense) **gives** the true bread from heaven. The chapter began with the Feeding of the Five Thousand on the far side of the Sea of Galilee and continues with Jesus, back in Capernaum, teaching that 'unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you' (6:53). This doctrine sounded a bit like cannibalism to its first audience and often arouses hostility and incredulity whenever it is first encountered nowadays. For Jews, blood is life-blood, ritually drained out of animals before they are cooked and eaten, and drinking blood – especially human blood – is disgusting as well as in contravention of the Jewish Law. No wonder 'many of his disciples drew back and no longer walked with him' (6:66).

Catholics are content to take these words literally, but various attempts have been made to re-interpret the words figuratively, and even to say that

Jesus is not talking about 'flesh' and 'blood' in a eucharistic sense. Yet, even without the Eucharist, there are rich layers of meaning in the text and it may be, that in a time of eucharistic famine, we can explore some of this extra meaning in our own devotion. Certainly believing in the One who is the Bread of Life (6:47) is the gateway to eternal life. Abiding in Jesus is the response and reward for Jesus abiding in us (6:56). It is the Spirit that gives life (6:63). No one can come to Jesus 'unless it is granted him by the Father' (6:65). We have no where else to turn, as Simon Peter says to Jesus, for Jesus has 'the words of eternal life' (6:68). We find ourselves saying with Peter, 'we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God', that is, the Messiah, the Christ. (6:69)

Friday in the Third Week of Easter

1st May

Acts 9:1-20

The Conversion of St Paul

THE CONVERSION of St Paul, the most famous conversion story not only in the Bible but in the whole of Christian history, gives us a proper example of what it is to turn to Christ. It isn't just an awakening of a dormant faith, as when someone who has been baptised but never practised, still less the story of a journey from a separated Christian community into the Catholic Church. Saul the Pharisee was persecuting Christians, seeking to imprison them and endanger their lives. He became Paul the Apostle, arguably the most influential Christian theologian of all. He remains a controversial figure, not quite fitting in with some of our ideas. For liberal Protestants, he has sometimes been seen as the one who hijacked the Jesus of the Gospels and turned him into someone else. That's an extreme view – and, of course, wrong – but it does remind us how much of our understanding of the nature and person of Christ owes to the Epistles of St Paul. At the other end, we have, in the Catholic Church, Paul presented as the second most important apostle of all. Buried in the basilica 'outside the walls' of Rome, he ranks with St Peter, buried under the square of St Peter's. The Roman Church is the Church of St Peter and St Paul, and the First Eucharistic Prayer, the Roman Canon, lists Paul after Peter in the list of apostles. Poor old Matthias, who is brought into the Twelve to replace Judas, is relegated, it seems, to the second list, later in the prayer.

St Paul, who calls himself the least of the apostles, 'unfit to be called an apostle, because [he]persecuted the church of God' (1 Cor 15:9), is ranked as an apostle because he was a witness of the Risen Christ. Having said that, the Christ whom he met on the Damascus Road, was the Ascended and Glorified Christ. It was a vision and not an encounter, such as the apostles had on the evening of Easter Day and the following Sunday.

In the Calendar, as revised in 1970, we don't meet all the saints as once we did. At one time, the Conversion of St Paul, if it fell on 25th January, would take precedence over the Sunday. Nowadays this doesn't happen, which makes our encounter with them on weekdays – as in today's first reading – particularly worth noticing.

Fourth Sunday of Easter

3rd May

Jn 10:1-10

The Shepherd and the Sheepfold

TODAY is 'Good Shepherd Sunday', a day on which we reflect on the Risen Lord Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd, the one who says to Simon Peter 'Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep.' (John 21). We reflect also on all those who share the pastoral ministry – the ministry of shepherds – and we pray for those in formation for this ministry and for an increase in numbers of those called to share it.

A little group of us met on Zoom on Friday morning and studied this morning's Gospel (Jn 10:1-10) and I was struck once again by what a powerful image the image of the Good Shepherd is. It is steeped in the Old Testament - and the group looked at over a dozen references. God is addressed as the Shepherd of Israel: 'you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth' (Psalm 80:1). There are warnings about bad shepherds: "'Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" says the Lord' (Jer 23:1). God promises, like a shepherd, to 'assemble the lame and gather those whom I have afflicted' (Mic 4:6). And a Messiah is foretold, 'I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd' (Ezek 34:23).

Quite a bit of our conversation on Friday morning was about what the sheepfold was. Before we really get to the Good Shepherd passage (Jn

10:11-18), today's Gospel (Jn 10:1-10) envisages Jesus as the Door to the sheepfold. As some commentators have said, the shepherd in the Middle East would lie across the opening of the sheepfold to ward off wolves. He acted literally like a door. But who is in the sheepfold and who is not? The flock might be safely tucked in at night but, if they stayed there during the day, they would starve. The Good Shepherd leads his flock to good pasture – the powerful images of Psalm 23 spring to mind – and Matthew 18 and Luke 15 give us the Parable of the Lost Sheep. Sheep wander. It's something we see from our kitchen window at this time of year: the lamb who escapes from the field and has to be rescued by the shepherd – who, as I saw last week, grabs them by the scruff of the neck and drops them back in the field rather than laying them gently on his shoulder. Not being penned up in the sheepfold is normal but not without its risks. So, is the sheepfold the church building? Or is it heaven? Or is it a place for rest and recuperation, where the sheep having safely grazed can safely snooze? And who is allowed into the fold? 'And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold', says Jesus (Jn 10:16). 'I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd. We talked about that a bit on Friday morning. And there are no easy answers as to who that does and does not include. All we can do is count ourselves fortunate to belong to the Shepherd and gratefully leave it to him to decide who else does.

English Martyrs

Monday 4th May

Mt 10:17-20

The English Martyrs

MANY men and women – priests and laity – were martyred in England and Wales in the period 1535-1680 and have subsequently been recognised by the Church as saints. At the same time, many Christians from the Reformed tradition also lost their lives during these tempestuous times. Most martyrs were put to death for refusing to compromise their beliefs. A particular relevance of this feast for us in East Hendred is that this part of Oxfordshire – then Berkshire – was a centre of recusancy, an area where there were many Catholics, openly and secretly, and a place of particular risk, where priests were hidden in priest holes and mass was said secretly. We think particularly of Hendred House, the chapel of which has been here

since the thirteenth century, and where, in penal times there was much covert activity. For a time the chapel had to be disguised as a log shed.

Persecution of Christians seemed for a time last century to dwindle but in fact it has been estimated that more people lost their lives for their Christian belief in that century than in the previous 1900 years. In parts of the world this persecution continues and, even in the liberal democracies of the West, we now face considerable opposition. It would be over-dramatic, perhaps, to call this opposition 'persecution', but it is not an easy time to confess and practise the Catholic Faith.

Today we remember – and offer our prayers and support to – the neighbouring parish of English Martyrs, Didcot, on their feast of title. We also pray for our Anglican brothers and sisters. When the Church of England revised its Calendar, it included a feast 'Saints and Martyrs of the Reformation Era' in which were specifically mentioned those on the different sides of the religious divide who suffered for their beliefs. That said, we continue to pray, as today's Collect puts it 'that all our people may be gathered once again to celebrate the same sacraments under the one Shepherd, Jesus Christ'. Moreover, we do not begin to underestimate the heroism and suffering of the Catholic martyrs and we seek their prayers.

Tuesday in the Fourth Week of Easter

5th May

Acts 11:19-26

The Gentile Mission

WE SOMETIMES forget that, in the early days of the Church, it was only Jews, and those who converted to Judaism, who were included in the broad mission of the Church. There are exceptions to this from the first: the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21ff) – called by Mark the Syrophoenician woman (Mk 7:24ff) is rebuffed by Jesus but argues with him saying that 'even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs'; similarly both Matthew (chapter 8) and Luke (chapter 7) tell the story of the healing of the centurion's servant. The issue of whether Gentiles can be included in the community of the Church without first converting to Judaism is not settled finally until the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) but Peter, staying in Caesarea in a centurion's house, learns in a vision that the Jewish dietary

laws no longer apply. In Galatians 2 we glimpse how troublesome the issue must have been. Peter (and James) are clearly apostles to the Jews and Paul (and Barnabas) to the Gentiles but there is a row between Peter and Paul when in Antioch Peter draws back from eating with Gentiles. The word used is 'insincerity'. It is clear from today's reading that Antioch is a lively centre for the Christian Church. We hear of 'a great number' and 'a large company'.

There are early witnesses that Saint Peter founded the See of Antioch before he went to Rome. We hear this from Saint Ignatius of Antioch and Saint Clement of Rome. Antioch, a cosmopolitan city, was then seen as capital of the East, and, as our reading says, it was where followers of Jesus are first called 'Christians'. St John Chrysostom tells us that Saint Peter was in Antioch for a long period, Saint Gregory the Great that Peter was seven years Bishop of Antioch before going on to Rome.

It is startling to think that, had the argument gone the other way, the Church as we know it – mainly a Mission to the Gentiles – may never have really got underway.

Wednesday in the Fourth Week of Easter

6th May

Jn 12:44-50

A Summary of Jesus' Mission

IF SOMEONE were looking for a summary of Jesus' teaching, we would probably point to Matthew 22 – You shall love the Lord your God...and...love your neighbour as yourself. But today's Gospel from John 12 gives us another succinct summary. Jesus is the Light of the World and whoever sees him sees the Father who sent him. What he says is what the Father bids him say and the way out of darkness into light is believing in Jesus. Both of these summaries – the Summary of the Law and the Summary of Jesus' Mission as Light in darkness – arise from conflict with the religious authorities. In that sense, nothing changes. In our day we are not in conflict with Pharisees or other religious leaders but with the secular opinion-formers of our society: we live among many who doubt the truth of the Gospel. There is nothing new under the sun: the unbelief of the people, which Jesus is confronting in today's reading, is a challenge for the Church in every generation. It is important, then, for us to show that the

Love of God and our neighbour – a radical commandment for ordering our lives – and placing our belief and trust in Jesus as Light in darkness – setting proper bearings for the living of a holy life – are the way to have life and to have life in abundance. As Jesus himself put it a little earlier in John's Gospel: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10:10). Or, as we prayed in the Collect, may those 'who thirst for what [God] generously promise[s].. always have their fill of [his] plenty'.

Thursday in the Fourth Week of Easter

7th May

Acts 13:13-25

Paul explains the history of salvation to Jews of the diaspora

WE MEET St Paul now on what is known as his First Missionary Journey. The Missionary Journeys led to the establishing of a number of city congregations in the Near East. The names are familiar to us in the titles of some of the letters – Colossae, Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonica. But today we see Paul in Antioch in Pisidia. Even though we have seen in the last few days that Paul is seen as the Apostle to the Gentiles, his method seems to have been to head for the local synagogue and speak first to the Jewish diaspora. This was not all he did: in Acts 17 we find him in the Are-op'agus in Athens, preaching in the open air. In today's reading, he shows us how he preaches to the Jews. He re-interprets Jewish history in the light of the Christian story of redemption. This involves seeing not only how the longing for a Messiah emerged in Hebrew history but also how Jesus is the fulfilment of that longing. In some ways, we are in a similar situation. A recent article in the *New Statesman* was exploring how, amidst the pandemic conditions, there has been an explosion of on-lone searching for bibles and religious meaning. Whenever our faith in materialism falters, we seem to fall back on spirituality, in some shape or form.

Friday in the Fourth Week of Easter

8th May

Psalm 2

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage

WE PROBABLY don't pause and think about the psalms often enough. Whether seen as the hymn-book of the Jewish Temple or a wider collection of Hebrew poetry, the Psalter has also been at the heart of Christian Prayer from the beginning. The Daily Office is essentially the psalms as the cycle of liturgical prayer. Some psalms are brilliant for this purpose: others are more obscure. It is often remarked that the mood of the Psalter fits very well with the emotional life of the believer: that depends on temperament, for nearly a third of all the psalms are laments. And yet nothing is more uplifting than the hymns, the prayers of confidence, and the thanksgiving psalms we find in the Psalter. Today's psalm – Psalm 2 – is what is called a 'royal psalm'. The earthly king in Jerusalem is anointed and empowered by the heavenly king. Unsurprisingly, the Church applies this to the relationship between God the Father and Christ, his anointed Son. This is simply an instance of how what is local and specific in the Psalter is made universal in the liturgy of the Church. As we pray for peace in the world, we pray that the nations of the world will come under the Lordship of Christ, the Prince of Peace.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

10th May

Jn 14:1-12

THE BEST homilies, they tell me, are three-point sermons. You tell people what you're going to tell them. Then you tell them. Then you tell them what you've told them. Even better if what you're going to say, what you say, and what you say you've said also has three points. So, here are mine. The Way, the Truth, and the Life. From today's Gospel. Jesus is the Way which we are called to follow. He is the Truth in which we believe. And the life we seek to lead is his Life.

First of the three: the Way. It's surprising how many times the word 'Way' gets pressed into service. I have known confirmation courses called 'On the Way'. An international quarterly journey of spirituality, published by

the Jesuits is called 'The Way'. There is even an American pyramid marketing scheme called 'Amway'. I am never sure whether this is an abbreviation of 'I AM the Way', for religious Americans, or whether the 'AM' is just short for America. Whether corny or profound, the word 'Way' is a picture word. It suggests a road to follow. Like the Camino. Or the Stations of the Cross. Or the instruction manual which tells us how to proceed. Or just, as in the phrase, 'Way of Life', which I'll come back to.

"`What is Truth?' said Jestling Pilate", according to the seventeenth century philosopher Francis Bacon. The three words remind us that John's Gospel, where the question is mentioned, is concerned not only with picture words but with deeper philosophical matters. Jesus is the Logos – the creative principle underlying everything that was, and is, and is to come. This is a matter to be grasped. A truth, indeed, to be wrestled with. Someone to believe and to put one's trust in.

If people are concerned with the Way, a phrase which may spring to mind is 'Way of Life'. If they are concerned with the Truth, they will wonder what 'Truth' they should entrust themselves to as they pursue their Way of Life. So the third of our words is 'Life'. It is possible to pass the time not really participating in one's own existence. Just reacting to this and then that. As the 'Lockdown' poster on our kitchen board describes the day's routine: 'Let the dogs out, let the dogs in, let the dogs out, let the dogs in, let the dogs out, let the dogs in'. It is all too easy just to muddle through. But Jesus' phrase that he came that 'we may have life, and have it abundantly' (Jn 10:10) reminds us of the riches we are called to share. At present most of us receive neither the Holy Eucharist nor the life at the marriage banquet in heaven of which it is a foretaste, but we can glimpse the self-offering of Jesus on Calvary, we can acknowledge and look forward to that which we do not fully share.

So, as Jesus told Thomas, he is the 'Way, the Truth, and the Life'. These are the three points in our three-part homily. Some translations, omitting the final 'the', put it in this fashion: Jesus is the Way and the Truth and he is Life. As St Paul puts it in his Letter to the Colossians, 'if you have been raised with Christ...you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.' (Col 3:3).

Monday in the Fifth Week of Easter

11th May

Jn 14:21-26

The Holy Spirit, the Counsellor

WE HAVE very little idea of what took place during the forty days between the Resurrection and the Ascension. We have some Resurrection Appearances and twice we are assured by St John that much else happens. At the end of John 20 we are told:

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.

At the end of John 21 we hear much the same:

²⁵ But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

By contrast with this limited amount of information, there is considerable material in what are sometimes called 'The Farewell Discourses', chapters 14 to 17. These words are spoken between the Last Supper and the Arrest of Jesus and it is highly possible that what we have here is material from the time spent by the Risen Lord with his disciples or material from Jesus' earlier ministry or indeed both.

In today's passage, Jesus speaks of the One who, after him, will encourage the Church, teach, and bear witness. The word used in older translations was 'Comforter' – one who comforts in the sense of strengthening. Other words are 'Advocate' (Jerusalem Bible) and 'Counsellor' (Revised Standard Version). We cannot limit, or even describe, the Breath of God which is the Holy Spirit, so it is good that we have a few inadequate words. What is promised is a Divine Person who is more than a Comforter, more than an Advocate, and more than a Counsellor. Certainly he will comfort us – give encouragement and strength. Certainly he will speak up for us – helping us to understand the will of God and to express ourselves as we try to expound it to others. And he will be a Counsellor, guiding us into all truth and protecting us as we seek to make our way and live the Christian life.

Tuesday in the Fifth Week of Easter

12th May

Jn 14:27-31

Peace I leave with you

THE GIFT of Jesus to his disciples as he prepares to leave them is Peace, a peace such as the world cannot give. It is hard to do justice to the word 'Peace' which, in context, refers to a state of wholeness and perfection, tranquil and permanent. Our awareness of its importance has been heightened by the building in of the 'Sign of Peace' into our eucharistic celebrations, a sign now notably missing from our lives, where even a simple handshake – let alone an embrace – is presently not available beyond the four walls in which we live. Yet we need to remember that Jesus is here speaking to his disciples: there is no mention of any physical expression of Peace. Peace can be given and shared in a word.

It is also important to notice that the gift of Peace does not bring about ideal conditions. Jesus and later his disciples were faced with hardship, danger, and death. 'The ruler of this world is coming', says Jesus, and, though he has no power over Jesus, Jesus does as the Father commands. Missing from the Gospel passage in the lectionary are the final few words of the chapter. 'Rise, let us go hence'. This should serve to remind us that we are now at the end of the Supper and going out into the night where events seemingly very different from the wholeness and perfection of which Jesus speaks are about to take place.

Wednesday in the Fifth Week of Easter

Our Lady of Fatima

13th May

Jn 15:1-8

The True Vine

WE READILY respond to the metaphor of the Vine. It's a very simple image. Jesus is like the tree itself – the vine – and we, his followers, are the branches. Branches which do not flourish are pruned away, allowing for fresh growth. The Father is the Vinedresser. The imagery is very much rooted – to use a suitable metaphor – in the Old Testament, where Israel

is seen as the Lord's vineyard (Isaiah 5; Jeremiah 12) or as a 'choice vine' (Jeremiah 2), a 'luxuriant vine' (Hosea 10). We may worry about the idea of being 'pruned away': am I bearing fruit, am I productive? This worry often translates into worry about everyday living. Am I a good friend, parent, spouse, teacher? Apparently many people worry about Imposter Syndrome – feeling as though they are not really up to doing whatever it is they are supposed to do. Self-worth is not something most of us are very good at.

I suggest that the more important thing in this passage to reflect on and take to heart is the word 'abide'. I looked up the meaning of 'abide' on the internet. I'm told that it has a particular biblical meaning – and certainly we did come across it a little while ago a couple of times in the story of the Road to Emmaus ('Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.' Lk 24:29). The definition I found was that 'to abide' is 'to remain stable or fixed in a state', 'to continue in a place'. Nowhere is this stronger than in the last verse of Psalm 23, abiding in the House of the Lord. The longing to be in the Lord's Temple – a longing of which have a heightened awareness at present – is there in Psalm 84 as well as in today's Psalm, 122, which we have just encountered. But we mustn't get stuck on the idea of the Lord's House – except, of course, that it is the place where Christ in his sacramental Presence lastingly abides. The Risen Christ, as we discover in the New Testament, over and over again, is God's New Temple, into which we are built as Living Stones. 'And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb' (Rev 21:22). It is certainly helpful that we have a number of different metaphors for living *in Christo*, in Christ. We are members of his Body. He is the Temple of which we are part. He is the True Vine, of which we are branches. He encourages us 'to bear much fruit, and so prove to be [his] disciples.'

St Matthias

Thursday 14th May

Acts 1:15-17, 20-26

The Lot Fell on Matthias

THE STORY of the choice of Matthias is the first reading at Mass today. The Lectionary misses out verses 18-19 – the traitor Judas coming to a sticky end – but that disaster is not really something to pass over without comment. It's a mess and it tells us a great deal about the Church, and indeed about how God operates, to see that, right at the beginning, the Church needed Plan B. Plan A was for twelve apostles, each the symbolic head of one of the tribes of Israel. What should they do if they found that one of the twelve pillars on which the Plan relied had crumbled away?

The Jewish High Priest wore the Urim and the Thummim on the breastplate to be worn in the Holy Place (Exodus 28:30). These sacred objects were used to cast lots, thereby discovering God's will. Within the Jewish culture, what could be more normal than to cast lots? It seems that the selection process for the twelfth man – that's probably the origin of the cricketing term for the spare player – involved both votes (they settled on two candidates) and the solemn casting of lots. It wasn't about luck – as in 'heads or tails'? – but belief in something like a sacramental process, whereby God could work.

We know very little about Matthias, but he was clearly a witness of the Resurrection appearances and present on the Day of Pentecost. He went on to preach in Judaea, Cappadocia, and Ethiopia. Tradition, and representation in art, says that he was martyred by axe or halberd. Whatever we think our Plan A is, God may have different ideas. Indeed, whatever God has in mind for us, his will may be frustrated by our sin and our stupidity. Plan B comes into play, with God's help and succour.

Friday in the Fifth Week of Easter

15th May

Jn 15:12-17

No longer servants but friends

TODAY'S Gospel is a shortened version of the Gospel we had yesterday for St Matthias' Day . Yesterday's was Jn 15:9-17. Today's begins a little later, but ends at the same verse. In this shortened Gospel, we begin and end with the command to love one another, and, as the opening verse makes clear, the love which the disciples must show is the love with which Jesus has loved them. This is a theme addressed further in 1 Jn 4:10-11. 'In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.'

The love of God, shown by Jesus, is a radical love, in which he lays down his life for his friends. This laying down of life is not only an expiation – a cleansing – but an atonement, establishing an entirely new relationship between God and humankind. We become 'friends' (*philoï*) and not 'slaves' (*douloi*). We enter freely into a loving relationship with God not because we choose to but because he chose us. This sounds soft and comfy, or even elitist and privileged, until we realise that our calling is to 'go and bear fruit'. As we know, for a chosen few, throughout history, bearing fruit has entailed sharing in the laying down of life in faithful witness. For everyone else, the call is for lasting fruit that 'should abide'. There's that word 'abide' again that we met a couple of days ago. Called to bear lasting fruit, we are called into a lasting relationship of fruitful love with God and with one another.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

17th May

Jn 14:15-21

The Promise of the Paraclete

THE FAREWELL Discourses must have been distressing to the disciples. Here is Jesus, telling them that shortly – ‘yet a little while’ – and the world will see him no more. The darkness is deepening and they need to learn what they can whilst it is still light. He promises them that he will not leave them ‘desolate’ – *non vos relinquam orphanos* in Latin, so probably ‘orphans’ or, better still, ‘orphaned’. He promises to return to them in his Resurrection glory. He will live and therefore they will live. They will know ‘in that day’ that he is ‘in the Father’ and they ‘in him’ and he ‘in them’. So, the followers of Christ – and that includes us who live in him through Baptism and the Eucharist – are brought right into the life of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and ‘the Spirit of Truth’, the Paraclete.

The Holy Spirit is mentioned frequently in the Gospels but here, in John 14, we find out more than we do in most other places. Early in John’s Gospel we learned that ‘the wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit’ (Jn 3:8). We now discover that the Holy Spirit is an Advocate, a Counsellor, a Comforter – there are various translations of the word *Paraklētos*. The strongest of the translations is probably ‘Advocate’. What is implied is One who speaks up on our behalf, in a forensic sense, as well as One who offers us counsel and support. The Promise of the Holy Spirit is fulfilled on the evening of Easter Day when the Risen Lord breathes on the disciples and, giving them the power to forgive sins, says ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’ (Jn 20:22).

Monday in the Sixth Week of Easter

18th May

Jn 15:26 – 16:4

The Spirit of Truth

TODAY'S Gospel continues with the Lord's teaching about the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete – translated variously as Counsellor, Comforter and Advocate. I think we can see once more that 'Advocate' is probably the closest translation because the Holy Spirit is the one who 'bears witness to' Christ and assists Christ's followers also to be 'witnesses'. This is not a new idea. We recall a phrase from the Advent Prose. 'You are my witnesses,' says the *LORD, 'and my servant whom I have chosen' (Is 43:10). The vocation of God's servant-people is to be witnesses to the Gospel. It is a costly vocation. As the Lord makes clear, some will lose their lives bearing witness in this way.

The three days – Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday – leading to Ascension Day, which is now on Thursday, used to be known as 'Rogation Days', days originally part of the Calendar of Pagan Rome, praying for good weather and a successful harvest. Many of us, living, as we do, in a rural parish, will want to remember this older meaning, especially as we reflect, more than we usually have to, on how dependent we are on the natural world in which we live.

Tuesday in the Sixth Week of Easter

19th May

Acts 16:22-34

'Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved'

THE 'LOCKDOWN' has drawn attention to a particular term – the household – not usually in very common use. Married couples, families, and various domestic arrangements are part of everyday experience but how often have we drawn attention to 'the household'? It is a biblical term – maybe 120 references, a third of them in the New Testament – and usually referring to a decidedly patriarchal arrangement in which a man presides over his household. On three occasions we are interested to

discover that 'household' is a term for the Church. The Church is 'the household of faith' (Gal 6:10). It is 'the household of God' (Eph 2:15 and 1 Tim 3:15). This sense of us all being together in God's household is a major incentive for looking after one another – and others. 'As we have opportunity', says Gal 6:10, 'let us do good to everyone, especially to those who are of the household of faith'.

So, as we focus on the 'household' – those with whom we share a house at present – we need to look beyond to 'the household of God' with whom we long to share the gift of Holy Communion, itself a major fruit – but not the main or sole fruit – of Holy Mass. But we need also to reflect on our own households – whether there are many or few – and, if we live alone, on our less visible links with others, our families and friends, our loved ones living and departed.

But a word about the patriarchy bit.... We notice that, though things are cast in a pre-modern understanding of patriarchy – with the man having the franchise, the ownership, and the revenue, the Bible is always careful to talk about the duties of marriage partners to each other and to those who depend on them. Furthermore, as the story of the Jailer this morning shows, the conversion of a man is the salvation of his household. Neither is this just that way round. As I used to look round the congregation, before the 'Lockdown' and, as I pray, I shall once more soon look round again, I see quite a few women whose faith is – or will be – , please God, the salvation of their household.

Wednesday in the Sixth Week of Easter

20th May

Acts 16:22-34

Paul in Athens

PAUL'S preaching to the Men of Athens is a scene in which a Jewish prophet confronts, and engages in dialogue with, the cultured philosophers of the Gentile world. 'Areopogus' might be the place – Mars Hill – or it may be the meeting-place of the learned. These include Epicureans and Stoics. Both schools had about three centuries of learning: the Epicureans were happy to disregard religious explanations; the Stoics were pious but not in ways which would lead them to take seriously the claims of a crucified Jew.

Food for the Journey: Lockdown in Catholic Hendred (2020)

What is fascinating about the encounter is, first, that, in neither the Jewish academic world nor in Gentile circles, does Christianity cut through. We are familiar enough nowadays with clever people discounting the Gospel message but it is rather astonishing to see how influential Christianity has been, throughout the known world since the fourth century. The second thing that is fascinating is that St Luke, the author of Acts, hardly grapples with pagan philosophy beyond reflecting that the 'statue to an unknown God, on which Paul bases his message, is the one 'in [whom] we live and move and have our being'. Typical of Jewish thought, the thing that Paul fixes on is the idolatry of the Gentile world. 'Being God's...offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man.'

The crisis point in the encounter with the Men of Athens is when Paul mentions the Resurrection of the Dead. Some mock. Others reserve judgment until they hear more. A group – presumably small, because we hear no more about them, and they are sufficiently small for a couple of names to be singled out – repent and believe the Gospel.

What we can take away from this encounter is that there is nothing new under the sun. Our proclamation of the Gospel will be hard going when we are with those whose academic defences are in place. Some will mock. Many will profess to be agnostic – not knowing what to make of it and perhaps thinking that it is not possible to be anything other than uncertain of what to make of it. A few will hear the Gospel and take its Good News to heart, especially its Good News that, in Christ, we share the hope of the Resurrection.

ASCENSION DAY

Thursday 21 May

Mt 28:16-20

What comes down must go up....

IT WAS all very simple when the Gospels were first written down: heaven is up there and earth is down here. At Christmas we sing 'He came down to earth from heaven' and today, Ascension Day, we sing 'Hail! the day that sees him rise, to his throne beyond the skies. Christ, the Lamb for sinners given, enters now the highest heaven.' We often say 'what goes up must

Food for the Journey: Lockdown in Catholic Hendred (2020)

come down' – a bit of a comfort when a ball gets temporarily stuck in the branches of a tree. Perhaps we ought also to say that, 'when it comes to God, what comes down must go up'. God came down from heaven and became a human being – just like us, without the sins and the mistakes – so that we can go up to heaven – just like God, so without sins and mistakes.

What's made this very simple message a bit harder to understand is that – unlike Mrs Alexander and Charles Wesley who wrote those old and much-loved hymns a very long time ago – we do know that it's not all about coming down and going up. If a football team does badly, it faces 'relegation' – a posh word for 'going down'. If it does well, it faces 'promotion' – a posh word for going up in the league tables. The 'going up' and 'coming down' work well as images. Prices go up and come down. The marks we get for our work go up and come down.

How we deal with this change of understanding about how the universe works does depend on other things too. I am old enough to remember who orbited the earth in a space capsule in April 1961: the first man in space. He was a Russian. Eight years later I watched Apollo 11 in 1969 do the first manned moon landing. The crew got out and walked about on the surface of the moon. If I remember rightly, the Russian mission 'proved' that there was no heaven up there. The Americans, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, looked out from their space craft at the earth, some distance away from them in space and recited the first verse of the Bible. 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth'. So we are not going to get to the bottom of things with science and exploration. They teach us what there is and how it works. What we need to find out is why things are as they are and why they work that way.

There is a very good word for the fact that God became fully human in Jesus' incarnation and we become fully divine in Jesus' ascension. That word is 'atonement' – 'at-one-ment'. If you make French dressing, there is no hiding the fact that oil and vinegar are very different and you start out with them being different, and without a bit of care, they separate out again. But, mixed together, they become a very nice dressing for your salad, with a few fancy bits thrown in. In the ascension of Jesus we are made one with God. Like the prayer the priest says at the altar during mass: 'by the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity'. What comes down must go up....

Friday in the Sixth Week of Easter

after the Ascension of the Lord

22nd May

Jn 16:20-23

The First Novena

THANKS to the restoring of Ascension Day to the Thursday, forty days after Easter, we now have a full nine days until Pentecost. Immediately this feels right. The biblical forty days were observed and the biblical fifty days – Pentecost has the meaning of ‘fiftieth day’ – will be observed. The Jewish feast of ‘Shavuoth’ is also fifty days on from the second day of Passover. More important than getting these basic calculations of ‘forty days’ and ‘fifty days’ right is the regaining of the Novena, the nine days that separate Ascension and Pentecost. Novenas are helpful because they give us chance to prepare properly. There are many Novenas but the original one – these nine days – is the one which gives meaning and context to the idea. So, what happens in a Novena? If we look back to the first Novena, we find the apostles, having said farewell to the Lord at the Ascension, going back to Jerusalem to an upper room – perhaps ‘the Upper Room’ – to await the outpouring of the Spirit. So, our Novena is a time of prayer and quiet expectation. In fact the old nickname for this coming Sunday – the Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost – was ‘Expectation Sunday’. One of my favourite phrases from the psalms – in Latin and in English – is *Expectans expectavi*, ‘I waited patiently for the Lord.’ We shall be working out in the next few days what gifts we might be waiting for.

Sunday after the Ascension

24th May

‘Expectation Sunday’

TODAY is ‘Expectation Sunday’, the day when we look forward with some eagerness to next Sunday, the Feast of Pentecost, when we not only celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles and the women, gathered in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, but also pray for a fresh

Food for the Journey: Lockdown in Catholic Hendred (2020)

outpouring of the Holy Spirit on us, and on the worldwide Church. There have been some splendid Pentecostal events. One I shall never forget personally was the visit of Pope St John Paul to Britain in 1982. I attended an outdoor Mass at Coventry Airport, along with a vast crowd. I was a music teacher in a Catholic school and we all had to camp out the night before, ready for an early start. Unforgettable. I am sure many of us have memories of similarly vivid occasions, whether at Pentecost or not, where the feeling that the Spirit of God is abroad in our midst is palpable.

So, during this Novena of Prayer – these nine days between Ascension Day and Pentecost – it is worth not only redoubling our efforts to live a life of holiness and prayer but also to reflect on what we really would like to ask the Holy Spirit, at work in the world, do for us, to heal our brokenness. Top of everyone's list is the ending of the plague, people held hostage in their own homes by a virus, or lying desperately ill in hospital. We pray for all of this to pass. We see the Holy Spirit at work not just in priests and parishes but in scientists and research labs, doctors, health care workers and hospitals. But, more than that, we have seen unleashed in our midst powerful correctives to some of our way of life. One friend of mine, a retired nuclear physicist, said, it's as if nature has sent us all off to our rooms to think again how we engage with the world. There are some powerful images of an alternative way of doing things. We have seen clear skies, heard bird song, breathed fresh air, discovered an alternative to the trudge of commuting, learned new habits of eating and drinking, new forms of recreation. We have wrestled with living on our own or living at close quarters with others. We have made do with spiritual sustenance packaged in e-mails or live-streamed on Facebook or Zoom. Some have not had that and had to rely on whatever the broadcast media serve up.

At the end of this is not just a vaccine or a proven therapy for a new and tiresome virus but a new understanding of the vital contribution made by some of those whom we have not much noticed before: migrant workers, social care workers, porters and cleaners. Also a new understanding of the innate goodness of people. For every spiv or crook, there are a thousand good-hearted folk, eager to volunteer and to help those less fortunate. This outburst of community – shown not least by socially-distanced street parties for VE Day, clapping on Thursday evenings, and pride in the new discovery of hymn tunes that can be played on the bells of St Augustine's – all of this is the Holy Spirit at work in our world. We want more of all this and, with God's help, we want the world to emerge from the dark shadow of plague into the sunlight of divine blessing. Come, Holy Spirit!

Monday in the Seventh Week of Easter

25th May

Acts 19:1-8

THE SECOND half of the Acts of the Apostles is really the story of St Paul, his missionary journeys, and his eventual arrest and final journey to Rome. We must take the Gospel of St Luke and the Book of Acts as a two-part work (the opening of Acts says as much). The two halves – St Luke's Gospel – represent the journey of a rabbi from Galilee to his arrest and death in Jerusalem, the centre of the Jewish world, and – the Acts of the Apostles – the journey of the Apostolic Church from Jerusalem to Rome, the centre of the known world, the Gentile world.

In Acts 19 – this morning's first reading – we find Paul in Ephesus. We are still very much as the Jewish stage of the Christian mission in that Paul's preaching during his three-month stay in Ephesus is based in the synagogue there, amongst the Jews of the diaspora.

The information we are given is intriguing: there are disciples here who have undergone the baptism of repentance, as preached by John the Baptist, but have yet to experience the Holy Spirit. Indeed they are not aware that there is a 'Holy Spirit'. When they hear Paul proclaim the Gospel, they are moved to be baptised in the name of Jesus, and to receive the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit. These gifts include the gift of prophecy and the gift of speaking in tongues – gifts which will be all too prominent as we reflect in the coming days on the promise of Pentecost.

Tuesday in the Seventh Week of Easter

after the Ascension of the Lord (St Philip Neri)

26th May

Phil 4:4-9

THOUGH the readings for the week continue with a further chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, we divert today to St Philip Neri and a reading from Philippians. St Philip Neri had a profound experience of the Holy Spirit – an in-filling such as described by Pentecostalists and Charismatics – and we are blessed that his example is given to us as we prepare for the promise

of Pentecost. We are bidden to share in the Peace of God which passes all understanding and, with forbearance, have no anxiety about what is happening. In place of the nervous energy of anxiety we are offered a share in the ministry of prayer, intercession, and thanksgiving. We are to live constantly mindful that all things will come to an end in Christ: the Lord is at hand.

If I am honest, I find all those sentiments very inspiring but very hard indeed to grow into. It is our vocation to try to develop that confidence and trust, that freedom from anxiety. These are matters which are tied in with our emotional growth. The second part of the reading is more straightforward: we are to focus on what is true, what is honourable, what is just, what is pure, what is lovely, what is gracious. We are to focus on things which are excellent and worthy of praise. All of this is not about our emotions but about our will: if we are to succeed, we have to decide to do these things.

We can bring the two halves of the reading together by seeing that our faithfulness in prayer, supplication, and thanksgiving – what we do as we open our anxiety to the healing balm of the Holy Spirit – and our focus on what is lovely and gracious are rewarded by the indwelling of the God of peace in our hearts and minds.

Wednesday in the Seventh Week of Easter

after the Ascension of the Lord (St Augustine of Canterbury)

27th May

1 Thess 2:2-8

THE FIRST Letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians is believed to be the earliest bit of Christian Scripture we have. It was written fewer than 20 years after the Resurrection and reveals that when Paul was in Philippi, at an earlier stage in his journey round Greece, they gave him a hard time. He seems in today's reading to be talking to Gentile converts in Thessalonica – those who 'turned to God from idols' 'serve a living and true God' (1 Thess. 1:9).

The relevance of this reading to St Augustine of Canterbury is clear. St Augustine arrives in Kent, a pagan kingdom with a Christian Queen

(Bertha). He sets about converting the King and though, in the longer perspective St Augustine was less successful than sometimes thought, he made considerable headway in Kent. This painstaking approach, with gradual success, is probably what lies behind St Paul's own missionary work.

There is much wisdom in this passage: courage is needed and lack of guile; there is no place in Christian preaching for flattery and greed; there must be gentleness and affection and a sense of sharing. The image of 'a nurse taking care of her children' is a very striking one, especially amidst the typically male-framed discourse of the time.

Proclaiming the Christian Gospel was no easy thing to do – for St Paul or for St Augustine of Canterbury – and is no easy thing for us to do. I think we sometimes forget that we are not asked to go and stand in the town square, nor even outside the village shop where we live. The call is to live our lives with honesty and integrity – at best inspiring others by the way we live – and thus to bear witness to our families, our friends, and our neighbours. We need to discover once more the importance of hope – what St Paul calls 'the hope to which God has called [us]' (Eph 1:18), 'Christ in [us], the hope of glory' (Col 1:27)

Thursday in the Seventh Week of Easter

after the Ascension of the Lord (Blessed Margaret Pole)

28th May

Acts 22:30; 23:6-11

WE ARE heading for the climax of the Acts of the Apostles. Paul, arrested because of the agitation of the Jewish leaders, is hauled before the Sanhedrin. St Luke's mention of the Sanhedrin here reminds us of the trial of Jesus. This high-ranking court has proved itself twice over to be an undisciplined rabble. Similarly, St Luke does not highly rate the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees believe some of the right things but come to the wrong conclusion. The Sadducees, whom he mentions just once, are simply wrong. Paul noticed – and took advantage of – the differences between Pharisees (of which Paul had been one himself before his conversion) and the Sadducees. Pharisees believed in life after death and Sadducees didn't. Unsurprisingly, when he explains himself, Paul elicits

some support from the Pharisees. 'What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?', they say. The quarrel turned violent and the tribune ordered that Paul be taken to the barracks. Earlier we had seen Paul claiming to be by birth a Roman citizen and those who could say 'Cives Romanus sum' – I am a Roman citizen – had particular rights. One right was to be tried for crimes in front of the Roman Emperor, which led to Paul being taken off to Rome.

It is hard to read St Luke – the Gospel as well as the Acts of the Apostles – without being struck by some of the difficulties the Christian mission faced. Leaving aside the fundamental fact of the Crucifixion of Jesus, a fact which St Paul calls 'a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles' (1 Cor 1:23), we see the new Christian movement, inspired by the Holy Spirit, nonetheless meeting some real obstacles. Chief of these is the lack of headway the Gospel makes with Israel, God's own people. We have a series of setbacks: the martyrdom of the new deacon, Stephen (Acts 7); the martyrdom of James and the imprisonment of Peter (Acts 12); the uproar in Thessalonica (Acts 17); the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19); the arrest of Paul and the shipwreck on Malta, en route for Rome (Acts 27). The final difficulty – the beheading of Paul – is after the Book of Acts has ended. All we have is a final verse that tells us that Paul lived in Rome for 'two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered' (Acts 28:30). The pattern of setbacks and suffering features throughout Christian history – as today's honouring of the martyr Blessed Margaret Pole shows. The victory of the Gospel is a triumph indeed but it is a triumph amidst adversity.

Friday in the Seventh Week of Easter

after the Ascension of the Lord (St Paul VI, Pope)

29th May

Jn 21:15-25

HAVING spent quite some time in the Easter season with the Acts of the Apostles and St John's Gospel, we would reach the end of both books on Saturday. Since there is no Mass celebrated here on Saturday, I have extended today's Gospel to give us the final verses of St John. (If you want to finish off Acts, the Saturday passage begins at 28:16.) I have chosen today to reflect on the Gospel, partly because the scene was set on

Food for the Journey: Lockdown in Catholic Hendred (2020)

Thursday's reading from Acts for Paul's departure for Rome, and though we hear of a shipwreck on the way on the Island of Malta and of his house arrest in Rome for a couple of years, we don't hear from Acts about his execution. In that sense, we have less than the full story.

We don't quite hear from St John's Gospel what eventually happens to Peter and John, the Beloved Disciple. We hear in today's Gospel that Peter who denied knowing his Lord three times after Jesus was arrested is three times given chance to profess his love and devotion, and three times is given a commission to care for the sheep and lambs of God's pasture. We also hear implicitly that Peter will suffer martyrdom: "When you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go." (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God.)' We find out later that Peter was crucified under Nero in between AD 64 and AD 68. The tradition is that the execution took place at what is now called St Peter's Square: the spot is mark by an Egyptian obelisk, 25 metres high, erected in 1586. The grave of Peter is deep below St Peter's Basilica.

Peter and Paul were martyred at about the same time. Peter was crucified, apparently upside down, but Paul, the Roman citizen, had the right be beheaded, a death no doubt much quicker and more dignified. We find Peter enquiring of Jesus what will happen to the Beloved Disciple. The slightly enigmatic reply - 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!' - led many to speculate that John would not see death. This, says the Evangelist, was not accurate, but John's natural death showed us that it is not only martyrs who are saints.

PENTECOST

31st May

Jn 20:19-23

SOMETIMES we need look no further than the Collect at Mass to focus our thoughts on a particular occasion. The Collect speaks of 'the mystery of today's great feast' and how God thereby sanctifies the 'whole Church in every people and nation'. We pray then that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are poured out 'across the face of the earth' and we pray that God will 'fill now

Food for the Journey: Lockdown in Catholic Hendred (2020)

once more the hearts of believers' 'with the divine grace that was at work when the Gospel was first proclaimed'. So we have these three things: the mystery proclaimed at Pentecost, God at work throughout the world, and divine grace filling the hearts of believers.

The Mystery of Pentecost

Pentecost is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit as described by Peter on the Day of Pentecost in a quotation from the Book of Joel:

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even upon the menservants and maidservants in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

Joel 2:28-29

Pentecost, 50 days after the Passover, was known as *Shavuot*, the Feast of Weeks, seven times seven weeks. It is one of the three Pilgrimage Festivals mentioned in the Old Testament and was tied up the wheat harvest (Exodus 34:22) and the giving of the Torah to Israel on Sinai. The Counting of the Omer – the counting out of the days – increased eager anticipation for the gift of the Law. Water in plenty – in a dry climate - and the shedding abroad of God's Spirit are symbolic of *Shavuot* and of the speaking and hearing of the Good News of salvation in many different languages. Salvation proclaimed in Prophecy. Salvation remembered in Dreams. Salvation imagined through Visions.

God at Work throughout the World

Jews from the diaspora came to Jerusalem on pilgrimage from all over the known world – hence the many languages – but converging on the Jerusalem temple gives way, in the Christian story, to God's Holy Spirit making Christ the New Temple known throughout the world. God is not confined to a Holy Place nor to the religious sphere. If God is the Holy Spirit, the Breath of Life, he gives Life to all living things. If he is the *Logos*, the Source of Knowledge, he is there in research and science, medicine and technology. If God is Love, he is there in art and architecture, literature and music, as well as in people and relationships.

Divine Grace Filling the Hearts of Believers

The Holy Spirit gives his charisms and fills the hearts of believers. These seven gifts of the Spirit, learnt by rote, are Wisdom, Understanding,

Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety, Fear of the Lord. They correspond roughly to the fruits of the Spirit which emanate from them. The list in Galatians 5:22 is:

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness.

As we pray for a share of God's Spirit – whether we are sons, daughters; old or young; and whatever our station in life – it is through us, and, pray God, not despite us, that God the Holy Spirit is at work in the hearts of God's faithful people, and renewing the face of the earth.

Monday after Pentecost

1st June

2 Pet 1:2-7

The Christian's Call and Election

THE SECOND Epistle of St Peter, it is generally agreed, is not by Peter and dates from the second century (sometime between 120AD and 140AD). It is probably the latest of the New Testament books to be written and, despite its opening verse, is probably not a letter.

The first verse, omitted from the reading as set for Mass, is:

**Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,
To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with
ours in the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ.**

The author is clearly burnishing his credentials. Writing probably in a general way for Christians in Asia Minor, and to those familiar with the writings of St Paul, the author is probably setting out to give a further message from St Peter. Perhaps he is writing from Rome, perhaps from Alexandria, or from somewhere in Asia Minor.

There is a flavour of 1 Peter in the notion of escaping from what is corruptible into what is incorruptible and, more especially, in the reference to becoming 'partakers of the divine nature' (in Greek theology this is called *theōsis*). The rest of the passage gives us some practical advice on how this is done, broadly speaking by exploring and receiving the fruits of the

Holy Spirit, the gifts of Pentecost. We are to 'supplement [our] faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.' A good 'to do' list for this week, the ancient Octave of Pentecost.

Tuesday after Pentecost

2nd June

2 Pet 3:11-18

Awaiting New Heavens and a New Earth

TODAY, the second of two excerpts from the Second Epistle of St Peter - today's following on from yesterday's - gives us what purports to be a last word from St Peter - though almost certainly not written by him - and we shall move on tomorrow to extracts from the Second Letter of St Paul to Timothy. Again, though purporting to be from St Paul, 2 Timothy is almost certainly not written by him. There is quite a story as to how all this finally settled down as the New Testament was compiled. As late as the fourth century, we find disputes as to whether 2 Peter should be included. The case for inclusion is that there are teachings unique to - or uniquely emphasised - in this book. The case for exclusion is a sense that these teachings are out of synch with the rest of the New Testament. A verse and a half is missed out in the version read at Mass today:

So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him,¹⁶ speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.

No smoke without fire, you may say, (and St Paul can be hard to understand) but, talking of smoke, the verse in 2 Peter which speaks of the heavens being dissolved and the elements melting with fire (v12) not only gave us the imagery of the *Dies Iræ* but a link with the Old Testament (Is 65:17; 66:22) and the teaching of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 3:10; 5:22; 13:140, 50; 18:8-9). Also prominent in 2 Peter is the emergence of

ideas from the Gentile world – Greek philosophy is evident in the use of the ideal of godliness (*eusebia* in 1:3, 6, 7; 3:11) and in the notion of deification, mentioned yesterday (*theosis*, partaking in the divine nature). This development is defended by Raymond E. Brown: ‘is it an inevitable thrust of the proclamation of a gospel of incarnation?’ Brown thinks, on the whole, that it is. (*Introduction to the New Testament* p.771)

Meanwhile, during these days following Pentecost, we notice that fire does not only destroy, and does not only purify. Fire is pre-eminently the symbol of the Holy Spirit, who transforms us with the heat and light of divine love.

Wednesday after Pentecost

(St Charles Lwanga & Companions, Martyrs)

3rd June

2 Tim 1:1-3, 6-12

Rekindle the Gift of God that is within you through the Laying on of Hands

TODAY, we move on from 2 Peter, which we looked at on Monday and Tuesday, to extracts from the Second Letter of St Paul to Timothy. Though purporting to be from St Paul, 2 Timothy is almost certainly not written by him, just as 2 Peter was not the work of St Peter. The passage we read this morning at Mass misses out verses 3-5, with the mentions of Timothy’s grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice which remind us that this is a personal letter.

The striking phrase in this reading is slightly disguised by a rather sonorous translation in RSV. ‘Rekindle the gift of God that is within you’ is quite a bit less persuasive than the more recent rendering: ‘Fan into flame’. Even more interesting than the imagery here – whether of ‘rekindling’ or ‘fanning into flame’ – is the notion that this is something we ourselves do. What the Church does, through the sacraments, is here represented by the laying on of hands. But we ourselves are to fan into a flame the gift that is given to us by the sacraments of confirmation and ordination – when charisms are imparted to us by the laying on of hands. What we must do is work at it. Doesn’t that leave out the sacred action of the Holy Spirit, the Giving

Gift? No, because 'God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control'. Whatever resources we have are resources given to us by God.

I think we can see here the contrast between external, sacramental life – the formal liturgies of the Church and the rites of passage – and the internal life of the Spirit. As we mark the various stages of life – baptism, first communion, confirmation, and, for some, marriage and ordination – the charisms (the gifts) are definitely given, but only as we engage with them, and 'fan them into flame', can the internal processes really take place. This explains the undoubted fact that there are many in whom these graces lie dormant and unexplored and, of course, others where the inner life of the Spirit is somewhat ahead of where formally they have got to on their pilgrimage.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, Eternal High Priest

Thursday after Pentecost

4th June

Heb 10:4–10

*It is written of me in the roll of the book:
'I have come to do you will, O God.'*

AS A CHILD, I used to hear today's passage from Hebrews, chapter 10, read on Good Friday. It was clear that neither I – nor indeed the reader, who was the head server at the church – had the slightest idea what any of it meant. So, let's have a go. Let's start with the Entrance Antiphon at Mass, based on Heb 7:24; 9,15. This proclaims that 'Christ, the Mediator of the New Covenant, has an eternal priesthood because he remains for ever.' Here is a bundle of special terms: 'Christ' (the Lord's Anointed) is 'Mediator' (the go-between or priest between humans and the Divine) of the 'New Covenant' (a new and lasting agreement between humanity and the Divine). Elsewhere in that chapter (Heb 7) we learn that Christ is 'High Priest after the order of Melchizedek.' Melchizedek, a figure from pre-history, was the mysterious king of Salem and priest of the Most High God who brings out bread and wine and then blesses Abram [not yet called 'Abraham'] (Gen 14). The point about Melchizedek is that he was an early

figure, not part of a dynasty or family of priests, a king moreover, and, as we notice, involved not in the sacrificial slaughter of animals but in the offering of bread and wine. Christ is the one and only descendant of Melchizedek's priesthood and his priesthood does away with the sacrificial offerings of the Jewish priesthood, the constant animal sacrifice, and replaces it with the once-and-for-all sacrifice of the Cross.

Complicated though this language is – and however primitive some of the concepts – we are helped to grapple with the basic idea of 'atonement'. Atonement – 'at-one-ment' – is how two fundamentally different things can become one. A good example is a salad dressing. Oil and vinegar can never be reconciled – they are essentially different from each other – but they can be brought together, much as, in Christ, we have the hypostatic union of godhead and humanity. But, if atonement is what we are trying to describe, how best do we describe the process? To describe the bringing together of what is inherently perfect (God) with what is inherently imperfect (human existence), we need One who is both God and human. Jesus the Great High Priest was 'one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning' (Heb 4:15).

When we talk of sinlessness and sin, immortality and mortality, eternal life and death, perfection and imperfection, we end up with language of expiation, propitiation, sacrifice and sin-offerings. The Epistle to the Hebrews may be remote and strange, viewed from the secular present, but it is striking, nonetheless, that so many of these old ideas have found the way into our everyday thinking about penalties and retribution, not to mention notions of self-sacrifice and vicarious suffering. The figure of Christ the Great High Priest gives all of this shape, purpose, and meaning, and if we bring alongside the imagery of the Incarnation, we begin to make sense of it all. We reflect on the Christmas antiphon *O admirabile commercium*: O admirable exchange: the creator of humankind, taking on a living body...gave us his divinity. Or, as is said during the Offertory at Mass: 'By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.'

Friday after Pentecost

(St Boniface, Religious, Bishop, & Martyr)

5th June

2 Tim 3:10-17

All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted

ONE OF the tasks of the parish priest is to ensure that, where the weekday cycle of readings is interrupted, for instance by a feast with its own readings, some continuity is preserved during the week. We have two interruptions this week: yesterday we celebrated the feast of Our Lord Jesus Christ the Eternal High Priest, and consequently missed out a reading from 2 Tim (2:8-15). Tomorrow, being Saturday, there is no Mass, so we shall have omitted two of this week's readings from 2 Timothy, and there were only four to start with. So, let us make some adjustment. If yesterday had not been a feast, we should have had this stirring fragment, (2:11-13), possibly from an Early Christian hymn for Baptism:

**If we have died with him, we shall also live with him;
if we endure, we shall also reign with him;
if we deny him, he also will deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—
for he cannot deny himself.**

St Paul invites Timothy to remind his charges of these words. His concern is to ensure the integrity of the Gospel. In today's reading he tells Timothy:

**continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed,
knowing from whom you learned it All scripture is inspired
by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction,
and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be
complete, equipped for every good work.**

Much ink has been spilled over what 'inspired by God' means with regard to Holy Scripture. Catholics take Scripture very seriously indeed: the daily diet is dense and rich. The word 'inspired' means literally that the Breath of God – the Holy Spirit – is what gives life to Scripture and the Church has had the task not only of discerning what is bound up in Scripture but also how Scripture is to be interpreted and understood. Scripture is indeed 'Food for the Journey'.

Tomorrow's reading (4:1-8) has Paul making his farewell (4:6-8):

I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

As today's passage tells us, 'All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted' so St Paul's final words are ones to which we would all do well to aspire.

THE MOST HOLY TRINITY

Sunday 7th June

Jn 3:16-18

THE BIBLE study Group this last Friday morning were reflecting on a longer passage than today's Gospel. Starting at verse 1 of John 3, instead of verse 16, we were able to take into consideration what Jesus is telling Nicodemus, in that chapter, about the Holy Spirit, and about being born of the Holy Spirit. I don't often criticise the Mass Lectionary – wiser folk than me have compiled it – but, if there is a choice between a reading mentioning the three Persons of the Holy Spirit and one which mentions only two, then, on Trinity Sunday, we are better off with the one mentioning all three.

But focusing on what we have just heard, the Gospel, as set, teaches us that God the Son is the gift of God the Father to the world. It is a gift of love and a gift which requires of us only that we should believe in the Son, that is, put our faith and trust in him. It's a matter of choosing between darkness and light and, though there are many who love darkness rather than light, whoever 'does what is true comes to the light'. And our deeds are seen as 'wrought in God'.

There is, of course, only one God and we see him in his holiness on Mount Sinai, giving Moses words to write on two tablets of stone. This is not Exodus 20 – with the giving of the Ten Commandments – but Exodus 34 where there are new tablets of stone. Why new ones? A couple of chapters earlier we encountered the story of the Golden Calf when the people rebelled against God and made themselves an idol. Moses came down the mountain, and furious with the people, broke the tablets of stone. Two

chapters later, we encounter forgiveness and a new start, with new tablets. We already see the God whom Jesus discloses. He is the God of forgiveness and a fresh start, for all who believe in him, put their faith and trust in him.

The third of our readings – the middle one – gives us one of neatest, most succinct descriptions of God. We see here God the Holy Trinity. He is revealed in what the theologians call *perichoresis* – literally a dance. I'll finish with this verse, the final verse of 2 Corinthians:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Monday (*Week 10, Year II*)

8th June

1 Kings 17:1-6

Elijah predicts a drought

AS WE return to 'Ordinary Time', the 'Green Season', the cycle of readings takes us away from an emphasis on celebration to an emphasis on study and learning. And so we find ourselves heading towards the end of the First Book of the Kings. At this point, the stories of the major prophets begin and we encounter Elijah. There is a crisis going on: a drought is a particularly serious matter in a land where rainfall is scarce.

Putting the story in context, we are in the Northern Kingdom – Israel. North and South divided into two Kingdoms after the death of Solomon (922 BC). From 1 Kings 12 on to the end of 2 Kings, we have the history of the two Kingdoms until the destruction of Israel (724 BC) and the Babylonian Exile (587 BC), when Jerusalem is sacked and Judah is taken off to Babylon. In both Kingdoms, we have the story of – largely – weak and wicked Kings and the historian wastes no time in explaining political misfortune as the consequence of bad conduct.

Elijah was ministering at the time of a particularly evil King – Ahab – and, as the Northern Kingdom continues with its idolatrous ways, the consequence is drought. The point of today's story is that, despite everything, God provides for his faithful. Thus Elijah is given sufficient food and water and ravens bring him bread and meat. The Wadi Cherith – the brook – is a source of water until it dries up.

Food for the Journey: Lockdown in Catholic Hendred (2020)

Until recently we tended to see problems of drought, famine, and plague as challenges for the developing world, as they were for the ancient world. One thing that our present difficulties have brought home to us afresh is our reliance on the natural order. Science and technology cannot insulate us entirely from the forces of nature. The promise holds good, however: God's love and care for us. This Providence does not protect us from every challenge: we don't live in an enchanted garden. It does sustain us – and assure us of salvation – as we face whatever difficulties come our way.

Tuesday (*Week 10, Year II*)

9th June

1 Kings 17:7-16

The Widow of Zarephath

THE STORY of Elijah continues as does the drought which has brought the land to a crisis. We are in the middle of the ninth century BC, under the tyranny of the murderous King Ahab. Elijah had been surviving on food brought by ravens and with water from the Wadi Cherith. Finally, the brook dries up and Elijah moves on to Zarephath. At the city gate he encounters a widow and asks her for bread and water. She doesn't refuse but makes it clear that there is enough only for a last meal for herself and her son and she is out collecting firewood to cook this meal. Elijah assures her that God will provide flour and oil for her and her son until the end of the drought. In fact it will be a year until the rains return. The widow responds with generosity to Elijah's request for food and, in response to this generosity, the Lord provides.

This simple little story of our dependence on God – 'Give us this day our daily bread' – is also at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, an extract from which we hear as today's Gospel. We are called to be salt and light and to let our light so shine that others, seeing out good works, may glorify God. Across nearly thirty centuries – 3,000 years – the generous response of the Widow of Zarephath to Elijah's need continues to shine out. It is echoed in the Feeding of the 5,000 – where the bread and fish were sufficient for the crowds – and in many of the heroic efforts of the present day as charities such as CAFOD work to alleviate the effects of famine and drought.

Wednesday (Week 10, Year II)

10th June

1 Kings 18:20-39

Elijah's Triumph over the Prophets of Baal

WHAT an exciting story – the confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal! He, the Lord's prophet, challenges the 450 pagan prophets to a trial of spiritual strength. Two bulls are prepared for sacrifice, one by the prophets of Baal and the other by Elijah, the Lord's prophet. Elijah mocks the prophets of Baal – they hobble first on one leg and then on the other as they do their sacred dance. When no fire falls from heaven on their offering, Elijah taunts them. Perhaps their god is asleep, or on a journey. He then performs an act of spiritual derring-do. He convenes the people, builds an altar, puts the wood on it, dismembers the bull, then three times dowses the offering in water. After he has prayed, fire sweeps down from heaven and consumes the sacrifice. The people conclude that the Lord is God, the Lord indeed is God.

The importance of this story for us – a story from pre-history – is not that it is miraculous. It is impossible, at this distance, to know exactly what transpired. What we have is what is believed to have happened: an undoubted contest between the false religion of Baal – with its 450 prophets doing their best to conjure up fire for their sacrifice – and the true religion of Israel, where the sovereign God does what is humanly-speaking impossible, with only one prophet to offer prayer. The religion of Baal was one of the prevalent cults of the Canaanites, amidst whom the Israelites had come to live, forcing their way in by conquest. Its equivalent nowadays is not any one of the non-Christian faiths – since, unlike the early Israelites, we now know that there is only one God. The trial of strength we have with the prophets of Baal is nowadays the argument we have with those of a secular disposition, who discount religious truth. These secular prophets sometimes outnumber us but in the spiritual life we find ourselves saying, 'The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.'

Thursday 11th June

St Barnabas, Apostle

Acts 11:21-26; 13:1-3

TODAY we leave on one side the story of Elijah and turn our attention to St Barnabas. We shall be back with Elijah tomorrow. Our first reading is two extracts from the story of Paul and Barnabas. Though we are nearly halfway through the Acts of the Apostles, we notice that Paul is still called Saul and the mission of the Church, which encompassed Gentiles in Acts 10, is only now in Acts 11 beginning to move beyond the Holy Land and become established further afield. It was in Antioch, we hear, that the disciples are first called 'Christians'. Our second extract, from Acts 13, tells us something about this infant Church on Antioch. There are a few prophets and teachers, one of whom at least was a person of substance, a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch. It was in Antioch that the laying on of hands – what we now call 'ordination' – on Barnabas and Saul took place. A few verses later we first come across St Luke in Acts describing the leaders of the Church in Antioch as 'presbyteroi', presbyters, a term used earlier for Jewish elders.

Without the context, we could be mistaken for thinking that these developments are some kind of strategy for church growth. In fact, a couple of verses before the passage begins, we read of 'those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen'. In short, much that happens in the life of the Church is not planned or thought through but a reaction – sometimes a panic reaction – to events. Life will change for us in many ways – some far-reaching and some small – as a result of current events. None of this is the result of planning or thinking but, as with the Early Church, God works through setbacks and disasters to bring about his sovereign purposes.

Friday (Week 10, Year II)

12th June

1 Kings 19:9, 11-16

Elijah Meets God at Horeb

THIS morning's is the last of our extracts from the story of Elijah this week. It describes a revelation of fundamental importance in the development of spirituality throughout the ages. It is the mainspring of the Carmelite movement which is present with us in this area in the Friary on Boars Hill. At the end of his ministry Elijah discovers that, though he experiences wind, an earthquake, and a fire, in none of these is the Lord to be found. God does not disclose himself through the forces of nature, even though his glory is evident in creation. After wind, earthquake, and fire there is a still, small voice. It is the still, small voice that we get to in Psalm 46, when, after speaking of the power of God to intervene in the world, we have this same still, small voice. 'Be still, and know that I am God...The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.' The theme is taken up famously in the hymn 'Dear Lord and Father of mankind'. John Greenleaf Whittier, an American Quaker poet, wrote these words and they include:

**Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and Thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm.**

CORPUS CHRISTI

Sunday 14th June

IN DISCUSSIONS with the Government, Faith Leaders have been required to make a case for the opening and use of places of worship. Muslims and Jews and Evangelical Christians were clear that the buildings are there for public worship and, if public worship is not allowed, the buildings do not need to be open. Catholics and some Anglicans took the line that the church building itself is inherently a place of prayer where, in T S Eliot's haunting phrase in 'Little Gidding', 'prayer has been valid'. Many – I hope most – have discovered during 'the Lockdown' that God is present everywhere and that we can pray wherever we are. So, what is the big deal about opening churches?

Here, I think, we come to the heart of the Catholic Religion. At the time of Jesus, the Temple was in Jerusalem – one place at a particular time. He, Jesus, lived in our midst in one place at a particular time. It was the hinge of history but it was just one point in the passage of generations. Catholics believe, however, that, in the words of St Thomas Aquinas, 'The heavenly Word proceeding forth yet leaving not the Father's side' became incarnate. More than that, he remains incarnate. He takes our flesh in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. The church building houses the tabernacle, in front of which an everlasting light burns, and, whenever we go into church, we are entering the Temple, with its Holy Place.

We go to Mass because a transaction takes place there. On the face of it, the deal is that we present ourselves to God and he gives himself to us in Holy Communion. The Body of Christ. Corpus Christi. Christ in us, the hope of glory, as St Paul describes it.

**O sacred banquet
in which Christ is received,
the memory of his passion is renewed,
our lives are filled with grace,
and a pledge of future glory is given.**

That prayer, *O sacrum convivium*, is perhaps my favourite prayer. It begins with a banquet and continues with the pledge of future glory, the *prægustatum* or foretaste. But we mustn't ignore the line 'the memory of his passion is renewed' nor the important truth that 'our lives are filled with grace' not only by receiving Holy Communion, grace itself, but by the

renewing of the memory of the passion. It is no accident that the sacrifice of the Mass happens at the foot of the Cross, which is how things are actually set out at St Mary's. Over and above the altar is the Crucifix.

On the radio this weekend, I hear, are some plays which cannot be done in the theatre during 'Lockdown'. For those who want to watch a play, this is less than ideal. But everyone wants to listen to what happens in a play – and this at least will be on offer on the radio. In a similar way, the many livestreamed masses which are going on at present are less than ideal. They omit a whole dimension. Not in this case 'seeing' but 'tasting'. But a very important dimension remains: 'listening'. So it is with the Mass. We cannot presently share in Holy Communion, in the sense of 'eating', but we can take part in the Mass, sharing in the Offering of the Holy Sacrifice.

Monday (*Week 11, Year II*)

15th June

1 Kings 21:17-29

Naboth's Vineyard

ON MONDAY and Tuesday of this week, we have two more readings from the First Book of the Kings and learn through them (as we normally do from this source) about the wickedness of Israel's kings. To be precise, we learn about the wickedness not only of King Ahab but also of his scheming Queen, Jezebel. The historian is building a case-file against the Kings, to explain why they, and Israel, come to a sticky end. There are short-term disasters and long-term disasters. The short-term disaster, as we shall see tomorrow, is temporarily averted when Ahab repents but the dogs will eat Jezebel in the Field of Jezreel. Ahab's family too will be dishonoured: dogs will eat those who die in the city and those who die in the open country will be food for the birds. The long-term disaster is just over a century away: the destruction of Israel in 724BC. The historian is assembling the evidence slowly: Ahab is spared, but disaster lies ahead. There is a pattern to this: earlier, the Lord spared David and the punishment – the division of the kingdom – did not happen until after the reign of Solomon, a reign which itself justified the fate which awaited the united Kingdom. In fact there are similarities between David and Ahab: David steals Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, by having Uriah killed in battle; Ahab has Naboth stoned, having assembled false witnesses to testify that Naboth blasphemed.

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This way of explaining history is not one we nowadays tend to subscribe to. There are causes for the collapse of regimes – Hitler, Stalin, Saddam Hussein, Gaddafi – but we tend not to attribute these outcomes to Divine intervention. That isn't to say, of course, that there isn't an ongoing battle between Good and Evil, in which these various outcomes are episodes. We mustn't oversimplify, however. Ten years ago, in his book *Moral Combat*, the historian, Michael Burleigh, showed that the Second World War was much messier than a battle between Good and Evil.

In the Jewish Law was enshrined the *Lex Talionis*, the requirement that retaliation should not exceed the offence committed (Lev. 24:19–21). This early regulation remains the basis of the idea of proportional response. In today's Gospel, Jesus takes us beyond that to a new moral ideal. Turn the other cheek. If someone wants your tunic, give him your cloak as well. If you are ordered to go one mile, go the extra mile with him. We cannot ourselves affect the affairs of nations – we would have been powerless against the malice of Ahab and, despite the voting booth, are mostly powerless to affect current affairs nowadays on a national or international scale. But we can begin with the Sermon on the Mount, and breaking the spiral of retribution and going the extra mile is a very good place to begin.

Tuesday (*Week 11, Year II*)

16th June

(*St Richard of Chichester*)

Mt 5:43-48

Love for Enemies

MANY will remember the musical *Godspell*, by Stephen Schwartz. It was a re-telling of the Gospel story, originally composed in 1970, but commonly performed in years following. Most memorable of all the songs in the show was 'Day by day...three things we pray'. That lyric was based on a prayer attributed to St Richard of Chichester, whose feast it is today. I say 'attributed'. There's an element of approximation here. But, whether we opt for the *Godspell* version, or the prayer itself, the words are well worth remembering. Here is the fuller, St Richard of Chichester, version:

**Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ
for all the benefits you have given us,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for us.**

**O most merciful Redeemer, friend and brother,
may we know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly,
day by day.**

Know him more clearly. Love him more dearly. Follow him more nearly. A good summary of what it is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Today's Gospel, from the Sermon on the Mount, is not only about the difficult task of loving one's enemies but, the challenge to perfection. 'You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.' The path to perfection could easily be described as knowing more clearly, loving more dearly, and following more nearly. It isn't the route that's difficult, it's making progress along the route. The phrase 'be perfect' is striking because perfection is an abstract idea not really in the Hebrew tradition. The closest is the command to be holy: 'Say to all the congregation of the people of Israel, "You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy"' (Lev 19:2). Where St Matthew says 'be perfect', St Luke, in his version of the saying, has 'Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful' (Lk 6:36). So, we can take our pick: the route to perfection is the road to holiness and discovering mercy and showing mercy are signposts along the way.

Wednesday (*Week 11, Year II*)

17th June

2 Kings 2:1, 6-14

Elijah ascends to Heaven and Elisha succeeds Elijah

RETURNING to the Books of Kings, after yesterday's reflection on the Gospel of the Day, we now have chance to look at the story of Elijah's departure – not by natural death but by ascension into heaven – and the mantle falling on his successor, Elisha. Elisha requests a double portion of Elijah's spirit and Elijah is not sure whether this will be granted. Elijah's final prophecy is that, if Elisha witnesses his departure, his request for a double portion will be granted. And we have the story of the whirlwind with its chariot of fire and horses of fire. Before that we have seen Elijah and Elisha cross the Jordan on dry ground – much as the people of Israel, fleeing from the armies of Pharaoh, crossed the Red Sea on dry ground (Ex 14:16). The parting of the river was brought about by Elijah's mantle, rolled up,

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and, when he returned from witnessing Elijah's ascension, Elisha uses the same mantle, rolled up, to make a path back across the Jordan. This crossing of the Jordan, though it is reminiscent of the crossing of the Red Sea, is also another transition. The 50 prophets accompanying Elijah have crossed from North to South, from Bethel, the holy place of Jacob's dream in the distant past (Gen 28:19) to Jericho, in the South (Josh 2:1), near the place where the Israelites crossed the Jordan (Josh 3:13-17) *en route* to Gilgal and the Promised Land.

The story is as heavy on symbolism as it is imaginative on historical detail and it helps us to reflect on transitions and journeying closer to the Lord. Transitions include handing on the tradition and the responsibility to those who come after: tradition, after all, means handing on. And journeying closer to the Lord is not only our striving after perfection, which we were reflecting on yesterday, but our preparation for meeting our Maker, a journey rather less spectacular, one would hope, than Elijah's whirlwind and chariot and horses of fire.

Thursday (*Week 11, Year II*)

18th June

Mt 6:7-15

How to pray

YESTERDAY and today, the Gospel readings are from the Sermon on the Mount and concern the three religious duties of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Today we look more closely at prayer. Praying is at the heart of our relationship with God and it is no surprise that disciples, of whatever Faith, ask their spiritual leaders to teach them how to do it. So it was that Jesus' disciples asked him how to pray. In his answer, he warns against using many words, heaping up empty phrases. He reassures them – and us – that the heavenly Father knows our needs before we ask. And he gives them – and us – the model prayer, the Our Father. So the answer to the question is 'Be still and know that I am God' (as Psalm 46 puts it) and, in the stillness, say the Our Father. No more is needed. No less is needed. Jews were in the habit of praying three times a day the Eighteen Benedictions (known as the '*Amidah*', because they were said standing). Since we find all the phrases of the Our Father in those Benedictions, the Our Father is probably a simpler version, much as Jesus also summed up the Commandments in a simpler version, the twin commandments to love

God and our neighbour as ourselves. One of our earliest sources for Christian Prayer is the *Didache* which is probably from the same time as St Matthew's Gospel. About praying the Lord's Prayer, the *Didache* tells us 'Three times in the day you are so to pray' (8:3).

When we look at the Our Father, we discover that – like the Ten Commandments – it starts with acknowledging God in his holiness. It then moves on to aligning the will of the one who prays with the sovereign will of God. It then makes requests. Central to these requests, (so much so that it is further explained in verse 14-15) is the covenant of forgiveness. God's forgiveness of other (the vertical part of the Cross, if you like) is conditional upon us learning to forgive one another (the horizontal part).

Many have struggled with establishing a good routine, especially during the Lockdown. We could do worse than re-establish prayer three times a day, perhaps standing and saying the Lord's Prayer morning, midday, and night.

SACRED HEART OF JESUS

Friday 19th June

Mt 11:25-30

I am gentle and lowly of heart

DEVOTION to the Sacred Heart was a mediæval development, arising from the devotion to the Passion of Christ and to the Holy Wounds – the hands and the feet and side of the Crucified Jesus. It was especially popular with religious communities. Foremost amongst the many saints who have subsequently encouraged devotion to the Sacred Heart is St Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-1690) who saw visions of Christ over eighteen months. These led to the reception of Holy Communion on the First Friday of the month, the Holy Hour of Eucharistic Adoration on Thursdays, and an hour each Thursday evening in meditation on the Agony in the Garden. In a final revelation, the Lord asked, through St Margaret Mary, for the celebration of the feast of the Sacred Heart on the Friday of the week following the Thursday kept as Corpus Christi. Several people in the parish have been in the habit of keeping 'First Fridays' and, to some extent, we have met the Thursday devotions by having Exposition before the lunchtime Mass. In a larger parish we might manage a full Holy Hour on Thursdays, perhaps on Thursday evenings, combined with the Watch of the Passion.

Recent Popes have made their contribution to the devotion. Pope Leo XIII consecrated the entire world to the Sacred Heart of Jesus on 11 June 1899. The encyclical letter also encouraged the First Friday Devotions, and the month of June as the Month of the Sacred Heart. Pope Pius X made the consecration an annual event. Pope Pius XI confirmed St Margaret Mary's Visitations in his encyclical *Miserentissimus Redemptor* (1928). The hundredth anniversary of the feast which Pope Pius XI had instituted was celebrated by Pope Pius XII in an encyclical *Haurietis aquas* (1956) and fifty years later, Pope Benedict wrote, affirming the importance of the devotion. In the meantime, focusing on the eternal significance of the Sacred Heart, Pope St John Paul II had this to say: 'To celebrate the Heart of Christ means to go to the inner centre of the Person of the Saviour, the centre which the Bible identifies as his Heart, the seat of the love that has redeemed the world. If the human heart is really an unfathomable mystery known only to God, how much more sublime is the Heart of Jesus, in whom the very life of the Word is pulsating.'

TWELFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (Year A)

21st June

'The Year of the Bible: the God Who Speaks'

THIS YEAR, at the bidding of the Catholic Bishops, we are engaging with the Bible more deeply. In this 'Year of the Bible' we focus on 'the God who speaks'. I want to suggest that there are three – or rather at least three – ways in which we engage with the Bible.

The first way is by listening to the readings proclaimed in the Liturgy of the Word at Mass. We may do this slightly differently – perhaps following the texts as well, as we are encouraged to do, or reading the texts without being present at the celebration of Mass. Several people have told me that, during 'the Lockdown', they have not bothered with the technology. They have simply read the texts, either from this Daily Bulletin or from some other source, *Magnificat* or their own Missal. But however we do this, what we are engaging with, are the Scriptures set by the Church for a particular day. Each passage is seldom more than a few verses' long and quite often there are linking themes. God certainly speaks through these readings and we highlight this when the Gospel is read. We stand. The reader is an

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ordained minister. We surround the lectern with lights and on special occasions use incense.

The second way we engage with the Bible is called *lectio divina*. In this traditional monastic discipline there are five steps. The first is reading: we read a Bible passage slowly and carefully. The second is prayer: we have a loving conversation with God. The third is meditation: we think deeply, dwelling upon a spiritual reality within the passage. Fourth is contemplation: resting in God's presence. Finally there is action: the command 'go and do likewise' (Lk 10:37). *Lectio divina* can be corporate but it is also possible as a solitary activity.

The third way of engaging with the Bible is Bible Study. We look carefully at what the text says from different angles, often with a Bible commentary or two to hand. There is a range of different approaches, from the academic to the spiritual. Usually there is a blend of these approaches. There is also an opportunity to take on different amounts of Scripture. Our Friday Bible Study has profited sometimes from looking at the Sunday Gospel in the context of a whole chapter. Sometimes it is good to look at a whole book. Reading the whole of a Gospel, from start to finish, can be exhilarating and enlightening. We get something of this effect from the reading of the Passion on Palm Sunday and Good Friday, when, on each occasion, two chapters are read, as a dramatic narrative.

I hope, whilst we are still in 'the Lockdown', that we shall see the invitation of the Catholic Bishops to engage with 'the God who speaks' as a wonderful opportunity for exploration, each one of us. Whether we prefer the set readings – to listen to or read, or *lectio divina*, or Bible Study, there is scope for stretching ourselves. I'll finish with one thought, drawn from today's Gospel. It is that constant exhortation of Jesus to his disciples, whatever difficulties they encounter, 'Fear not.' Or as Pope St John Paul II put it, in the central message of his pontificate: 'Be not afraid'..

SS John Fisher & Thomas More, Martyrs

Monday 22nd June

Mt 24:4-13

Persecutions foretold

IN EVERY generation – not least our own – there are those who point to the signs of the times – disaster, drought, earthquake, famine, plague, and war – as signs that everything all around us is collapsing. The Early Church certainly wrestled with this and the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD70 were viewed with particular foreboding. There was a particularly acute version of despair as the year AD1,000 – the end of the millennium – hove into view and all this was revisited in modern times as AD2,000 approached. In fact, from the nineteenth century onwards, various Christian movements were formed with a particular emphasis on the urgency of the End-Times. In the Catholic Church, similarly, attention was focused on the appearances of Our Lady of Fatima, towards the end of the First World War (which was viewed as the war to end all wars). The Fatima predictions continued – and continue – to fuel what we call ‘apocalyptic expectation’, the feeling that the End is coming and a final showdown and manifestation of the power of God. All of this builds on Jewish apocalyptic – which was very much around at the time of Jesus – and, if we read certain passages of the New Testament, the coming of Christ in glory seems imminent. In that sense, Matthew, who uses the same material as Mark, calms things down. Note the sentence in the Gospel: ‘this must take place, but the end is not yet’. Note too the words of Jesus, ‘all this is but the beginning of the sufferings’.

What St Matthew was doing was adding length and perspective to the predictions about the End Time. ‘You will be hated by all nations’ makes it clear that the End Time would not happen imminently, whilst Christianity remained a local, Jewish denomination. The Gentile Mission, on which St Matthew is very keen, has to happen first. Nor will it be an easy success. ‘Wickedness is multiplied’ and ‘most men’s love will grow cold’. The final outcome is assured: ‘he who endures to the end will be saved.’

The life and death of the two saints, John Fisher and Thomas More, are a worked example of what is set out in today’s Gospel. Both suffered for their faith. Both were the victims of wickedness...multiplied. In the struggle that we now call the Reformation, whilst anger blazed love grew cold. It is heartening that, with the perspective of history, Catholics and Anglicans

recognise Fisher and More as martyrs. We keep them together: for Catholics the feast is on 22nd June, the date on which Cardinal John Fisher was beheaded; for Anglicans the feast is 6th July, the date on which the brave Sir Thomas More was martyred for opposing the royal attack on the authority of Holy Church.

Tuesday (*Week 12, Year II*)

23rd June

(*St Etheldreda, Abbess*)

2 Kings 19:9-11, 14-21, 31-35, 36

Hezekiah's Prayer

YESTERDAY'S reading – had not the celebration of SS John Fisher & Thomas More not displaced it – would have been from 2 Kings 17, the downfall of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, after Shalmaneser King of Assyria had laid siege to Samaria for three years. The Israelites were carted off to Assyria. This was in the year 724BC. The historian reminds his audience that the Lord had warned Israel and Judah about keeping the Law and the collapse of Israel was the result. The Southern Kingdom, Judah, continues, for the time being.

We pick up the story today a couple of chapters later. By now we have the reign of Hezekiah in Judah (715-687) – the first of two good kings. The second of the good kings of Judah, Josiah (640-609), is a generation later, but only a generation later (587), Judah is conquered by the Babylonians and the Exile begins. Between Hezekiah and Josiah, and between Josiah and the Exile, the Southern Kings are up to their normal tricks. The great sin is apostasy – pursuing idolatry and forsaking the Law.

These are troubled times. Even for Hezekiah, the Assyrian threat looms large. The Assyrians write a threatening letter. Hezekiah responds by taking it to the Temple and consulting the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah reassures Hezekiah that the Lord will protect Judah from Assyria. Sure enough, 185,000 men are struck down in the Assyrian camp. It is a supernatural victory: credit is given to the angel of the Lord.

It is clear that, even under righteous regimes, the threat of death and disaster remains. For us, as for Hezekiah, there is a comforting verse in the psalm we used today:

**We have thought on your mercy, O God,
in the midst of your temple.**

It is when we resort to the Lord's House in prayer – as Hezekiah did – that we encounter the merciful reassurance of the living God, amidst our troubles. I am reminded of another verse, the one Martin Luther paraphrased in German in the chorale and cantata *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*:

**God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble. Ps 46:1**

NATIVITY OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST

Wednesday 24th June

Lk 1:57-66, 80

IN THIS new era of Zoom Meetings and Zoom Masses, it was interesting to see the Pagans get in on the act. Last Saturday, 20th June, Stonehenge being closed to the public, English Heritage showed the rising of the sun on-line. It was the longest day, the Summer Solstice, the day when the earth's axis is tilted most closely to the sun, the day on which there is most daylight. Not everyone realises that the Church celebrates the times of longest daylight and longest night. The Birth of St John the Baptist – his Nativity – is just after the summer solstice and the Birth of Jesus Christ – Christmas – is just after the winter solstice, when the earth's axis is tilted furthest from the sun.

To continue playing with the theme of light, the Gospel Cantic used in Morning Prayer is the *Benedictus*, in which Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, hails John as the prophet of the Dawn, the Dayspring from on high, the one who looks towards the coming of the Light. And, as the longer Creed reminds us, Jesus – God the Son – is *Lumen de lumine*, Light from Light.

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The two men are cousins, John being six months older than Jesus, as the familiar narrative of the Annunciation reminds us – ‘In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God...to a virgin [whose] name was Mary.’ Just a few verses earlier, the same archangel had appeared to Zechariah, the priest praying in the temple at the altar of incense. St John the Precursor, or Forerunner, as the Orthodox Church calls him, is given greater significance in the East than in the West and in the words of Jesus we see a conundrum:

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. *Mt 11:11*

The least in the kingdom of heaven - the least in the new dispensation - is greater than John the Baptist because John died before the Crucifixion. But no one is greater than John because of his role as the last of the prophets of the Old Covenant, a New Elijah, preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah, and identifying him: ‘Behold, the Lamb of God’. We see a happy coming-together of the three figures, Mary, John the Baptist, and Jesus. They are inextricably linked in the narrative, and we are not surprised to notice that, in the Calendar, only with these three figures – Mary, John the Baptist, and Jesus – do we honour their birthday.

Thursday (*Week 12, Year II*)

25th June

2 Kings 24:8-17

The Capture of Jerusalem and the Deportation to Babylon

THE DOWNFALL of the Hebrews continues. We heard of the fall of the Northern Kingdom earlier – the actual account was in the reading set for Monday which was displaced by the feast of St John Fisher and St Thomas More. Today we encounter the fall of the Southern Kingdom, that cataclysmic event in Jewish history. There seem to have been two sieges of Jerusalem and three deportations of the young, fit, and talented population of Judah to Babylon. These deportations are dated to 597 BC for the first, with others dated at 587/586 BC, and 582/581 BC respectively. The last of the kings, Zedekiah, was a vassal of the Babylonian King

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Nebuchadnezzar and, when he rebelled, he was blinded and led off into captivity. As with Israel, the Northern Kingdom, the sin of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, is faithlessness, whether manifested in wickedness or in idolatry. The historian misses no opportunity to make this point.

Why are we interested in this history? It is nearly 3,000 years ago and from a very different culture. Round about the beginning of the nineteenth century – so a couple of hundred years ago – the philosopher Hegel said ‘The only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history’. We may need to do our history to check that out. But this particular history is ‘salvation history’, the story of God’s people. That is another reason to attend to it, to discern and hear the Word of the Lord, which is valid in every time and culture. If history did repeat itself, then perhaps the nearest equivalent in our civilization are the Reformations of the sixteenth century. Everything was taken apart and put together rather differently. Exactly that happened to the Hebrews at the time of the Exile. It was on returning from Babylon from 539 BC and the rebuilding of the Temple in the years afterwards that Judaism as such emerged from the religion of the Hebrews. We may not need to know the ancient history but we need to know and understand our Jewish roots.

Friday (*Week 12, Year II*)

26th June

2 Kings 25:1-12 and Ps 137

Cursing in the Psalms

THE MISERY of Judah continues in today’s First Reading and the details speak for themselves. We pick up the mood of the exiles in Babylon in the psalm, 137. Quite often the psalm at Mass is a much-abbreviated version of the psalm as given in Scripture. Sometimes this is simply a matter of length. Sometimes it is because particular verses suit the feast or readings they complement. Sometimes, as today, the abbreviation is to omit words which offend our sensitivities. Verses 7-9 of Psalm 137 read like this:

**⁷ Remember, O LORD, against the E'domites
the day of Jerusalem,
how they said, 'Raze it, raze it!
Down to its foundations!'**

**⁸ O daughter of Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall he be who requites you
with what you have done to us!**

**⁹ Happy shall he be who takes your little ones
and dashes them against the rock!**

People through the ages have struggled with the 'Cursing Psalms'. St Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430), the North African Theologian, told us to interpret the little ones to be dashed against the rock as our sins which need to be dealt with in their early stages of development. The Church has traditionally waded through the whole Psalter in the Daily Office but used edited extracts for Mass. It is useful to regard the Psalter as representing the whole gamut of human emotions – which we work through day by day – but seeing the psalm verses chosen for Mass as strictly relevant to the particular celebration.

More recently (1970) we have edited the psalms used in the Daily Office, omitting verses which for some people would be a stumbling block. This fits in with the agenda of the Second Vatican Council, not yet realised, that saying the Daily Office – especially Morning and Evening Prayer – should not simply be the obligation of clergy and religious but be something in which the whole People of God participate.

SS PETER & PAUL

28th June

Mt 16:13-19

IN THE Preface for SS Peter & Paul, as prescribed for today, there are these words:

For by your providence the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul bring us joy: Peter, foremost in confessing the faith, Paul its outstanding preacher, Peter, who established the early Church from the remnant of Israel, Paul, master and teacher of the Gentiles that you call. And so, each in a different way gathered together the one family of Christ; and revered together throughout the world, they share one Martyr's crown.

When we look at the New Testament we get a slightly different picture of the relationship between Peter and Paul. In Galatians we read of a serious disagreement about whether Gentile converts should be subject to Jewish custom and law. Peter and Paul seem to be on different sides of the argument. 'When Cephas came to Antioch I opposed him to his face' (Gal 2:14). Paul's view certainly prevails at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), and Peter had been converted to this point of view by the dream he had about all foods being clean, when he stayed at the house of the centurion, Cornelius in Cæsarea (Acts 10). We cannot be sure whether the Galatians confrontation happened before or after the Council of Jerusalem. Had Peter not quite worked the issue through or was he being insincere?

We can be reasonably clear that it was Peter 'who established the early Church from the remnant of Israel' and that Paul was 'master and teacher of the Gentiles'. It may be going too far to suggest that there was concerted co-operation between them. Both ended up in Rome, in very different circumstances. Peter, the Jewish missionary, was crucified with the slave's death of crucifixion. The site is where now an obelisk stands in St Peter's Square and he was buried in a tomb, now situated below St Peter's. Paul, the Roman citizen, fared better, dying by the comparatively merciful method of beheading. His tomb is in the Basilica of St Paul's 'without the walls'.

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The twin leadership of SS Peter & Paul is of great importance to Roman Catholics, because they bring together the twin mission of being 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to [God's] people Israel', as the *Nunc Dimittis* puts it (Lk 2:32). We readily understand the role of Peter – it was spelt out for him by the Lord at Cæsarea and further clarified at Cornelius' house some years later. It is slightly odd that Peter, having played a prominent role in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles disappears entirely in the second half of the book. Paul, by contrast, becomes the dominant figure and, after Acts 15, the story is clearly focused on Paul, whose claim to be an apostle rests on the shaky ground that, though he was not a witness of the Resurrection – as apostles by definition are – he has a vision of the Risen and Ascended Christ, who commissioned him to be an apostle. There is much to be gained by reflecting on the balance Peter and Paul together bring to the mission of the worldwide Church and, in view of the fact that they were both martyred in Rome, the centre of the known world, it is perhaps not surprising that the list of twelve apostles in the Roman Canon begins with St Peter and St Paul. Poor old Matthias, the twelfth man, then gets relegated to the second list of saints in the Canon.

Monday (Week 13, Year II)

29th June

Amos 2:6-10, 13-16

The Mission of Amos

THE PROPHET Amos commands our attention this week. We do not know much about him but he seems to have come from Judah and moved to Israel, that is from the Southern Kingdom to the Northern. We are in the first half of the eighth century, BC, and the Northern Kingdom will soon come to an end. But the time of Amos is a time of wealth and comparative political stability and we find the wealthy, caught up in decadent life-styles and oppressing the poor. Amos takes to task various centres of power – Damascus the capital of Syria, Gaza the Philistine capital, Tyre the main city of the Phoenicians, Edom, Ammon, and Moab – before turning his anger towards Judah. Unlike the other centres, Judah is not castigated for the misuse of power or violence, but for straying from the keeping of the Law.

These proclamations bring us to today's reading, the transgressions of Israel. He is eager to speak up for the vulnerable, in particular: the poor, women, people following a righteous way of life. God will come to the defence of these and, from God, not even flight will save the swift of foot.

Tuesday (*Week 13, Year II*)

(First Martyrs of the Church of Rome)

30th June

Amos 3:1-8; 4:11-12

Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!

THIS WEEK we are with the prophet Amos. It is towards the middle of the eighth century BC and we find him in Israel, the Northern Kingdom, a little while before that kingdom comes to an end. It is a time of wealth and decadence, a time when the poor are particularly oppressed by the rich. The prophet upbraids Israel because it is indeed God's family, the family he brought out of Egypt. To those to whom much is given, much is expected, as we say. The pattern of the oracle is relentlessly logical: nothing in nature happens that is not logical; so it is with what God requires of his people. The cry 'Prepare to meet your God' rings out down the ages: throughout the history of Israel, the consequences of idolatry and unfaithfulness are plain to see. We have usually taken a broader view of history, not seeing it as a story of consequences and judgment, and yet.... One of the dominant themes of our own times, brought home to us during this time of pandemic, is that human behaviour indeed has its natural consequences. We see disease and famine in the developing world, greed and corruption everywhere. We see the assault on the natural world, and the despoiling of the environment. 'Prepare to meet your God' still has a chilling ring to it.

Wednesday (Week 13, Year II)

1st July

Amos 5: 14-15, 21-24

A challenging, new set of priorities

IN CHAPTER Five we move to a new set of priorities. It might be supposed that God delights in worship, in solemn assemblies, in sacrifice, in singing and in the playing of harps. The prophet tells us here that to suppose these things is to misunderstand God and the priorities he would have us follow. The Israel that Amos encountered was a place of prosperity, where the rich enjoyed themselves and the poor were marginalised. There are uncomfortable parallels with our own society nearly 3,000 years later. We occasionally surprise ourselves – for example, managing to take the homeless off the streets (we hope permanently). A Children in Need charity evening raises unimaginable sums, as does a centenarian walking in his own back yard to raise funds for the NHS. But there is still much decadence, much to shame us. So God is saying to us – no less than to Israel in the day of Amos – what I really want is justice rolling down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Amos is making the point rather sharply: our gathering for Mass could not really be described in the terms he describes Israelite worship. But we are challenged by Amos – and the prophets in general – to build a better world.

Thursday (Week 13, Year II)

2nd July

Amos 7:10-17

Judgment Speech concerning Jeroboam the King and Amaziah the Priest

IMAGINE someone walking into Westminster Abbey and speaking first against the Crown and then against the clergy. Something like that happened in the royal sanctuary at Bethel. The priest, Amaziah, reported Amos to Jeroboam the King and then warned Amos to go back down South, to escape the King's anger. Amaziah clearly mistook Amos to be a professional prophet from a family of prophets. 'No', said Amos. 'I am not

a prophet but a herdsman, a tree surgeon, sent by God with a warning.' With that he turns his anger against the priest, foretelling a sticky end for Amaziah.

In popular usage, a prophet is someone who foretells the future – rather like a fortune-teller at the circus, gazing into a crystal ball. Certainly there are prophecies in that sense which come true. But we are not talking about magic arts or magic powers. A prophet is one who foresees the future and explains the consequences of our actions to us. The modern equivalent is perhaps a columnist or political correspondent who looks ahead at what may happen if we pursue certain courses of action. The biblical commentators were often foreseeing catastrophe and this is what Amos is doing. Though Amos speaks later of God's inescapable wrath, the Book of Amos finishes with an oracle of salvation: the kingdom of David and Jerusalem will be restored and encompass both Northern and Southern Kingdoms in a renewed covenant between God and the land, God and the people, and the people and the land.

St Thomas

Friday 3rd July

Jn 20:24-29

Thomas is convinced by the Resurrection

IN the Rabbinic literature (Tanh. 6:32a), Rabbi Simeon ben Laqish is reported as praising the one who takes on the commitment to the kingdom of God without having seen what happened on Mount Sinai. In much the same way, Jesus says to Thomas, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.' In this episode we are possibly dealing with not only Thomas's doubts – his need for physical proof – but the doubts of the early community, and others thereafter. Thomas's doubts could be met with the opportunity to plunge – which is the force of the verb – his hand into the side of the wounded Saviour. There is no indication that Thomas carried out the physical examination. It was surely enough for him to encounter the Risen Lord.

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The doubts of the early community, a gathering which would comprise mostly those who were not physical witnesses of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, could not be dealt with by the opportunity to test out the evidence for themselves in this way. Similarly, at some historical distance, we too will have our doubts, doubts which cannot be dealt with by raw proof. To all of us, Christ says 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.' We are called to choose between *pistos* and *apistos* – nouns found only in the Gospel of St John – between being a 'believer' or being an 'unbeliever'. We notice that so-called 'Doubting Thomas' gives us one of the two strongest statements of faith in Jesus as Son of God. The first statement 'the Word was with God and the Word was God' begins the Fourth Gospel (Jn 1:1). The second is nearly at the end (Jn 20:28): 'My Lord and my God'. In the earlier version of the Roman Missal translated into English, we were told that this is what we would say in response to 'the Mystery of Faith'.

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (Year A)

5th July

Mt 11:25-30

Hiding things from the wise and revealing them to the simple

RECENTLY we celebrated the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Heart of God overflowing with love for us. The love is shown in the tremendous mystery of the Incarnation – God taking our flesh and living in our midst. It was shown in the mystery of the Cross – God in Christ reconciling the world to himself in an act of selfless love. It is shown in the Sacrifice of the Mass – when both of these mysteries come together. At the Mass, God again comes into our midst, taking the form of bread and wine. At the Mass God in Christ continues to reconcile the world to himself and pour out his love upon us. The two mysteries – the Incarnation and the Cross – happened as events in the past but because of a third mystery – the eternal Present of Easter they are with us now and point us to a glorious future. To speak of mysteries may suggest things which are almost impossible to understand but, in the Gospel, Jesus thanks the Father for hiding things from the wise and understanding and revealing them to babes. Christmas, the Passion,

Easter, the Eucharist, the Marriage Feast in Heaven. It's as simple as that, unless, like the wise and understanding, we overthink them.

Monday (*Week 14, Year II*)

6th July

Hos 2:14-16, 19-20

Introducing Hosea

LAST week it was Amos. This week it's Hosea. Both were prophets in the Northern Kingdom – Israel – in the eighth century BC. Hosea is warning against Israel forming an alliance with the Assyrian Empire and it seems that, though we know almost nothing about him, we can probably date his writing to before the Assyrian assault of 735-732 BC, of which Hosea is clearly unaware. We seem to be in the last years of the reign of Jeroboam II, so we can perhaps go further and say before 746 BC.

Had we read from earlier in the chapter, we should have heard about God's anger against Israel. It is because of this anger that Israel could easily be overwhelmed by invading Assyrians. Such disasters, political and military, are always interpreted as the judgments of God. We need to know that the overarching theme is marriage. God is the bridegroom and Israel the bride. It happens that Hosea has an adulterous wife, Gomer, and her fickleness, her infidelity, and her ignorance of Hosea's love for her gives Hosea the perfect analogy for his message. Gomer/Israel are faithless and will be punished. And yet Hosea's love for Gomer, like God's love for Israel, is steadfast.

Tuesday (*Week 14, Year II*)

7th July

Hos 8:4-7, 11-13

They that sow the wind shall reap the whirlwind

AS WE saw yesterday, we are with Hosea this week, a prophet in Israel in the eighth century BC. The threat is from the Assyrians who eventually (after Hosea's time) overwhelm the Northern Kingdom. Between God and

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Israel, says Hosea, there is a covenant of love and, in today's passage, the prophet is outlining offences against that covenant. Principally (8:4-7) there is the sin of idolatry. The reference to the 'calf of Samaria' is a reference to the bull set up by Jeroboam I had erected in Bethel (1 Kings 12:29). This symbol of Baal, the Canaanite god, echoes the golden calf (Exodus 32) fabricated by the Israelites whilst Moses was communing with the Lord atop Mount Sinai. Whether at Sinai or at Bethel, or indeed elsewhere, there is no greater sin than idolatry. As well as idolatry, but flowing from it, are strange cultic practices, and it is to these that Hosea turns his attention in the second part of today's passage (8:11-13).

The phrase 'sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind' has entered our language as a metaphor. It is particularly appropriate when people and nations embark on courses of action which risk escalation and reprisals. Hosea is making a religious point: it is hard to see how Israel could have avoided being overwhelmed by the Assyrians but, for the prophets, all such disasters, as with the historian in the Books of the Kings, are seen as the result of apostasy and sinfulness, and in particular the sin of idolatry, awhoring after other gods.

Wednesday (*Week 14, Year II*)

8th July

Mt 10:1-7

The Mission of the Twelve

WHILST the First Reading continues with Hosea, whom we have been looking at this week, the Gospel today, and for the rest of the week, has Jesus commissioning the Twelve for the work ahead. Only here in St Matthew's Gospel are the Twelve called 'apostles'. The Mission is seen to be to the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' and not to the Gentiles. The context is specifically Hebrew: there are twelve apostles, because there are twelve tribes of Israel; the image is of Israel as 'harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (9:38) and the 'harvest' for which the Twelve are being prepared is the 'close of the age'. The 'close of the age' will witness the coming together of all peoples for judgment and it is an image we find in Isaiah (24:13; 27:12), the prophet Joel (3:13) and in 2 Baruch (70:2) and 4 Ezra (4:39). The apostles, as they preach the Kingdom, have four commands: 'heal the sick', 'raise the dead', 'cleanse lepers' and 'cast out demons'. These are the very deeds described in chapters 8 and 9 of St Matthew's Gospel and in Jesus' message to John the Baptist (11:4-6).

There is an underlying unity in the preaching of the Kingdom in that we see the same message in the preaching of John, the preaching of Jesus, and the preaching for which the Twelve apostles are commissioned. The terms of reference seem strange: in our circles there may be plenty of healing of the sick but raising the dead, cleansing lepers, and casting out demons are not common activities. Nevertheless we don't have to think too hard about what are equivalent activities in the mission of the Church. One has to think only of the extensive work of healthcare professionals and the extent to which we find Christians giving their lives to the service of others. Then there is the ministry of those in teaching, in social care, and in social services. All this is additional to the basic task of proclamation and the ministry of Word and Sacrament, which are at the heart of the apostolic task.

Thursday (*Week 14, Year II*)

9th July

Hos 11:1-4, 8-9

God's Compassion

HOSEA is a strikingly beautiful book, with rich use of imagery and metaphor. God is variously a healer (7:1; 14:4), a shepherd (13:5), and a fowler (7:12) as well as a husband (chaps 1-3) and a father (chap 11). He is also like the dawn (6:3a), spring rains (6:3b), a lion (13:7a), a leopard (13:7b), a bear (13:8), the dew (14:5) and an evergreen cypress (14:8). Israel is like a dove (7:11; 9:11), a luxuriant vine (10:1), a morning mist (13:3a) dew (13:3b) and chaff (13:3c), as well as an unfaithful wife (chaps 1-3).

We focus today not on the political situation eight centuries before Christ, nor on the inadequate response of Israel to the love of God, but on that love itself, its beauty and its depth. In short, we ourselves learn from this wonderful poetry: we learn about the quality of God's love for us. If we wanted to sing a hymn, we might well turn to the thirteenth century hymn *O amor, quam ecstaticus*, translated as 'O love, how deep, how broad, how high!', and sung to Eisenach, a lovely chorale harmonised by J S Bach.

Friday (Week 14, Year II)

10th July

Hos 14

Return to the Lord

THE PROPHET Hosea finishes the book with an exhortation to try to understand God and walk in his ways. Transgressors will stumble but the wise will fear God. We are here into the Wisdom tradition, where to be wise is not to pursue knowledge but to fear God. God is portrayed as one who wants to forgive and to heal, to repair the breaches in the Covenant, and to restore his people. We know that, historically, the appeal of Hosea, like that of Amos, eventually falls on deaf ears. Disaster does in fact engulf the Northern Kingdom. Yet what we see, behind the corporate message to Israel, is a message to individuals to fashion their lives according to God's commandments. The wise will understand. The discerning will know. And the upright will respond.

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR A)

12th July

Mt 13:1-23

The Parable of the Sower

AN AUDIENCE of Galilean farmers would readily understand the way the seed is sowed in today's parable. It is simply broadcast everywhere, regardless of the quality of the ground. Perhaps the ploughing came second: sow then plough, rather than plough then sow. We gain a glimpse of the generosity of the Creator, seen in the super-abundance of seed, and this matches what we see in nature. Matthew, it seems, is talking to a Jewish Christian community in the first century, and, with the mention of 'hardening of hearts', is addressing the failure of many first century people to respond to the life, death, and resurrection of the Messiah, which has taken place in their midst. Conveniently, this translates very accurately into our own times. We see the massive endeavours Christians worldwide to spread the Gospel, both by evangelism and by social action, and we are puzzled about the unwillingness of many amongst whom we love to receive the Gospel and act on its imperatives, despite much good-heartedness. The

Parable of the Sower is addressed to the crowds, gathered beside the Sea of Galilee (23:1-9) but the explanation of why Jesus speaks in parables (10-17) and the interpretation of the parable (18-23) are the words of Jesus to his disciples. We should be content to share the Parable itself far and wide – to broadcast it, in fact – but the rationale for parables and the meaning of the parable are for the Church to ponder and study. It is encouraging that we have here a blueprint here not only for success but also for limited success and even failure.

Monday (*Week 15, Year II*)

13th July

Is 6:1-8

A Vision of God in the Temple

ONE OF the prerogatives of the parish priest is to re-arrange the weekday readings for the sake of coherence and continuity. In this parish, where there is seldom a mass on Saturday morning, I try to at least notice the Saturday morning mass readings. This last Saturday was a case in point and accordingly we are reading Saturday's First Reading two days' late. Two days' late is better than not at all.

We begin a few days of Isaiah with Isaiah's vision in the temple. Here we are confronted by the glory of God, as Isaiah was. Such holiness is too much for us and we are challenged by our own unworthiness. And yet, as we hear the 'Holy, holy, holy' ringing out, as it does at Mass, we are touched by God, our sins are forgiven, and, like Isaiah of Jerusalem, we are commissioned to go out as God's messengers.

The Book of Isaiah is long and has distinct parts. Focusing, as it does, on Jerusalem, it is regarded by Jews as a main source of *Haftarah* (that is, Bible reading to complement the reading of the Torah) and Christians return again and again to the book because of its Messianic prophecies, relevant to the birth and death of Christ. We need not know, or attend too much to the historical background, but it does help to have some idea of the shape of the book. Chapters 1-23 and 28-39 relate to Isaiah, son of Amoz, a prophet in Jerusalem of the eighth century BC, so the same time as Hosea and Amos but in the Southern Kingdom rather than the North. Ahaz (735-715) and Hezekiah (715-687) are the kings and, though we know that Judah will fall to Babylon a century later, that outcome of course is not clear

to people living in the eighth century. They are also threatened by Assyria (which conquered Israel) and Hezekiah finds himself having to pay tribute to Sennacherib of Assyria, who lays siege to Jerusalem.

The second part, sometimes called 'Deutero-Isaiah', is about 125 years after Isaiah of Jerusalem. These chapters (Isaiah 40-55) look beyond the invasion of the Southern Kingdom by Babylon (587 BC) to a promising future, with the help of Cyrus King of Persia, who conquers the Babylonians and frees the Jews from slavery. The optimism is tempered in Isaiah 56-66, where there is some disillusionment but nonetheless a full and glorious restoration of Judah is expected. You may have noticed that we have omitted chapters 24-27. These chapters, sometimes called the 'Isaiah Apocalypse', look to the final triumph of God over the power of evil and his universal reign. It is a glorious picture of the coming together of all nations to feast on God's holy mountain.

Tuesday (*Week 15, Year II*)

14th July

Is 7:1-9

Isaiah Reassures King Ahaz

THE PROPHET is one who sees both the present and the future with a keen and usually uncomfortable eye. In today's reading, Isaiah counsels King Ahaz about the danger of joining a union of small states against the might of Assyria. That coalition, says Isaiah, will fail and, far from preserving Judah's independence, make matters worse. The alternative is not much better: asking for Assyrian protection for the independent state of Judah is asking the fox to guard the hen-coup. If the prophet's analysis of the present is grim, he nonetheless looks to the future with hope. He has named his son *Shear-jashub* ('a remnant shall return') and the Lord instructs him to take his son when he goes to see Ahaz. The son is a sign of both judgment and salvation. In later verses we shall come across the prophecy of Emmanuel ('God-with-us'), mentioned three times (7:14; 8:8; 8:10) not so much a comfort for the present difficulties as the guarantee of a future favourable outcome. Another of the prophet's son is *Maher-shalal-hash-baz* ('the spoil speeds, the prey hastens') and this is a comforting sign to King Ahaz that there is nothing to fear from the coalition:

it will collapse before an infant speaks his first words (8:3-4). Isaiah is clearly fond of playing with words: his words of assurance to the King (7:9b) translate in our version to 'If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established.' A more helpful translation, perhaps, building on the Hebrew word 'mn (which we know from the word 'Amen'), would preserve the Hebrew word-play and read 'If you do not make yourself **firm**, you will not be **affirmed** by the Lord.' Ahaz needs to do nothing to save his nation but have confidence in God's words of assurance.

Wednesday (*Week 15, Year II*)

15th July

(*St Swithun*)

Is 10:5-7, 13-16

Can the axe claim more credit than the man who wields it?

ISAIAH, and the prophets as a whole, show the people of Israel that what was happening to the two kingdoms, North and South, was in fulfilment of the divine will. In the eighth century, Assyria's empire has designs on Egypt, to secure resources and trade routes, and Israel and Judah are literally in the way. Though Assyria unwittingly becomes the instrument of divine purposes, punishing God's people for their unfaithfulness, Assyria – and indeed every ambitious and acquisitive empire – is in the end subservient to and subject to the universal reign of God. 'My hand has found like a nest the wealth of the peoples...and there was none that moved a wing, or opened the mouth, or chirped'. In today's reading God is scornful about the tool mistaking itself for the one who wields it. 'Shall the axe vaunt itself over him who hews with it?'

Thursday (Week 15, Year II)

16th July

(Our Lady of Mount Carmel)

Zech 2:10-13

Rejoice, O daughter of Zion

WE TURN from Isaiah, whom we have been following this week to one of the minor prophets, the book of Zechariah. It's a book which needs to make us cautious. There are at least two parts to it, the second of which (chapters 9-14) is from a later source (and almost impossible to understand.) Today, in chapter 2, we are with 'Proto-Zechariah' and we are with the Jews in the period 520-516 BC. They are newly-returned from exile in Babylon and, encouraged by Haggai and Zechariah, as recorded by Ezra the Scribe (Ezra 5:1), are setting about re-building the Jerusalem Temple, destroyed some sixty years earlier. We notice two main themes, both highly controversial at the time. The first is the longing for the return of the Lord to his Temple, expressing hope in the coming of the Messiah. The second is the prophecy that the Temple will be a holy mountain, a place of pilgrimage for all nations. This is the same vision as that of Isaiah, a couple of centuries earlier, (Is 2:2-3; 11:9; 25:6-7), but very different from that of Ezekiel 44 where the admission of foreigners to the Temple is a grave violation of the Covenant. Today's reading is almost always associated with the vocation of Our Lady to be daughter of Zion, and Temple of God's Presence, and, by extension, with the vocation of the Church to make faithful response to God and be the place of God's In-dwelling. That said, it is useful for us to hear the passage in the wake of the readings from older prophets in earlier weeks. The main themes resound through the centuries. They did then and they do now: the longing for the coming of God's Kingdom and the inclusion in the banquet on the Holy Mountain of people from all the ends of the earth. For 'Holy Mountain' read 'Carmel'. 'Carmel' in Hebrew is derived from Hebrew words for 'fertile land' and vineyards of God', a good site for an international banquet. The Carmelites are those who, like Our Lady, devote themselves to listening to God. Where better for this than on God's Holy Mountain?

FRIDAY (*Week 15, Year II*)

17th July

St Bonaventure (in the Diocese of Portsmouth)

Eph 3:14-19

Prayer for the Readers

THERE are no certainties when it comes to the Epistle to the Ephesians. We cannot be certain who wrote it. Though most scholars think it was not St Paul who wrote it – or for whom it was written – it seems reasonable to attribute the letter to later Pauline thought, perhaps the work of a disciple, recording the mature reflections of his master. If so, he had a more elaborate literary style than we find in the Epistles of indisputable authorship. Nor is he struggling with questions about the imminent Second Coming of Christ, with which the earliest Christians struggled. What we get is the most sublime expression of Christian theology, a high point in the so-called 'Pauline Epistles'. The first part of the book, from which today's first reading is drawn, is doctrinal, and – this is the genius not only of this Epistle but also of the Franciscan saint, Bonaventure, a doctor of the Church – we have a combination of doctrine and spirituality. In this passage, the writer is praying that the love of Christ, which knows no limits, so abounds that the reader and listener are 'filled with all the fullness of God'.

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR A)

19th July

Mt 13:24-43

More Parables

WE KNOW that we are right in the middle of the Green Season IN ORDINARY TIME when we come across the parables, especially the ones with an agricultural flavour. St Matthew gathers seven or eight together in chapter 13. Last week it was the Parable of the Sower, this week it is the

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weeds and darnel, the mustard seed, and the leaven. As one of our Bible Study members reminded us, when we were discussing the Parable of the Sower, the Parable of the Weeds is the other example where Jesus himself explains the meaning. Cumulatively, these stories explain why it is that, however hard we try, we shall have limited success in persuading others of the truth of the Gospel. We are very much sowers of the seed rather than gatherers-in of the harvest. One of the privileges of the priest's ministry is to come across those where the seed was sown long ago. A frequent example is the bride and groom who want to marry here because one or other went to St Amand's and much remains. The same is true sometimes of those seeking baptism for a child. The point for each one of us is that we have a duty, conferred on us by our baptism, to bear witness to the Kingdom of Heaven in how we live, what we say, and what we do. But it does not fall to us to try to convince anyone of anything. This applies with particular force to the transmission of the Faith to our children and grandchildren. The task is simply to live an authentic life.

Monday (*Week 16, Year II*)

20th July

Mic 6:1-4, 6-8

God Challenges Israel: What God requires

THE EIGHTH century prophets form a quartet. Isaiah was at work in the Southern Kingdom, Judah, Hosea and Amos were at work in the Northern Kingdom, Israel. The fourth prophet we now meet, active in both South and North, is Micah of Moresheth. The place name is important because there were many called Micah. He appears from the book to have been active for many years but in reality he was probably operating in the last quarter of the eighth century, leading up to the invasion of Judah by Sennacherib in 701BC.

Micah's message is not new to us. The prophet is operating in the same milieu, and with the same concerns, as the other prophets in the quartet. Despite the political volatility, there were reforms and economic steps forward which allowed wealthy landowners to prosper at the expense of small peasant farmers. Having proclaimed a glorious future for Israel in

chapters 4 and 5, we today meet Micah outlining the problems this ungrateful people has. We may recognize from the *Improperia* of the Good Friday Liturgy the reproaches Micah makes: 'O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!' He reminds them that God led them out from slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land and asks them how they respond. Micah points them beyond formal religious duties, the cultic sacrifices of year-old calves, thousands of rams, and rivers of oil. In perhaps the most famous verse in the book, and amongst the verses of the Bible that ring out most clearly, we find these words, which apply as much to us as to the Israelites nearly three millennia ago: 'what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?'

Tuesday (*Week 16, Year II*)

21st July

Mic 7:14-15, 18-20

God's Compassion and Steadfast Love

THE POETRY and tenderness of Micah of Moresheth shine through. Yesterday it was 'What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?' Today it is 'You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.' Micah prays to God that he will 'shepherd his people'. There are over one hundred mentions of shepherds in the Bible, mostly in the Old Testament. The twenty or so mentions in the New Testament are mostly a reference to Jesus the Good Shepherd but, interestingly, there are nearly thirty Old Testament mentions of shepherding which identify God as the Shepherd of Israel. 'Shepherd', of course, comes from an agricultural economy, and, as a metaphor, gives us 'pastoral care'. Micah in today's passage is asking very particular things from the heavenly Pastor. He wants God to let his people graze in the finest pastures. We are linked back to an earlier reference, in Micah 2, where Micah reassures the people that God will gather the remnant and lead them out of exile – this is after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. Micah's coupling of 'faithfulness to Jacob' with 'steadfast love to Abraham' tells us that he is thinking about the whole people of the Hebrews, Israel, presently conquered by Assyria, and Judah under grave military threat from the same enemy. We know – though Micah doesn't – that Judah will survive the Assyrian threat but will eventually fall to the Babylonians. Oracles of

judgment are usually about present dangers. Oracles of salvation point beyond the immediate future to the long term.

St Mary Magdalen

Wednesday 22nd July

Jn 20:1-18

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalen

IN JOHN Chapter 20 there are four Resurrection stories, two at the tomb and two in the Upper Room. Three are on the same day, one a week later. The first two concern St Mary Magdalen, the second two the Twelve. In today's Gospel we have the first two stories. We begin with Mary Magdalen coming to the tomb on that first Easter Sunday morning – in John she seems to be alone, whereas in the synoptic Gospels, explicitly in Matthew and Mark, and implicitly in Luke, she is accompanied by Mary the mother of James and Salome. With or without 'the other Mary', Mary Magdalen has come to the tomb, and Mark and Luke tell us that the purpose of the visit is to anoint the body. Mary Magdalen is perplexed that the stone of the tomb has been rolled back and the body removed and she runs to find Peter and John the Beloved Disciple. We move to the second of the two stories and we now find Mary, herself looking inside the tomb and weeping. The angels in the tomb ask her why she is weeping and, when she explains her loss, she turns to find Jesus – not that she recognises him.

As with Doubting Thomas in the fourth of the Resurrection stories, there is a personal encounter with the Risen Lord. There is an interesting contrast between these two encounters. Famously Jesus says to Mary 'Do not hold me' – *Noli me tangere* – but to Thomas 'Put your finger here and see my hands; and put out your hand and place it in my side' (20:27). Personal encounters with the Lord minister to our deepest needs. Mary Magdalen's deepest need – as with many a bereaved person – is to learn about not being able to touch. Thomas's deepest need, by contrast, is to investigate things for himself and so convince himself.

This emphasis on personal encounter, we discover, is a particular emphasis in the Resurrection appearances in St John's Gospel. The Risen Lord has a personal encounter with Mary Magdalen on Easter morning, with the Eleven, minus Thomas, in the evening of that day. Similarly there is a personal encounter with Thomas the following Sunday evening. Later there

is one with the disciples at the Lakeside, as they returned to their trade as fishermen, and with Simon Peter after their breakfast of bread and fish. What is outstanding about the encounter with Mary Magdalen is that it was the first encounter, and the tenderest. Mary Magdalen recognises her Lord, as we too should, when he calls her by name. When he calls our name, we too should respond 'Rab-bo'ni!' (which means Teacher).

St Bridget

Thursday 23rd July

Jn 15:1-8

I AM the True Vine

IN THESE daily 'Food for the Journey' reflections, we have encountered a fair amount of agricultural imagery – the sowing of seed, sorting out wheat and weeds, the shepherding of sheep. The vineyard is another favourite metaphor, especially in the Old Testament, and here, in one of the sayings from his Farewell Discourse, Jesus presents himself as the Vine and his Father as the Vinedresser. It is a powerful image and leads us, often enough, to think about the trunk of the Vine, Jesus, and the branches, ourselves. The branches either bear fruit or - this bit makes us uneasy – get pruned away. Another way of thinking about these sayings – not just the Vine but the rest of the Farewell Discourse too – is that they focus on our relationship with Christ and, enabled by the Holy Spirit, the Counsellor, with one another. The key word is 'abide'. We 'abide' in Christ as he 'abides' in the Father. And we 'abide' with one another in the fellowship.

Friday (*Week 16, Year II*)

24th July

Jer 1:1, 4-10

Jeremiah's Call and Commission

AND SO we come to the prophet Jeremiah, one of the major prophets. Today's passage was set for a couple of days ago, but was superseded by readings for the feasts of St Mary Magdalen and St Bridget. We are using

it today because, without chapter one, the Book of Jeremiah would lack context. We are in the closing stages of the Southern Kingdom of Judah and the prophet takes us right up to the collapse of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews in Babylon, so 626BC until 587BC. The word 'Jeremiah' gives us 'jeremiad', a long, mournful complaint or lamentation. This is the tone of Jeremiah's prophecy. He is brutally treated and disregarded because he proclaims the unwelcome truth that the nation's collapse is inevitable. We hear, nonetheless, that the Lord authorises Jeremiah's words and will deliver him from the hands of those who wish him harm. The story of his call and commissioning is frequently cited in support of our understanding that God knows us intimately before we draw breath and, as St John Henry Newman reminded us, has a work for each one of us uniquely to do.

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

26th July

Mt 13:44-52

More about the Kingdom of Heaven

HAVE you ever wondered why it is that the Gospel spreads like wildfire in various parts of the world but here, in the UK, and throughout Western Europe and in the States the Church has a bit of a struggle? The African Church, for instance, is huge, and even unpromising terrain like China sees significant growth. You would think that Europe, and America, where Christianity has been so strong would fare better. There are no easy answers and we can't underestimate the impact of two enormous European wars and the advance of a harsh secularism, with little regard for traditional Christian values. But other parts of the world have wars and nowhere is harsh secularism more in evidence than in China. This is the very same issue that St Matthew is wrestling with in chapter 13, the parables we have been hearing this last week or two. The Holy Land, where Jesus lived and worked, where the Christian Church began to take shape, following his death and resurrection, seemed a very obvious place for the Gospel to take root and grow. Instead, we read about the growth of the Church amongst the Gentiles, those who didn't even seem to be part of the original mission. Reflecting on this, the Evangelist tells us the parables of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Sower. The Wheat and Tares. The Mustard Seed. The Hidden Leaven. The Treasure hidden in the Field. The Dragnet. In each case the contrast is between what is very small and unpromising and what is

harvested. A lot may be left aside and apparently wasted - seed on paths and amid briars, seafood that doesn't have fins and scales - but it's all part of the plan. Pope Benedict predicted that the Church would be smaller but that holiness would increase.

Monday (*Week 17, Year II*)

27th July

Jer 13:1-11

The Linen Loincloth

WE CAN see clearly that, in his use of parables - the mustard seed and the leaven in today's Gospel are good examples - Jesus is placing himself in the long prophetic tradition. The prophets were fond of using everyday images to illustrate spiritual truths. And so, in the first reading, from Jeremiah, we have the image of the loincloth. In terms of geography and history, the story is improbable. It would hardly have been possible, in the time available, to make two trips to Babylon and back but the symbolism is clear. The loincloth is hidden in Babylon, from whence Judah's enemies are waiting to threaten Jerusalem and eventually cart its inhabitants off into exile. Buried and neglected, the loincloth rots away and is good for nothing. Such will be the fate of God's people - closer to him than a loincloth is to the human body but who hide themselves away far from his presence. As we usually discover, the sin of the people is apostasy, going after other gods. We know better than to go off after other gods, or do we? The secular materialism of the society in which we live is the equivalent of 'the others gods' of ancient times. We must hope that the Lockdown, in which secular materialism, along with the way we live amidst God's Creation, have been sufficiently challenged. There are signs that more people are once more asking religious questions but time will tell whether this is really the case and whether we, as the Church, will be able to respond.

Tuesday *(Week 17, Year II)*

28th July

Jer 14:17-22

The Great Drought: the People plead for Mercy

IN JEREMIAH, chapter 14, today's First Reading, we hear of the great drought which the people are suffering. The laments of the people are shared by the Lord's own laments and the laments of Jeremiah the prophet. Why is it that, when the people turn to the Lord in need, he is unable or unwilling to help them? Nothing, it seems, can avert the disaster which threatens to overwhelm them and which, as it happens, does overwhelm them. The analysis here is that it is the people's apostasy, their lack of faithfulness, which is the root cause. This disaster is a very particular example of what remains a problem for us in every age and culture. The question is 'who does God let bad things happen to good people?' We are no longer inclined to say that when bad things happen – drought, earthquake, famine, fire, flood, plague – God is punishing us. Sometimes the results of natural disasters reflect human sinfulness – inadequate construction, poor distribution, inadequate healthcare – and blaming God is simply escaping human social responsibility. The world we live in is God's creation and it is with his help that men and women of goodwill can create caring responses to the consequences of the way things happen in nature. Jesus himself addressed this problem in Lk 13:4 'Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Silo'am fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem?'

Wednesday 29th July

St Martha

Jn 11:19-27

'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God'

WE TURN today to the stories about St Martha, sister of Mary and Lazarus. The household were clearly friends of Jesus and he was a frequent visitor. There are two stories. One is the one we have just had as the Gospel reading. The second is an alternative reading from St Luke's Gospel. In the story in Luke, the two sisters, Martha and Mary, behave very differently. Mary sits at the Lord's feet to learn from him whilst Martha busies herself

in the kitchen. In more innocent days, Martha was portrayed as a 'housewife', a model for women looking after their homes. That kind of conventional domestic portrait is now, rather unfairly, seen sometimes, as anti-feminist though, in the Gospel narrative, it is giving legitimacy and respect to the role many women have played and continue to play. Martha's mistake is to tell the Lord that he should be asking Mary to help her with the cooking and serving. The Lord gently chides Martha for worrying and fretting over many things and tells her that Mary has chosen the better part and should be left to her contemplation. In short, both the active and the contemplative lives are endorsed by Jesus, though contemplation is the higher calling.

The other story about Martha and Mary is the one in today's Gospel reading. We now see another side to Martha. She is recognisably the same woman: as in the story in St Luke, she speaks sharply to Jesus. If he had got there on time, Lazarus would never have died. This leads to another exchange: Martha is able to profess her faith in the Messiah, one of the high points in the Gospels. Jesus tells her that he is the resurrection and the life and that those who believe in him will never die. It's a pity, sometimes, that we can't hear two Gospel readings. In this case, there is plenty to reflect on in each.

Thursday (*Week 17, Year II*)

30th July

Jer 18:1-6

The Potter and the Clay

ONE OF the many songs produced in recent decades and much used in Catholic worship is 'Abba, Abba, Father, you are the potter, we are the clay, the work of your hands'. It is an appealing image: Jeremiah is invited to watch a potter at work. The worship song is a little sentimental: God moulds us and we are his handiwork. The biblical reference, though, is to God breaking us and remoulding us, much as a potter, with a badly-cast pot, starts again. The house of Israel is to be reworked 'into another vessel as it seemed good to the potter to do.' As is so often the case, the image works both for the Church and for the individual. God's people are re-moulded and fashioned, as time goes on, and so is each one of us in our lives.

Friday 31st July

St Ignatius of Loyola

Jer 26:1-9

Jeremiah's Prophecies in the Temple

WE NOW find Jeremiah's life threatened. As we later find with Jesus, talk of the destruction of the Temple so challenges the authority of religious leaders that they want to destroy him. Jeremiah's message is not inevitably of doom. At the beginning of the passage, we hear that if people hear the word of the Lord and repent, all may yet work out well. Observing human behaviour we notice that, with individuals, there can be complete *metanoia*, repentance in the sense of changing direction. We think of the examples of St Paul, St Francis of Assisi, and, today, St Ignatius of Loyola. Less likely is the change of direction of whole societies. Intriguing us, at present, are the effects of the pandemic on our world. We have glimpsed what a complete change of direction might be like – working from home, low carbon pollution, greater gentleness, more silence, stronger sense of family, more thoughtfulness. Will these glimpses lead to lasting changes or will we, like the religious leaders of Jeremiah's day, and at the trial of Jesus, shout out and drown unbearable truths?

Monday (Week 18, Year II)

3rd August

Mt 14:22-36

Walking on the Water

THIS WEEK we leave Jeremiah to continue with his prophesying and focus instead on the Gospel readings. The Gospel readings set for today and tomorrow are replaced, when it is Year A in the Sunday Cycle, and we find ourselves with the difficult story of the Walking on the Water. It is difficult for the obvious reason that it is Jesus doing the impossible, just because he can. In a sense, this is the importance of the story: by doing what is impossible Jesus reveals himself to his disciples as God. In St Mark's version of the story, the disciples' 'hearts were hardened' (Mk 6:52) but in Matthew's account the reaction is different 'those in the boat worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."' (Mt 14:33), In this incident,

and in the earlier calming of the storm (Mt 8:23-27), we are confronted with the Jewish fear of the sea and reminded not only of the story of Jonah but of Psalm 107:23-32:

²³**Some went down to the sea in ships,
to trade on the mighty waters.**

²⁴**These have seen the deeds of the LORD,
the wonders he does in the deep.**

²⁵**For he spoke and raised up the storm-wind,
tossing high the waves of the sea**

²⁶**that surged to heaven and dropped to the depths.
Their souls melted away in their distress.**

²⁷**They staggered and reeled like drunkards,
for all their skill was gone.**

²⁸**Then they cried to the LORD in their need,
and he rescued them from their distress.**

²⁹**He stilled the storm to a whisper,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.**

³⁰**They rejoiced because of the calm,
and he led them to the haven they desired.**

³¹**Let them thank the LORD for his mercy,
his wonders for the children of men.**

³²**Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people,
and praise him in the meeting of the elders.**

Tuesday (*Week 18, Year II*)

4th August

Mt 15:1-2, 10-14

Things that defile

THE PHRASE 'Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem' very much suggests some sort of official delegation coming to investigate this wandering rabbi. The issue is not personal hygiene but ritual washing. There is an exchange, which our Gospel reading, as set, omits (vv3-9): in true Jewish fashion, religious teachers discuss and dispute details of the Law and its interpretation. What is at stake is 'the tradition of the elders'. Jesus calls the crowd to draw near and makes a momentous pronouncement that it is what comes out of someone's mouth which is

Food for the Journey: Lockdown in Catholic Hendred (2020)

unclean, not what goes in. Moral purity is more important than ritual purity. This is not a contradiction of the Law of Moses but an widening of our understanding of right and wrong and the part human motivation plays.

Mark's Gospel has the same story but he goes one step further, a step that Matthew is probably not willing to take. 'Thus', adds St Mark, 'he declared all foods clean' (Mk 7:19b). Whatever was said, the pharisees were 'offended' – the word is scandalised – and Jesus replies with a saying about plants that have not been planted by God. There are several examples in Hebrew literature of 'the shoot of my planting' (Is 60:21), the righteous community created and blessed by God. Those whom God has not planted are blind guides, says Jesus.

Wednesday (*Week 18, Year II*)

5th August

Mt 15:21-28

The Canaanite Woman's Faith

WE CAN'T be sure what is meant by Jesus withdrawing to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Is he heading for the Mediterranean shore, and does he actually get there? Does the Syro-Phœnician woman come into Jewish territory or does Jesus leave Jewish territory? The 'Canaanite woman', as the Gospel calls her, gives quite a performance and it is uncertain whether the disciples, begging Jesus to send her away, have in mind him curing the woman's demon-possessed daughter, and so sending her away, or whether they just want her sent away, without any help govern. What is certain about this incident is that it reveals the tension, in the mind of St Matthew, between the mission to the Jews and the mission to the Gentiles. Is there indeed a mission to the Gentiles? Clearly the Israelites are the children and the Gentiles are the dogs, albeit puppies, playing around the table in the home. We have no way of knowing how much this is how Jesus himself saw things and how much it is the Evangelist's agenda and understanding, but the daughter is healed and healed as a result of the woman's faith.

The Transfiguration of the Lord (Year A)

Thursday 6th August

Mt 17:1-9

The Transfiguration

THE TRANSFIGURATION, as St Matthew tells it, has one or two embellishments on the similar version in St Mark. So, Peter calls Jesus 'Lord' instead of 'Rabbi' (v4), no doubt following on from the Confession of Faith at Cæsarea Philippi, which we hear about in the preceding chapter (16). We also learn that the Transfiguration is a vision (v9).

Where Mark has talked slightly awkwardly of 'Elijah with Moses', Matthew puts them into the right order, representing the Law and the Prophets respectively. With St Mark we learn that the event took place 'after six days' and that Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him up the mountain. We are not sure whether the mountain in question is Mount Tabor or Mount Hermon. What does seem to be clear is that the episode echoes a similar episode in Exodus (24:9ff) where Moses takes Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy elders up the mountain of God where 'they saw the God of Israel'. 'Under his feet [was] as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness....They beheld God, and ate and drank.' So the Transfiguration is about worshipping – and, by extension, the eating and drinking of eucharistic worship.

The worship element is captured in Peter's slightly clumsy suggestion that he would make three booths, a reference to the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23:39-43), commemorating the journey of the Children of Israel through the desert, from Egypt to the Promised Land. When we hear of the bright cloud and the voice from heaven declaring Jesus to be God's Beloved Son, we are reminded of the Theophany at the Jordan, God showing himself as a Trinity of Persons at the Baptism of the Lord. The Transfiguration is a prefiguring of the Resurrection and the glory of the eschaton. It follows the exchange which we shall come across tomorrow, talk of taking up of the Cross and losing of life.

Friday (Week 18, Year II)

7th August

Mt 16:24-28

The Cross and Self-Denial

AFTER moving to chapter 17 for yesterday's feast, we move back to chapter 16 today. The verses here reflect the imagery of 'taking up the Cross', which was found earlier in the Gospel at 10:38-39. Today's Gospel is the first of three predictions of the Passion. The other two come in Mt 17:22-23 and 20:12-19. Today's passage follows on from the Cæsarea Philippi incident, in which Simon confesses his faith in Jesus as the Messiah, and Jesus re-names him Peter, 'the Rock'. We lost that story because of the celebration of the Transfiguration yesterday. We need to bear that story in mind because the first prediction of the Passion follows immediately on from it. Interesting though these predictions are, they are almost certainly sharpened up by hindsight. Looking back, the Evangelist can remember the dark allusions to the vocation to suffering and the warning that following Jesus will not lead to power and wealth. It is not likely that anything at the time would be as clearly known as the synoptic Gospel narratives present it. Yet, in the light of what unfolded, the message to the believer is clear: deny yourself and take up your Cross, follow Jesus and do not seek to hang on to life. Those who cling to life will lose it.

Monday (Week 19, Year II)

9th August 2020

1 Kings 19:9, 11-13; Mt 14:22-33

TODAY we bring together two very significant stories. In the Old Testament reading, Elijah's spiritual discovery of the voice of God. In the Gospel reading, the startling idea of Jesus walking on the water, an idea so startling that it has entered our language to describe the impossible. Elijah's discovery is of fundamental importance in the development of spirituality throughout the ages. It is the mainspring of the Carmelite movement which is present with us in this area in the Friary on Boars Hill. At the end of his ministry Elijah discovers that, though he experiences wind, an earthquake, and a fire, in none of these is the Lord to be found. God

does not disclose himself through the forces of nature, even though his glory is evident in creation. After wind, earthquake, and fire there is a still, small voice. It is the still, small voice that we get to in Psalm 46, when, after speaking of the power of God to intervene in the world, we have this same still, small voice. 'Be still, and know that I am God...The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.' The theme is taken up famously in the hymn 'Dear Lord and Father of mankind'. John Greenleaf Whittier, an American Quaker poet, wrote these words and they include:

**Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and Thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm.**

The story of the Walking on the Water is difficult for the obvious reason that Jesus is doing the impossible, simply because he can. In a sense, this is the importance of the story: by doing what is impossible Jesus reveals himself to his disciples as God. In St Mark's version of the story, the disciples' 'hearts were hardened' (Mk 6:52) but in Matthew's account the reaction is different 'those in the boat worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."' (Mt 14:33), In this incident, and in the earlier calming of the storm (Mt 8:23-27), we are confronted with the Jewish fear of the sea and reminded not only of the story of Jonah and the Whale but the story of St Paul being shipwrecked on Malta, when he was being taken to Rome (Acts 27:13-44). Jewish fear and respect for the sea is memorably described in Psalm 107:23-32:

**²³Some went down to the sea in ships,
to trade on the mighty waters.**

**²⁴These have seen the deeds of the LORD,
the wonders he does in the deep.**

**²⁵For he spoke and raised up the storm-wind,
tossing high the waves of the sea**

**²⁶that surged to heaven and dropped to the depths.
Their souls melted away in their distress.**

**²⁷They staggered and reeled like drunkards,
for all their skill was gone.**

**²⁸Then they cried to the LORD in their need,
and he rescued them from their distress.**

**²⁹He stilled the storm to a whisper,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.
³⁰They rejoiced because of the calm,
and he led them to the haven they desired.**

If the story of Elijah and the still, small voice is at the root of not only Carmelite, but all Jewish and Christian spirituality, the story of Jesus walking on the sea should surely be at the back of our minds whenever we wrestle with the severe problems of life. Our hyper-awareness of the dangers of the plague are gradually giving way to an increasing understanding of the domestic, educational, psychological, and social problems our society has experienced during Lockdown, not to mention any of the problems caused by the temporary refocusing of clinical and medical care. Amidst the turmoil of our lives we hear the quiet and reassuring words of Jesus in today's Gospel coming to us over the choppy waters:

'Take heart, it is I; have no fear.'

Monday (*Week 19, Year II*)

10th August

Ezek 1:2-5, 24-28

The Glory of the Lord

EZEKIEL was a Jerusalem priest, part of the elite who in 597BC were taken off to Babylon. He gives us a timeline, which we can just about interpret, and he seems to be prophesying in Babylon about 593BC. He purports to be describing in the present events which had happened before the Exile and, in common with the other prophets of the time, he ascribes the fate of Judah to the sinfulness of the people. God shows his divine power by abandoning the holy city. The book begins, as today's passage shows, with God still present in glory enthroned above the praises of his people. Ezekiel is very much a priestly book and the vision is described accordingly. We have a 'stormy wind', as we find in the story of Elijah (2 Kgs 2:11), Job (38:1), and Jonah (1:4). The 'living creatures', as we shall find on Wednesday, are subsequently identified as 'the cherubim' (Ezek 10:4). They are part of heavenly worship, as we hear from Rev. 4:6-8, and they

are familiar figures from the ancient world. The Assyrian *karibu* were statues of animals with human heads, guarding the palace at Nineveh and appear here as integral to the worship of the Lord, the God of Israel. Ezekiel starts at the bottom: he listens and gradually looks up to the firmament of heaven, hears the sounds, and then sees the vision 'like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain'. In other words, God is way above us, well above the temple in Jerusalem, way above the earth. So what the vision tells us is that God will not utterly forsake his people. He is not confined to Jerusalem and, as he chooses, can be available to his people in exile.

Tuesday (*Week 19, Year II*)

11th August

Ezek 2:8 – 3:4

Ezekiel is invited to eat a scroll

THE EATING of the scroll is at once strange and familiar. Why would one eat a scroll, let alone describe it 'as sweet as honey'? What is certainly more familiar – and we have come across it in other prophets – is pressing into service an everyday object – in Jeremiah it was the loin cloth and the potter's clay. So the vivid image of eating a scroll helps us to understand the message. We find something similar in the psalms. Psalm 19:10b describes the ordinances of the Lord as 'sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb' and Psalm 119:103 says 'How sweet are your words to my taste: sweeter than honey to my mouth'. The consuming of a scroll makes a reappearance at Rev. 10:9-10. There we learn that the scroll tastes 'as sweet as honey' but makes the stomach bitter. Written on Ezekiel's scroll are 'words of lamentation and mourning and woe', possibly identifying for us three types of Israelite lament poetry found later in the Book of Ezekiel. Or perhaps just three words for the same thing. By chewing and swallowing God's words, Ezekiel is internalising God's message. Thus, having thoroughly absorbed it, he is equipped to deliver the message to God's people.

Wednesday (Week 19, Year II)

12th August

Ezek 9:1-7; 10:18-22

The Slaughter of the Idolaters

WE CAN'T easily accept the Israelite understanding of God's anger, which is explored in this passage. The 'six men' whom the Lord chooses to do his work are not so much men as avenging angels. God himself does no harm but he is clearly seen as himself passing judgment. Those who are to be spared are marked with a sign, though the Hebrew might mean that only Ezekiel is signed and spared. There is a link here with the marking of foreheads on Ash Wednesday. Presiding over the judgment, God moves to the east gate of the temple, very definitely, as it were, stepping to one side. The terrible glory of his anger is shown in the attendance of the cherubim (as we now know the 'living creatures' to be). God's agents wreak havoc and the temple courts are filled – and therefore defiled – by dead bodies. We are probably not hearing here about what happened in 597BC, the beginning of the Exile, but a few years later, when the temple and city were laid waste. With hindsight Ezekiel conflates the events. It is a severe picture and nowadays we do our theology rather differently. We no longer start with the view that everything that happens – including death, disease, and disaster – is visited upon us by God. We see God as one who cares for us, loves us, and supports us through the most tragic of circumstances. How those tragic circumstances arise we cannot say. We talk about the 'mystery of evil' and, as we explore that, come across a no less bewildering 'mystery of goodness'. But centuries before the coming of Christ, the history of Israel is always seen through the lens of judgment. The Babylonian Exile, the destruction of the temple, and the slaughter of old and young all happen because of the apostasy of God's people. It's a dark picture.

Thursday (Week 19, Year II)

12th August

Ezek 12:1-12

Judah's Captivity Portrayed

MORE picture language: in today's first reading the prophet Ezekiel, priest of Jerusalem, gives us a 'sign-act'. The act is the journey of a refugee, referred to by Ezekiel as the 'prince', who digs through the wall at night to escape, face covered to conceal his identity from the Babylonian army who are giving siege to the city. The refugee, we can identify, as Zedekiah, and we find the story of this escape in 2 Kgs 25:4-7, the last chapter in the history of the Jews before the exile. It's worth just reading those verses:

Then a breach was made in the city; the king with all the men of war fled by night by the way of the gate between the two walls, by the king's garden, though the Chalde'ans were around the city. And they went in the direction of the Arabah. ⁵ But the army of the Chalde'ans pursued the king, and overtook him in the plains of Jericho; and all his army was scattered from him. ⁶ Then they captured the king, and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah, who passed sentence upon him. ⁷ They slew the sons of Zedeki'ah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedeki'ah, and bound him in fetters, and took him to Babylon.

This unsuccessful flight Ezekiel portrays as the defining sign of Judah's defeat and captivity.

Friday (Week 19, Year II)

14th August

Ezek 16:1-15, 60, 63

God's Faithless Bride

CHAPTER 16 is the longest chapter in the Book of Ezekiel and today we look at the first fifteen verses and a couple of the final verses. The image is of Israel as an adulterous wife, taken by the Lord from humble

beginnings, Pygmalion-style, woo-ed, washed, and clothed by God, and given fine jewellery. But, says the Lord, Israel trusted in her beauty and became a whore (v15). This image of God as the Bridegroom and Israel the Bride is fundamental in Scripture. It is perhaps the main reason why we refer to God as masculine, and to his people – whether Israel or the Church – as ‘she’. God, of course, is not a sexual being. He is beyond gender and both Israel and the Church have as many male members as female. Nevertheless, story and narrative are the way we encounter God and it is through story and narrative that we understand him and his ways. Having upbraided the adulterous wife, God, in verse 60, nevertheless remembers his covenant and, in verse 63, bids us recall his forgiveness of us, and, in our shame for our sins, cease our complaining.

ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

16th August

THE SOLEMNITY of the Assumption is not only the Principal Feast of our Lady but, in East Hendred Parish, our feast of title. It is also the anniversary of the consecration of the Church in 1865. Though it was defined only in 1950 that Mary had passed, body and soul, into the glory of heaven, this belief is ancient and was known in the early Christian centuries. It marks her out as the one who, pre-eminently, shared in the glory of her Son’s Resurrection but it also is a sign to us that we too shall share in the glory of heaven. This is expressed succinctly in today’s Second Reading: ‘For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.’ (1 Cor. 15)

Monday (*Week 20, Year II*)

17th August

Mt 19:16-22

The Rich Young Man

WE ARE now on the road to Jerusalem, and a young man encounters Jesus, clearly seeking to understand how to live the devout life. He asks 'What good deed must I do?' This incident is in all three synoptic Gospels (see Mk 10:17-22; Lk 18:18-23) but only St Mark tells us that Jesus loves him and only St Matthew tells us that he is a 'young man' as well as, later on, a wealthy one. St Luke calls him a 'ruler' and, in several instances in the New Testament, rulers are seen in opposition to prophets. St Matthew also gives us the challenge to be perfect. We are speaking of perfection as wholeness, a total roundedness – the holiness we hear about in the Book of Leviticus (19:2; 20:26; 21:8). The encounter begins with a reflection on the goodness of God and how we respond by keeping the commandments. To a list of commandments drawn from the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:12-17; Deut 5:16-21), Jesus adds 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev 19:18), which he later (Mt 22:39) adds as a second to the greatest commandment of the Law, love of God. Clearly the young man is spiritually restless and confesses that, even though he keeps the commandments, he still lacks something. In what feels uncomfortably like a challenge to us all – but was probably speaking to the circumstances of that one person – Jesus tells him to sell all his possessions and follow him. We have remarkable examples in history of people taking that advice themselves – notably St Francis of Assisi – and mendicant friars and itinerant preachers have been principal agents of mission. The celibate clergy too have been traditionally available to travel light and go wherever they are needed for the sake of the Kingdom. For most of us, the challenge is not to literally sell up and travel around but to see money and possessions and family ties with the perspective of Christian discipleship.

Tuesday (*Week 20, Year II*)

18th August

Mt 19:23-30

The Camel and the Eye of a Needle

TODAY'S Gospel follows on from yesterday's. We heard, the rich young man 'went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions'. This leads to a debate between Jesus and his disciples about the difficulties of riches. The rabbinical illustration of something impossible - an 'elephant' passing through the eye of a needle - is adapted by Jesus to read 'camel'. His disciples would certainly be more likely to see a camel than an elephant. If the rich can't be saved, say the disciples, who on earth can? Here we need to put to the back of our minds for a moment the long tradition of holy poverty in our Christian history and look back through the teaching of the Jewish Law. In the Law (Deut 28:1-14) wealth is a reward for following God's commandments. This was the normal assumption made by pious Jews, despite warnings in, for example, Ezek 7:19, that 'their silver and gold are not able to deliver them in the day of the wrath of the LORD'. Proverbs urges moderation: 'Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and trouble with it' (15:16). By the time of Jesus, the Qumran Essenes were preparing for God's Kingdom by learning to do without money and possessions. Otherwise, as in other settled societies, including the secular West, the poor are those who should be cared for and provided for but it is the rich who are truly fortunate. Rather like the Essenes, in the radical Kingdom Movement that Jesus is inaugurating, values are turned upside down. 'Many that are first will be last, and the last first.' It is not that the rich cannot be saved - after all, Jesus answers the disciples' question, 'With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.' What we are talking about is the future Age rather than the present and this is made clear by Jesus telling his apostles that they will be seated on twelve thrones, ruling over the twelve tribes of Israel. We should not leave this Gospel passage without reflecting on the relevance of the saying about leaving 'houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands' for Jesus' sake. This relates very closely to the call to be a priest or religious but it also reminds us that the Christian congregation is a family brought together not by biological ties but by belonging to the Lord.

Wednesday (Week 20, Year II)

19th August

Mt 20:1-16

The Labourers in the Vineyard

THE PARABLE of the Labourers in the Vineyard is, at first sight, grossly unjust. Some seem to have started work early (6am), others at the third hour (9am), others at the sixth and ninth hours (12 noon and 3pm). By the eleventh hour (5pm) the end of the twelve-hour working day was drawing near and yet more workers were hired. The pay seemed to have been uneven and unjust: one denarius for a twelve-hour day, or a nine-hour day, or a six-hour day, or a three-hour day, or for one hour's work. If we realise that one denarius was the agreed price for manual labour – and what was necessary for a man on a casual contract to look after his family – then it all seems less unjust. In fact an injustice – such as we still see nowadays – is when wages are insufficient to meet basic subsistence. So, in this Kingdom parable, the householder (God), caring for his Vineyard (Israel) recruits and makes use of all who make themselves available – all who stand around in the market place. To each he gives all that they need, though, inevitably, we look on and think that some do better than they deserve. In our indignation, we don't even bother to address our grumbles politely. 'Friend' is how the householder addresses the one who grumbles. We are reminded of two more uses of 'Friend'. One (22:12) is in the Parable of the Wedding Garment and the other (26:50) is Jesus' addressing Judas at the time of the Arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is a greeting both relational and stern. We can't miss the opportunity to point out that 'do you begrudge my generosity' in the next to last verse of this parable is a rather loose translation of 'is your eye evil?' The 'evil eye' gained a life of its own in popular superstition but it refers back to Mt 6:23: 'if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness'. The grumblers see only the injustice: they are in the presence of light but see only darkness.

Thursday (Week 20, Year II)

20th August

Ezek 36:23-28

A Heart of Flesh

THERE are a couple famous passages in the Book of Ezekiel, famous because they are used relatively often in the Church's liturgy. These are today's passage (*A Heart of Flesh*) and tomorrow's (*The Valley of Dry Bones*). *A Heart of Flesh* (Ezek 36) is used as a reading at the Easter Vigil and *The Valley of Dry Bones* (Ezek 37) as a reading at the Vigil of Pentecost.

Today we are looking at the restoration of Israel which is put in context by the verse before it:

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.

Israel is to be cleansed and restored by God not because she deserves it, but for the sake of God's holiness. He is not a weak tribal deity, who was powerless to prevent the trashing of his Holy Place and the transporting of his people into exile. He is the holy God, Lord of all, and therefore his people must be transformed into a holy people. The reputational damage must be addressed and remedied. And so the principal task is to rid Israel of all idolatry. It was idolatry which got Israel into trouble and they need to be given a new heart, an inner spirit to enable them to walk in God's statutes and observe his ordinances. If it's idolatry that gets you into trouble, it is faithfulness to the Law – to the Covenant – which puts things right. But none of this restoration is down to us: it is God who achieves it, and the new heart in place of the heart of stone is the way he achieves it.

Friday (*Week 20, Year II*)

21st August

Ezek 37:1-14

The Valley of Dry Bones

THE VALLEY of Dry Bones, read at the Vigil of Pentecost, is plainly about the infusing of the breath of the living Spirit into the dead. Israel, the apostate nation, is dead and its people transported into exile. Its bones are bleached by the desert sun but God brings Israel back to life by re-assembling the skeleton, then clothing the bones with sinews, flesh, and skin. Finally the Spirit is breathed in, giving fresh life. So far, we have the kind of creation text that we find in the ancient Near East. What is new here is that the prophet, speaking the Word of the Lord, at the Lord's command, is the catalyst of change. It is God's miracle but it is brought about by the obedient response of the prophet. The miracle is an immense comfort: the people will know that God is the Lord, when he opens their graves, and raise them from their graves. The in-dwelling Spirit will bring life, and a sure place in the people's own land. That is how they will know that the Lord has spoken, and that he has done it. As we encounter this reading in our own times, we note the sovereignty of God: what he does is what he decides to do and not as a result of any particular response – still less any initiative – on our part. When we see the Church losing ground – as it is in the secular West, despite exponential growth in other parts of the world – we take comfort that all is in God's hands. Like the prophets, we must take the long view.

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

23rd August

Mt 16:13-20

**You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church,
and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.**

IF YOU VISIT Rome, you find emblazoned on St Peter's Basilica the phrase *Tu es Petrus et super hanc petram ædificabo ecclesiam meam*. 'You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church.'

Protestants believe that 'this rock' is not Peter himself – whose rock-like credentials fall into disrepute to the sound of the cockcrow during the Passion – but the rock of Peter's confession: 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'. Faith which is a House built on rock is Faith in Christ, the Son of the living God. Christ himself is the cornerstone. And with the Protestant explanation we notice that no sooner does Christ apparently confer on Peter – if not on all the apostles – the keys of the kingdom and the power of the keys than he is saying to Peter, 'Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.' We do well to notice the double hinge: 'on this rock' and 'you are a hindrance to me' are one pair; Peter's three-fold denial of Jesus at the Passion and his restoration by the Risen Christ is the other.

Recent popes have readily admitted that their office has been a stumbling block in the path towards Christian Unity. One of the tasks of *Ut unum sint* was to invite non-Roman Catholic churches and ecclesial communities to comment on how a reformed papacy might better serve the Church worldwide.

The problem with Peter – both the apostle, whose character is so vividly drawn in the New Testament, and so very many of the fallible and frail men, 'Saints and Sinners', as Eamon Duffy calls them, who have held and exercised the Petrine office throughout the ages – is that he is indeed both saint and sinner. All leaders – and not just popes – end up with extreme slogans attached to them demonic and saintly. There is a healthy parallelism, a good dialectic contained within this 'saint and sinner' swing. We find something of this in ourselves. It is there, as we have seen, not only in the Lord's affirmation of Simon bar-Jonah as 'the rock', as Peter, and his scolding of him, but also in Peter's denial – 'I do not know the man' – and his pastoral charge – 'Feed my sheep'.

Pope Emeritus Benedict summed up the theology beautifully and succinctly. This is what he says:

Throughout the history of the Church the Pope, the successor of Peter, has been at once *Petra* and *Skandalon* – both the rock of God and a stumbling block. The faithful will always have to reckon with this paradox of the divine dispensation that shames their pride again and again – this tension between the Rock and Satan, in which the most extreme opposites are so strangely interwoven.

(Joseph Ratzinger, *Das neue Volk Gottes*, pp. 80ff)

St Bartholomew

Monday 24th August

Jn 1:45-51

Philip said to Nathaniel 'Come and See'

AT THE beginning of a film, a play, or a book, the scriptwriter, playwright, or author has to establish easily and gradually the people in the story, who they are and how they relate to each other. So it is with the first chapter of the Fourth Gospel. These are the early days when the disciples are called to follow Jesus. Jesus is followed by two disciples of St John the Baptist, Andrew and the beloved disciple (whom we presume to be John). Andrew then recruits his brother Simon Peter. Then one of them – we can't be sure whether it was Andrew, Simon Peter, or Jesus himself because it just says 'he' – recruits Philip. Philip in turn recruits Nathanael (known elsewhere as Bartholomew). Each of these vocation stories involves some labelling: to begin with we have St John the Baptist calling Jesus 'the Lamb of God, God's Chosen One'. Andrew calls Jesus 'teacher and Messiah'. Jesus names Simon 'Cephas' (or 'rock', hence 'Peter'). Philip tells Nathanael that Jesus is the One of whom the Law and the Prophets wrote. Jesus calls Nathanael 'an Israelite in whom there is no guile' and tells him that he already knows who he is. Nathanael calls Jesus 'Rabbi' and 'Son of God' and 'King of Israel'. Finally Jesus himself recalls the story of Jacob's Ladder, saying that they will see heaven opened and angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. The key phrase in this passage – for the disciples' contemporaries and for us who come after – is Philip's invitation to Nathanael: 'Come and see'. The only way we can effectively further the mission of the Gospel is to seek out every opportunity to say to others, 'Come and see'. We cannot control whether they come or what they see and, as with the disciples, it is only by being around Jesus for a little time that followers become believers.

Tuesday (Week 21, Year II)

25th August

2 Thess 2:1-3, 14-17

MISSING yesterday's opening chapter of the Second Letter to the Thessalonians – because of the special readings for St Bartholomew's Day – we now find ourselves, in chapter 2, thinking about the *Parousia* – the Second Coming of Christ. Christians from the very beginning have looked for the Second Coming, at the End of Time, but our perspectives have changed as the years have passed. In the very early days, many people thought that it would happen within their life-time. St Paul himself in 1 Cor 15:6 talks about the Risen Christ

'appear[ing] to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.'

One of his aims, clearly, is to dampen down speculation, as he does in today's reading. Verses omitted from the reading make it clear that, without the miraculous apocalyptic signs that precede what Paul calls 'the day of the Lord', nothing will happen. In the meantime, we should 'stand firm and hold to the traditions...taught by word of mouth or letter'.

This is a message for every age because features of our own times, like so many that have gone before, have been interpreted over-excitedly as signs of the End. Faith means living as though the Kingdom might break in imminently but we should live with our hearts comforted 'and establish them in every good work and word'. There is a place for excitement in our Faith but most of the time, it is hard slog, and all the more rewarding for that. But the calm rhythm of our inner life should give us the quiet conviction that we have been chosen 'from the beginning to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.' Hearing and responding to the Gospel, the Good News, is the means whereby we obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Wednesday 26th August

(Blessed Dominic Barberi)

2 Thess 3:6-10, 16-18

Warning against Idleness

WE ARE now at the end of the Second Letter to the Thessalonians and we can hear St Paul continuing to calm down the excitement felt by many about the Coming of Christ, thought by them to be imminent. As we heard yesterday, the argument St Paul makes is that the End cannot come until the disturbing apocalyptic events have taken place. But here, in Thessalonica, it seems that some have abandoned hard work as pointless and decided to live a life of idleness as they wait around for the End to come. The stark command is 'If any one will not work, let him not eat' and St Paul reminds them that, when he was with them, he himself toiled night and day so as not to be a burden on them.

Before we leave this letter, we ponder the question of who wrote it. We cannot be certain that the writer is St Paul. The arguments for and against his authorship are finely balanced. But if it isn't St Paul writing, and we are reading something from later on in the first century, rather than mid-century, that too could make sense. Paul himself lived until the mid-60s. There is a reference in chapter 2:4, a verse missed out in yesterday's passage, to 'the temple of the Lord' and that probably rules out anything later than AD70, when the Jerusalem temple was destroyed. The argument that the necessary signs of the End Time had not yet come if the letter were written after the destruction of Jerusalem is implausible. AD70 was certainly the end of something. In short, I find the argument convincing that it was St Paul himself who wrote this Second Letter to the Thessalonians.

Thursday (Week 21, Year II)

27th August

1 Cor 1:1-9

THE OPENING verses of the First Letter of St Paul to the Corinthians are a conventional greeting to the Church there and to Sosthenes, whom we first encounter in Acts 18:17. He was the ruler of the synagogue who was beaten up, presumably for having supported St Paul in Corinth. Though today's reading is very much an introduction to the Letter, it mentions the Lord Jesus Christ no fewer than nine times in nine verses. There is also an allusion in verse 8 to how this Letter of sixteen chapters will end: it will be finally about 'the day of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

We already know, from the many mentions of the Lord, that a major theme in this Letter will be unity in Christ Jesus in place of factionalism. St Paul stresses that the Corinthian Christians have already received the grace of God, that they have been enriched in speech and knowledge, and not lacking in any spiritual gift. In other words, their incorporation into Christ – an important emphasis in the First Letter to the Corinthians – is complete. This will be the springboard for St Paul as he goes on to challenge people saying that they 'belong to Paul' or 'belong to Apollos' or 'to Cephas' or 'to Christ'. He will go on to make the point that Christ is not divided, that he, Paul, was not the one crucified for them, and that it was not in his name that people were baptised. In fact, beyond the household of Stephanus, Paul cannot recall having baptised any of them. He is setting his stall out to bring dissension in the Church to an end.

Friday 28th August (Week 21, Year II)

St Augustine

1 Cor 1:17-25

Christ the Power and Wisdom of God

THERE was clearly a realisation amongst the early Christians, many of whom were uneducated, that the Gospel was not getting through to many of the worldly wise. In one sense, this is how it should be. A religious system which discriminated in favour of the well-educated and against

those who are too simple to understand it would be élitist and unjust. Jesus himself memorably said 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to infants' (Mt 11:25). Some of Jesus' immediate companions were fishermen and probably not all that well-educated. The early preaching of St Peter and St Paul would confirm what was already known from the preaching of Jesus - that there was no obvious correlation between people's intelligence and their acceptance of the Gospel. So it was that St Paul came up with the concept of 'The Foolishness of God'. He quotes Is 29:14, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart', and talks of the Crucified Christ as 'a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles'. The Greek word Paul uses for 'stumbling block' is *skandalon*: the Cross is a *skandalon* for Jews because they seek signs. If the Cross is a sign, then it is surely a sign of failure. Meanwhile, Gentiles, informed by Greek philosophy are in pursuit of wisdom and, according to the wisdom of the world, the Cross absurd. It is folly, utter foolishness.

The force of this passage from St Paul, paradoxically, is that its imagery is both intelligent and powerful. The designs of God are, of course, way beyond any consideration of worldly reasoning and part of the secret of the success of the Gospel, as it has spread through the centuries and as it continues to spread, is that it is particularly Good News for the poor. At the same time, we need make no apology for the intellectual rigour of our faith: philosophy and theology, science and technology, art, music, and literature have all flourished because of men and women of faith.

OVERVIEW OF WEEK 22

MOST of this week we stay with the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians, which we began at the end of last week. Composed in 56-57 AD, the letter is definitely by St Paul himself, writing from Ephesus to a church including both Jews and Gentiles. A major theme in this Letter is to discover unity in Christ Jesus in place of factionalism. The early Christians, many of whom were uneducated, also wrestled with the difficulty of preaching to the sophisticated. St Paul came up with the concept of 'The Foolishness of God' and talks of the Crucified Christ as 'a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles'. Gentiles, informed by Greek philosophy are in pursuit of wisdom and, according to the wisdom of the world, the Cross is utter foolishness.

So much for the story so far. This week's passages continue to explore St Paul's missionary preaching whilst we encounter the extraordinary missionary figures of England. St Gregory the Great on Thursday 3rd September is celebrated as a feast day, with *Gloria* and special readings. We divert briefly from the First Letter to the Corinthians to the First Letter to the Thessalonians. Gregory, who sent St Augustine, is a towering figure, but the holiness and energy of the saints of our native land continue to inspire us. St Aidan, St Cuthbert, and the saints of Lindisfarne were living and preaching in a hostile climate and yet it is to them that we owe the establishing of the Faith in this country.

Monday 31st August (Week 22, Year II)

(St Aidan, Bishop, & All Saints of Lindisfarne)

1 Cor 2:1-5

Proclaiming Christ Crucified

ST PAUL spends more than three chapters dealing with the factionalism that exists in the Corinthian Church. Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter): there are groups claiming allegiance to each of these. It seems to be a matter of who evangelized whom, who baptized whom. We are talking about the different loyalties the different believers have as a result, though then, as now, most loyalties are trumped by referring directly to Christ, and

accordingly some said 'I belong to Christ'. In today's readings, St Paul is setting out his stall as someone speaking from a position of weakness and trembling. He is relying entirely on the Gospel of the Crucified Christ, on the power of God rather than on human wisdom. Contrasting human wisdom (rhetoric) with the power of God is, of course, itself a rhetorical device and, despite his protestation, St Paul is engaged in sophisticated debate. Moreover it is a strategy which always works: to speak from a position of humility and, having gained an audience, to speak then with authority and insight.

Tuesday (*Week 22, Year II*)

1st September

1 Cor 2:10-16

THE CONTRAST here is between the 'unspiritual man' and the 'spiritual man' but St Paul is at pains to point out that this is not about human activity but divine gift. The 'unspiritual man' does not discern spiritual gifts; they are beyond his understanding. The 'spiritual man' is equipped with spiritual gifts by the Spirit. One senses that St Paul is discriminating between the formal adherent who doesn't quite get it and the converted and committed Christian who has received the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit. It is the difference between those who think they know how it all works and those who have the mind of Christ. A point of reflection is that many, if not most, of us have a toe in both camps. At times we feel 'unspiritual' and are uncertain about spiritual gifts. At other times we feel 'spiritual' and feel equipped by the Spirit. This is where we must learn to rely more completely on the 'Giving Gift', as it has been called, God's Holy Spirit to which we seek to be open.

Wednesday (Week 22, Year II)

2nd September

1 Cor 3:1-9

On Divisions in the Corinthian Church

WE HAVE already reflected on the factional attitudes of the Corinthians, claiming allegiance to Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or Christ. St Paul here uses the analogy of the nursing mother – we find something similar in 1 Thess 2:7-8 and Gal 4:19. Elsewhere he is like a father (1 Cor 4:14-21; 1 Thess 2:11-12; Gal 4:19; Philem 10). Whether mother or father, he is nurturing and bringing up those who are infants in the Faith, fed with milk and not yet ready for solid food. Later we have a horticultural image, showing clearly that he, Paul, did the planting, Apollos did the watering, but it is God who gives the growth. St Paul is very specific about the condition in which they presently are. They are not 'spiritual men' but 'men of the flesh, and behaving like ordinary men'. This is based on a basic distinction between *Pneuma* and *Sarx*, technical terms with a Greek label. *Pneuma* is 'Spirit' as in 'Holy Spirit' and *Sarx* is 'Flesh' as in 'All Flesh is Grass'. 'Spirit' is eternal and immortal. 'Flesh' is animal and mortal. A generation ago, these terms were thought too specialist and hard to understand and the new Bible translations tended to find paraphrases, none of which were very clear or exact. The most helpful way through is to translate the text and then, where necessary, explain it. That said, it is not very hard to see that much in Creation – plants, trees, animals – is born, grows, decays, and dies, whereas God created us human beings to grow, and grow, and grow, and, though our bodies decay and die, our personalities – the human soul – live on for ever with God, if we accept his friendship.

St Gregory the Great

Thursday 3rd September

1 Thess 2:2-8

St Paul's Ministry in Thessalonica

THE FIRST Letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians is believed to be the earliest bit of Christian Scripture we have. It was written fewer than 20 years after the Resurrection and reveals that when Paul was in Philippi, at an earlier stage in his journey round Greece, they gave him a hard time. He seems in today's reading to be talking to Gentile converts in Thessalonica – those who 'turned to God from idols' 'serve a living and true God' (1 Thess. 1:9).

This much we learnt, earlier this year, on 27th May, as we celebrated the feast of St Augustine of Canterbury. Though, in the longer perspective, St Augustine was less successful than sometimes thought, he made considerable headway in Kent, and did his best to fulfil the commission of his master, St Gregory. The painstaking approach, of which St Paul speaks to the Thessalonians, is probably what lies behind not only St Paul's own missionary work but that of St Gregory and St Augustine.

There is much wisdom in this passage: courage is needed and lack of guile; there is no place in Christian preaching for flattery and greed; there must be gentleness and affection and a sense of sharing. The image of 'a nurse taking care of her children' is a very striking one, especially amidst the typically male-framed discourse of the time.

St Gregory walks tall, even amongst the best of those who have served as Pope. Whether it was governing his subjects, inspiring and caring for the clergy with his Pastoral Rule, re-ordering the liturgy, presiding over the music of the Church, he was outstanding. Such figures inspire in us what St Paul calls 'the hope to which God has called [us]' (Eph 1:18), 'Christ in [us], the hope of glory' (Col 1:27)

Friday 4th September

(St Cuthbert, Bishop)

1 Cor 4:1-5

The Ministry of the Apostles

WHEN ST PAUL says 'it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court' it sounds a little defensive. We have no indication that the Corinthians are being critical of St Paul. It is more that he is setting out what the ministry of Apostles is. The legal imagery – 'human court', 'judge', 'acquitted', 'judges' – is helpful as St Paul points ahead – here and as the Letter reaches its conclusion – to the Coming of the Lord, which will be a Day of Judgment. The Apostles are not just those who bind and loose in the name of the Lord. They are also 'stewards of the mysteries of God', a rich phrase, which in the life of the Church, has come to apply both to the sacraments and to the Gospel. The Apostles are custodians and guarantors of both. During the current pandemic, we have re-named the ushers at Mass in East Hendred 'stewards'. They are no longer simply welcoming people and available to help – though those important tasks remain. They are now the people who prepare and safeguard the congregational area and look to the safety of the congregation. If they are not exactly 'stewards of the mysteries of God', they are certainly the stewards of the place where the mysteries of God are proclaimed and celebrated.

Monday (Week 23, Year II)

7th September

1 Cor 5:1-8

Sexual Immorality

HAVING dealt with factions in the first four chapters of his Letter, St Paul now turns to problems of Christian behaviour amongst the Corinthians. He begins with sexual immorality and the case of a man who wishes to marry his step-mother, the widowed second wife of his father. Interestingly, marrying at this level of 'kindred and affinity' may seem plausible but it is forbidden by the Jewish Law (Lev 18:8; 20:11). Perhaps Gentile converts

were wrongly assuming new freedoms: we cannot be sure what Gentile society would make of this case but we do know that Paul is here enforcing a Jewish standard. Indeed he issues what we would now call an excommunication. He goes on to write using Passover imagery, casting out the old leaven and celebrating, as happens at the Passover, with unleavened bread. Not the leaven of malice and evil but the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. We can see from this that St Paul is not setting standards for the world around but dealing directly with the distinctive witness of the Christian community. In what would have been tomorrow's reading, had it not been a feast day, St Paul goes on to deal with how disputes are to be settled within the Church. Again, we see him regulating not the world around but the gathered community (1 Cor 6:1-11). He reminds them that people of immoral lives will not inherit the Kingdom of God and that the Corinthians themselves were once people whose lives were immortal but are now washed clean, sanctified, and justified, through the name of Jesus and through the Holy Spirit.

The Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Tuesday 8th September

Rom 8:28-30

Called according to his Purpose

WE KNOW nothing at all about the birth and early life of Mary, though there are a few legends. One of these gives us Saints Joachim and Anne as her parents. We do know that Mary will have had parents and that their role, bringing her up for her to accomplish her role, was second only to her role in being the Mother of God. It not only seems fitting to remember that Mary was herself prepared for her unique task but also to number her with that select number whose birth we celebrate, as well as their death. Unless we count Jesus himself, the select number is precisely two. The Birth of Our Lady is celebrated, though it is not recorded in Holy Scripture, and the birth of her St John the Baptist is also celebrated. A few years ago what we now call the Holy Family Room at East Hendred was the Chapel of Saints Joachim and Anne. It was when the room was refashioned as a meeting and teaching space that the renaming took place. In most churches dedicated to Our Lady St Mary, there is no 'Lady Chapel', so that there is

no duplication of dedication. That would have been the reason for the dedication to Mary's parents. Happily, this family space is now dedicated to the Holy Family, an all-embracing term.

Wednesday (*Week 23, Year II*)

9th September

1 Cor 7:25-31

The Unmarried and Widows

THE PERILS of looking only at extracts from Scripture include not only what is looked at out of context but also what is missed out and not looked at all. We should note today that, before the First Reading begins, Paul has given us a couple of dozen verses about marriage, including what are referred to as 'conjugal rights' (7:3). However, there is a basic equality: the wife does not rule over her own body but nor does the husband rule over his (7:4). St Paul thinks it is as well for the unmarried and widows to remain single, as he has, but 'better to marry than to be aflame with passion' (7:8). We have the so-called 'Pauline Privilege' with regard to divorce: if an unbeliever leaves his wife, then she is free to find someone else (7:15).

After a few verses about circumcision and slavery, we come to today's First Reading. Here what St Paul has to say is self-explanatory but what is notable is the apocalyptic perspective. 'The appointed time has grown very short' (7:29) and 'the form of this world is passing away' (7:31). All that St Paul is teaching us about our state of life has to be seen to have been written from the perspective of the approaching 'End-Time'. St Paul is urging us to live holy lives, and, because time is short, to remain contentedly within our present condition. This teaching obviously has limited application from the very different perspective of two thousand years later, and yet the teaching of Jesus is that we should live and work as if the End is at hand. What is more, those who live the single life, as priests and religious or consecrated lay folk, are particularly called to a radical Kingdom life-style.

Thursday (Week 23, Year II)

10th September

1 Cor 8:1-7, 11-13

Food offered to Idols

ANIMALS sacrificed to pagan gods were often sold as meat in the market. Could Christians buy such meat? St Paul allows it so long as scandal is avoided. Again, we see St Paul regulating the conduct of a Christian community rather than making prescription for the ordering of society. Amongst the Christians there would be those for whom eating meat once used in the worship of pagan temples would be troubling, or who might be led by such food to pay improper attention to pagan beliefs and ways. So, the practical solution is not to avoid what might be cheap and wholesome food, helpful to the Christian poor, but to make sure everyone understands what they are and are not doing. In many ways, this is a subject remote from our culture but not entirely so. Take, for instance, the example of meat slaughtered after the prayers of another religion. If we follow what St Paul said to the Corinthians, this food remains wholesome, whatever one thinks of the prayers, but we should be vigilant about others' consciences, those who may disagree with us.

Friday (Week 23, Year II)

11th September

1 Cor 9:16-19, 22-27

'All things to All Men'

THE PHRASE 'All things to all men' has entered our language. Usually it means adaptability – the ability to work with different people in different circumstances – rather than fickleness or unreliability. Certainly St Paul meant it in the first sense, an ability to communicate with very different people in very different circumstances. Earlier in the chapter – not in the passage we are thinking about – he gave an impassioned defence of his right to speak as an apostle: 'Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?' (9:1). He obviously feels under attack because he says: 'If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you

are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord' (9:2). St Paul's vulnerability is that, having come late to things, seeing the Risen Lord in a vision on the Damascus Road, rather than in his resurrected body, and not being one of 'the Twelve', he is clearly an apostle – a witness to the Resurrection – in a slightly different way. Hence the defensiveness. He has to protest that he has made himself the slave of all, that he is weak when people need him to be. In fact he is whatever people need him to be: 'All things to all men.' At the end of the passage come the athletic metaphors: running to win the prize, boxing without pommelling the air. This is a fitness contest and what counts is spiritual fitness. The aim is to win a wreath, the prize of a champion athlete, but a wreath that does not wither and fade.

OVERVIEW OF WEEK 24

FOR FOUR days this week we are able to stay with the First Letter to the Corinthians, a high-point of Pauline theology. On Monday there is an important feast of the Lord, Holy Cross Day, which has its own readings. It does mean, as we shall see, that we do not encounter St Paul on the Eucharist – which would have happened otherwise on Monday – and we do not quite get all the links St Paul makes – the gathering of believers in Corinth, the gathering which is fed eucharistically on the Body of Christ, the gathering whose members become the Body of Christ. To see where St Paul takes all this we would need the Saturday reading – which we do not normally include in our anthology. For convenience' sake, we include Saturday's reading, the first part of which is largely self-explanatory. The second part – about the first man, Adam, and the last Adam, Christ – is more technical, and reflection on that must be on another occasion.

The Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Monday 14th September

Num 21:4-9

The Bronze Serpent

TODAY'S reading, from the Book of Numbers is an ancient and rather primitive tale. During the nomadic journey from Egypt, the Israelites experienced discomfort and at various times drought, famine, and pestilence. These incidents are often interpreted as punishments from God, or at least opportunities to deepen faith and trust. The incident of the Bronze Serpent is the last of the 'grumbling' occasions. We're on the last lap – the journey from the Red Sea, then going round Edom to get to the Promised Land. The people grumble about the food – people do – and are punished with a plague of snakes. The snakes are 'seraph serpents' – 'seraph' meaning 'burning'. We find *seraphim* in Isaiah 14:29 and 30:6 as well as, famously, in Isaiah's vision (Isaiah 6:2, 6), where they cry out the *Sanctus* ('Holy, holy, holy') that we use at Mass. Associated with these serpents is the burning coal to cleanse the prophet's lips. They are winged and can fly and may be related to the hooded cobra, venerated in Egypt and part of the Pharaoh's headdress. God instructs Moses to deal with this outbreak with a form of magical healing: mounting a bronze serpent on a pole. Those who look at it will escape death and the deadly seraph becomes an instrument of healing. We can find references to this ambiguous animal elsewhere in the Old Testament. The snake in Genesis 3 is a symbol of the devil (see Wis 2:24). Moses' own staff was turned into a serpent (Ex 4:3; 7:15). In Hezekiah's reforms in the eighth century BC (2 Kings 18:4), a bronze serpent is removed from the Temple, because it had become a symbol of idolatry. Our instinctive response – with Hezekiah – is to see the Bronze Serpent as an idol, surely no different from the Golden Calf, which brought disaster upon the people (Ex 32). There are two important differences, however. First, the Bronze Serpent is God's remedy for the plague and not the people rebelling against God and his commandments. Second, the Bronze Serpent is mentioned by Jesus (Jn 3:14-15) as a pre-figuring, a foreshadowing, of the salvation brought about by the Holy Cross. Jesus is lifted up and nailed to a cross much as Moses sets a bronze serpent on a pole.

Tuesday 15th September *(Week 24, Year II)*

Our Lady of Sorrows

1 Cor 12:12-14, 27-31

One Body with many Members

'THE BODY' is probably the key idea in the First Letter to the Corinthians. We were not able to look at the Eucharistic teaching in Chapter 11 because the special readings for Holy Cross Day took precedence yesterday, but the relevance of 'Body' to the Eucharist is plain. In today's reading, from Chapter 12, we encounter the metaphor of the human 'Body' as a description of 'the Church, the association of those who share Baptism and share in the Holy Spirit. It is such a good image that it has been taken over by the world at large. We talk about 'governing bodies', 'regulatory bodies'. Firms are 'corporate' (have bodily form), are 'incorporated', and are called 'corporations'. What remains unique about the Pauline concept of 'the Body of Christ' is that it is fed and sustained by 'the Body of Christ', the sacrament of Holy Communion. Also distinguishing 'the Body of Christ' from most other bodies is the notion, omitted from today's passage, that all members (and 'member', of course, is a bodily term) are of utmost importance. The foot cannot do without the hand (12:15), and so on, to the extent that, in St Paul's image, 'our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty' (12:23).

Harder to deal with is the list of charisms in the Corinthian Church: apostles, prophets, teachers, workers of miracles, healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. It is tempting to form these into a pattern of ministry – like the fully developed Holy Orders of bishops, priests, and deacons – but this probably would be a mistake. Some of these tasks identify particular roles ('apostle', for example). Others might simply characterise gifts: no one is ordained to be an administrator. The underlying message is that a variety of gifts is needed to sustain the life of 'the Body' and no one within the organism is unimportant, however lowly their function apparently is.

Wednesday (Week 24, Year II)

16th September

1 Cor 12:31-13:13

The Gift of Love

THE THREE theological virtues – Faith, Hope, and Charity – are extolled by St Paul but the greatest of these is Charity. Surely the most famous passage in St Paul's writings is the hymn to Love, 1 Corinthians 13. This passage is very often the 'go to' reading at weddings and funerals, not just because of the primacy of love amongst the virtues, but because the sentiments in this hymn are expressed so beautifully. Yet we need to be careful of the word 'love'. Greek, like English, has more than one word for 'love'. An older word in English is 'charity' but a phrase like 'as cold as charity' points to a certain dutifulness about 'charity', which may not involve warm feelings. If we think of two Greek words – *eros* and *agape* – we can make some valuable distinctions. *Eros* would describe what lovers feel at the garden gate. *Agape* would describe the love a parent has for a child or the kind of deep friendship which is usually referred to as 'Platonic love'. In short, 'love' in 1 Corinthians is not hearts and flowers but the sacrificial commitment of two people to one another and the covenant of love between God and Man. There is no doubt that the love of God, shown by his gift to us of Christ his only-begotten Son, reveals new depths of love – depths which can never be plumbed – but that love is partly unveiled for us in the Old Testament. Think of passages like Hosea 11:1: 'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.' The God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is a God of Love.

Thursday (Week 24, Year II)

17th September

1 Cor 15:1-11

The Resurrection of Christ

IT WAS nearly a week ago – when we were looking at 1 Corinthians 9 – that we thought about St Paul's unique calling to be an apostle. He was a witness of the Risen Christ – an essential part of being an apostle – and yet the Lord whom he witnessed was the Risen and Ascended Lord, revealing himself not in his resurrection body but in a vision on the Damascus Road. In a sense, St Paul is a 'second class apostle', therefore, and he certainly felt that rather keenly. Hence his manifesto in today's reading. Tradition means 'handing on' or 'receiving' and so St Paul tells us what was handed on to him. We then have testimony to a series of appearances – to Peter, to the Twelve (including, presumably, Matthias in place of Judas Iscariot), to five hundred brethren, to James and all the apostles – and then (better late than never) to Paul, who calls himself 'the least of the apostles'. His reference 'as to one untimely born' acknowledges something of the problem of timing but his feeling that he is 'the least of the apostles' is not so much that but the continuing regret that, before his conversion, he persecuted the Church and was instrumental in some being imprisoned or worse. As Paul gives an account of the tradition received, he calls this 'the Gospel which [the Corinthians] received, in which [they] stand, by which [they] are saved'. The passage is useful to us, two thousand years later, precisely because it is the Gospel we too have received, the Gospel in which we stand, and the Gospel by which we are saved. We learn from the very beginning of Christian Mission the importance of tradition – what is received and what is handed on – and we are reminded that it is our urgent task to not only receive the Gospel but to hand it on to our family and friends. It is not our job to convince anyone of anything – as St Paul says elsewhere, it is 'neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth' (1 Cor 3:7).

Friday (Week 24, Year II)

18th September

1 Cor 15:12-20

The Resurrection of the Dead

1 CORINTHIANS 15 is a lengthy and systematic demonstration of the power of the Gospel and in some 58 verses sets out the Christian hope in the resurrection. Clearly some of the Corinthians did not believe in the Resurrection of Christ. They may have believed in some sort of resuscitation of Jesus but not the resurrection. But, says Paul, if Christ is not raised, nor can the dead be raised. And if the dead cannot be raised, then Christ has not been raised. The Gospel rests on the basic fact of the resurrection of Christ, without which faith is futile, and those who have died are well and truly dead. If the Gospel hope were for this life only, then that would be a waste of time and those who devote themselves to the Faith are more to be pitied than anyone else.

Saturday (Week 24, Year II)

19th September

1 Cor 15:35-37, 42-49

The Resurrection Body

³⁵ But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' ³⁶ You foolish man! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷ And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. [³⁸ But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. ³⁹ For not all flesh is alike, but there is one kind for men, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. ⁴⁰ There are celestial bodies and there are terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. ⁴¹ There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.]

⁴² So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³ It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. ⁴⁴ It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a

spiritual body. ⁴⁵ Thus it is written, 'The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. ⁴⁶ But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual. ⁴⁷ The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. ⁴⁸ As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. ⁴⁹ Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

St Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist

Monday 21st September

Matthew 9:9-13

The Call of Matthew

THE CALL of Matthew in St Matthew's Gospel is set in an interlude between the second and third of three cycles of miracle stories. And it is St Matthew's Gospel that tells us that the name of the tax collector is 'Matthew'. The tax collector in the parallel accounts in Mark and Luke call him 'Levi'. In the tradition it has always been assumed that 'Matthew' and 'Levi' are one and the same person. It is also assumed, particularly in modern scholarship, that the ascription of the first Gospel to 'Saint Matthew' in the second century was possibly a way of securing apostolic authorship for what was written anonymously, however much by or at the behest of an apostle. The Gospel itself is heavily dependent on the Hebrew tradition. Called 'the Gospel for the Jews', from its authorship it is then assumed that Matthew began his apostolic work in the Holy Land.

The story of the Call of Matthew serves to illustrate Jesus' teaching that his mission is as a physician to sinners and not as a comfortable presence for the self-satisfied. The quotation, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice', is from Hosea 6:6, and, by inserting it into the incident as described by Mark, Matthew's Gospel emphasises that Jesus identifies with the tradition that justice is more important than religious ritual. We shall hear something similar tomorrow's reading from the Book of Proverbs. The remark is addressed to the Pharisees who refer to Jesus as a teacher but are puzzled that he associates himself with tax collectors – those who make their living out of extortion – and sinners – those who make their living out of immoral earnings.

Tuesday (*Week 25, Year II*)

22nd September

Proverbs 21:1-6, 10-13

Various Proverbs

THE BOOK of Proverbs gives us wisdom - practical, psychological, spiritual – enhancing the quality of life and contrasting behaving justly with doing evil. The Proverbs are wise sayings rather than simple catch phrases ('He who closes his ear to the cry of the poor will...not be heard' has more moral content than such simple catch phrases as 'a stitch in time saves nine' or 'too many cooks spoil the broth'. There are many sections in the Book of Proverbs, all of which come under the general heading 'The Proverbs of Solomon'. King Solomon (961-922BC), being famously wise, gathered round him clever and educated people, a group referred to by one scholar as 'King's College, Jerusalem', which gives us an idea of the intellectual ferment of the Wisdom tradition. In today's passage we have the familiar emphasis of the more sophisticated view that 'righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice'. That would not have been a view unchallenged by the Temple priesthood. Presiding over society is a king whose good heart is a stream in the hand of the LORD who can turn it wherever he wills. It is some hand that can contain water flowing in different directions. Here again, I think we are hearing a moral point of view rather than a bit of social history.

Wednesday (Week 25, Year II)

23rd September

Proverbs 30:5-9

*Give me neither poverty nor riches;
feed me with the food that is needful for me*

'THE WORDS of Agur' is a collection of sayings designated as an 'oracle' which, in today's verses, seek to strike a proper attitude in our approach to God. The approach is one of dependency and trust, confident that the Word of the Lord needs nothing added to it. Agur is identified as a Massaite – a member of one of the Northern Arabian tribes – and so, interestingly, gathered in this Hebrew literature, amongst Hebrew sayings, are the sayings of an outsider, one who we see is oriented towards God. In fact, verses 7-9, the second part of today's reading, are the only example of a prayer in the Book of Proverbs.

The Book of Proverbs, as a whole, presents us with an ongoing search for a life that is both abundant and fruitful. Human experience is viewed alongside the presence and activity of God in a way of which St John Henry Newman would appreciate. In *The Idea of a University* he has this to say:

'We attain to heaven by using this world well, though it is to pass away; we perfect our nature, not by undoing it, but by adding to it what is more than nature and directing it towards aims higher than its own.'

Our Lady of Walsingham (Week 25, Year II)

Thursday 24th September

Eccles 1:2-11

All is vanity! There is nothing new under the sun

THE SPEAKER is Qoheleth, a name which does not otherwise occur in the Bible. It means 'gathered' and the word 'Ecclesiastes', from the Greek, suggests gathering. The participle in Hebrew, from which Qoheleth comes, is feminine, but we are told that he is 'David's son... king in Jerusalem' – apparently King Solomon, he of the wise proverbs. It is clear from the style

of the Hebrew that this is not Solomon's work but something from half a millennium or more later. But to ascribe things to Solomon is to file them under 'wisdom'. The key word, not only in today's passage, but in the whole book of Ecclesiastes is 'vanity', which happens 38 times. The argument is not nihilism or pessimism. We may be defeated by the timing of things, but we can learn to live in the present. We are reminded of Jesus' words in Matthew 6:34:

**Take therefore no thought for the morrow:
for the morrow shall take thought for the things of
itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.**

The message of Qoheleth is that God is in charge. We cannot understand God. Therefore, we must simply fear God and trust in his ways. The view of God is not the personal one, where God has a name, too awesome to speak out loud. God here is *Elohim*, a more impersonal, generic name. Nothing new will ever happen and everything disappears without trace. We are left in need of the Gospel.

Friday (*Week 25, Year II*)

25th September

Eccles 3:1-11

Everything has its time

THE OPENING of the third chapter of Ecclesiastes is one of the most beautiful passages in the Old Testament, one to which people often resort as they celebrate the rites of passage. In fact, like the 'vanity of vanities' passage, read yesterday, it is about us not being in charge. We are presented with a whole series of circumstances, some of which we delight in, others in which we are far from comfortable, but in few of which we have complete control. Some of the 'business that God has given [us] to be busy with' can become ends in themselves and it is only the antithesis – 'a time to mourn and a time to dance' – that keeps things in proportion and allows us to move on. Human wisdom does not allow us to know in advance who will succeed and who will fail. God 'has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.' Eternity gives us the perspective. Meanwhile, if everything is beautiful in its time, we need to enjoy life in the present, the very same message as we heard yesterday, in a second striking piece of poetry.

Monday (Week 26, Year II)

28th September

Job 1:6-22

The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD

OUR RECENT extracts from the Book Ecclesiastes and the Book of Proverbs should have whetted our appetite for enquiring further into the Jewish Wisdom tradition and for this week's encounter with the Book of Job. This is a book, it is generally agreed, that brings together material from various sources, poetry and prose, and gives us an age-old story of the righteous man who suffers disaster and ruin. A persistent theme in Judaism – and in any human life reflectively lived – is why bad things happen to good people. In recent times it has been asked particularly poignantly about the Jewish Holocaust eighty years ago but it is raised whenever grave misfortune strikes. The mystery of suffering causes theologians to wrestle with *Theodicy* – why, whether, and how we can reconcile the problem of evil with the notion of a benign Providence, a loving God who answers our prayers. There is a story from the Concentration Camps of rabbis discussing whether, in the face of such evil, it was possible to believe in God. At the darkest point in the discussion one of them reminded the others that it was time to break off for Evening Prayers. In the end we have to trust amidst doubt. One reason, of course, is that if the Problem of Evil is massively difficult, so is the Problem of Good. Why is it that, in this perplexing world, there is so much decency, honesty, kindness, and unselfish love?

The Holy Archangels, Michael, Gabriel, & Raphael

Tuesday 29nd September

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

Judgment before the Ancient One

THERE are three archangels named in the Bible – Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael – and they have a ministering function in the world as messengers of God. St Michael, whose name means ‘Who is like God?’, is the captain of the heavenly army of angels who triumphs over Satan rather spectacularly in the Apocalypse. He protects the Church, and gives protection to the sick and dying. Today’s feast of Michaelmas derives from the dedication of a basilica in Rome to the name of St Michael. St Gabriel – the name means ‘Strength of God’ – is familiar to us from the Nativity Stories. He plays an important role in the birth of St John the Baptist and at the Annunciation of the Lord to Our Lady in Nazareth. St Raphael – the name means ‘God heals’ – makes an appearance in the Book of Tobit and is often thought to be the angel at the sheep pool, an incident described in John 5:2-4. Not all manuscripts have this passage in full, so it is worth hearing what is said:

Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Hebrew called Bethesda, which has five porticoes. In these lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame, paralyzed waiting for the moving of the water; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and troubled the water: whoever stepped in first after the troubling of the water was healed of whatever disease he had.

Of the three archangels – and there must be many more whose existence we do not know about – St Raphael is the least known. Yet his role – bringing divine healing – is of an importance unsurpassed. Today’s feast encompasses angels in general: the mediaeval description of Michaelmas, surviving in the dedication of many mediaeval churches and still used in the Church of England to describe the feast – is ‘St Michael and All Angels’. That at least reminds us that there is a whole order of existence out of sight and beyond our comprehension.

Wednesday 30th September (Week 26, Year II)

St Jerome

Job 9:1-12, 14-16

WHEN we hear the beautiful language of the Bible – none more beautiful than some of the passages in the Book of Job – we are reminded of the tremendous debt we owe to St Jerome (c342-420), the saint from Dalmatia (what we nowadays call Croatia) who translated the Bible. He was baptised and studied in Rome and, for a time, was secretary to Pope Damasus. The Pope asked him to revise the Latin version of the Bible and St Jerome went to live in a cave in Bethlehem to concentrate on his task. He also wrote Scripture commentaries and theology.

There can be no better way of honouring Jerome than to trace the history of the Bible in translation. His version of the Bible was called the Vulgate – Vulgate because it means ‘common’ and Latin was then the ‘common tongue’. It was revised twelve centuries later – the Clementine Vulgate was issued in 1592 – and then, four hundred years later, in 1979, the *Nova Vulgata* was issued. This is massive continuity, with minimum disruption, and reminds us of the somewhat similar continuity of the English Bible tradition, with the Coverdale Bible of 1535 lightly revised as the King James Version in 1611, and then appearing in regular updates from the end of the nineteenth century until our own day. Such was the trajectory of the Protestant Bible: Catholics had their own version, similar to King James, in the Douay-Rheims. Its New Testament appeared in 1582 and the whole Bible in various revisions in the 18th century.

The version of the English Bible which gained most prominence was the Revised Standard Version (RSV). Produced in 1952 by Protestant scholars, it was lightly revised in 1971 and gained acceptance by Catholics in the Common Bible of 1973. Since then it has emerged in Catholic editions, the second in 2006, which we use in Hendred Catholic Parish. The RSV was not the last word: the New Revised Version, using inclusive language, came out in 1989 and, rejecting some of the inevitable compromises in that process, the English Standard Version (ESV) was produced in 2001. There is much talk of the ESV becoming the new version for English-speaking Catholics. Like the RSV 2nd Catholic Edition, it addresses God as ‘you’ but manages to lose some other archaisms, such as the frequent use of ‘Behold’. What we have said here in honour of St Jerome is far from complete. We have made no mention of the many ‘dynamic equivalence’ translations, notably the Jerusalem Bible, which has been – and remains –

the version used in most Catholic parishes in Britain. The Jerusalem Bible is brilliant but is off-centre as far as the English Bible tradition is concerned. We have also not been able to do justice in this short reflection to the massive influence of the New English Bible (1970) and its update Revised English Bible (1989). Neither became integral to Catholic worship and both were overshadowed in the Anglican rite by the various recensions of the Revised Standard Version. We remain greatly indebted to Pope Damasus and his sometime secretary Hieronymus, whom we know better as Jerome.

Thursday 1st October

St Thérèse of the Child Jesus

Matthew 18:1-5

True Greatness

THE FIRST five verses of today's Gospel, somewhat unusually, is set for two consecutive feasts. Today we have verses 1-5 of Matthew 18 for St Thérèse. Tomorrow, we have the same five verses but with the addition of verse 10. There could be no more appropriate addition for Holy Guardian Angels:

See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.

St Thérèse discovered the heart of the Gospel. In her Autobiography she expresses her joy when she realised that the key to her vocation was not in any of the specific vocations of the members of the Body of Christ – or perhaps it was in all of them. Reading the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, she found perfect peace in Love. 'Love', she said 'is the vocation which includes all others'. Besides herself with joy, she found herself crying out 'Jesus, my love! I've found my vocation and my vocation is love.' She had the simple faith of a child, which is what the Lord asks from all of us.

Friday 2nd October (Week 26, Year II)

Holy Guardian Angels

Job 38:1, 12-21, 40:3-5

The LORD answers Job

THROUGHOUT the long speeches of Elihu, a character who appears out of nowhere in Job 32, and interrogates Job and his friends for several chapters, God is referred to as El Shaddai, the Almighty. He is transcendent, beyond manipulation, the omnipotent Creator, unaccountable, and making himself known through nature. Rain is God providing food through nature. Storms are expressions of divine displeasure. These speeches, contrasting with the discussions Job and his friends – ‘Job’s Comforters’ – have earlier in the book, prepare us for God’s speeches, which begin in chapter 38, some of which we have in today’s first reading. By now God is called by his Hebrew name, which must not be uttered aloud, and referred to by the title ‘the LORD’. God’s address to Job says to him essentially that all of this – light and dark, times and seasons, life and death – is way beyond Job’s understanding. Out of his league. Not surprisingly Job is massively humbled. ‘Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you?’. Today’s passage is just the beginning. The speeches made in the storm take us from chapter 38 to the beginning of chapter 42. The lesson of Job is quite simply that Almighty God and his ways are beyond our comprehension.

Monday (Week 27, Year II)

5th October

Galatians 1:6-12

There is no other Gospel

ST PAUL begins his letter to the Churches in Galatia somewhat directly. It follows the conventional form of greeting, found not only in his other correspondence but elsewhere in the ancient world. He is concerned to establish the divine mandate for his apostleship and what salvation in Christ really entails :

Paul an apostle not from men nor through man, but through

Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—² and all the brethren who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: ³ Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father; ⁵ to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

He is addressing the churches in Galatia, but not, as in other epistles, the faithful Christians of the local Church. As today's first reading tells us, foremost in St Paul's mind is the way the local churches have deserted their calling and embraced a different gospel. There is only one Gospel and it follows from that that those who embrace a different gospel are actually forsaking the Gospel. We shall hear more about this during the rest of the week.

Tuesday (*Week 27, Year II*)

6th October

Galatians 1:13-24

God reveals his Son to St Paul

THE GOSPEL that St Paul received was not received from man, nor learnt from a teacher. It came through a revelation of Jesus Christ. That was how yesterday's reading from the Letter to the Galatians finished. In today's reading St Paul gives us an account of how he became an apostle, how he got to know St Peter – but none of the other apostles apart from St James, brother of the Lord – and how he was known by repute, rather than first-hand, by the churches in Judæa. He makes an oath – 'before God, I do not lie!' – to the effect that the Gospel he is proclaiming is the God-given Gospel rather than a second-hand version of what he had heard or learnt from the churches in Judæa. The importance of this is what he is going to go on to say which is that, despite his grounding in Judaism, the Gospel he is preaching to the Gentiles is not based on the Jewish Law, the Torah.

Wednesday 7th October (Week 27, Year II)

Our Lady of the Rosary

Galatians 2:1-2, 7-14

Paul and the Other Apostles: Paul rebukes Peter

WE ENCOUNTER something of St Paul's spirituality in today's reading. He is led by a revelation – which probably means here from the kind of reflection that takes place during prayer and worship, rather than a vision. The revelation encourages him to go to Jerusalem and state his case – his mission to the Uncircumcised, that is, the Gentiles. He consults them discreetly – privately before those of repute – and gains from them support and encouragement. In this mission – which is fourteen years later, so after a considerable period of apostolic activity – he is supported by Barnabas, and the pair of them are accompanied by Titus, in some sense a subordinate. Interestingly, St Paul is warned to attend to the needs of the poor – was there a danger of him engaging only with the well-to-do? – and he makes the point that he is eager to do this. It may be that 'the poor' were the little ones of the flock – those with a special relationship with God – or indeed the Church in Jerusalem for whom the churches of the dispersion supported regularly. Interestingly, in this passage, we can see how an agreement that the Gospel should be proclaimed to the Gentiles did not lead to a conversion of hearts and minds among Jewish Christians. Paul tackles Peter for a mixture of insincerity and timidity. Peter in Antioch is clearly afraid of the 'circumcision party' and draws back from eating with Gentile Christians. There was obviously a big fault-line in the Early Church between those who saw the Christian movement as essentially Jewish and those who glimpsed its universal mission. We see this clearly in the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15).

Thursday (Week 27, Year II)

8th October

Galatians 3:1-5

Law or Faith

FOOLISH was how the Risen Lord described the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:25) and it is how St Paul describes the Galatians who

have muddled up the works of the Law with the life of faith. It is very easy to caricature 'works of the Law' and confuse it with a narrow legalism. The Jewish culture was and is not based on a narrow legalism but on the notion that the righteous person is one who keeps the commandments. In that way he or she accords with what God wants of us and we can be judged by how well we manage to keep the commandments. St Paul, speaking of faith, sees the Gospel very differently. It is, as he said in the opening verses of the Letter, faith in the One 'who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father'. The shift from performing righteous deeds – keeping the rules – to living by faith is fundamental. We cannot pull ourselves up by our bootstraps but we can be carried along by the gracious and saving help of God.

St John Henry Newman (*Week 27, Year II*)

Friday 9th October

Galatians 3:7-14

The Gentiles receive the promise through Faith

THROUGHOUT this week we have been looking at the letter to the Galatians. Today we have a more technical argument: the curses in the Book of Deuteronomy (27:26) apply to everyone who cannot manage to keep the 613 commandments of the Law of Moses. The One who frees us from this curse – and from the slavish attempt to obey lots of rules – is the One who, by hanging on a tree, is Himself cursed by God (21:23). By taking on that curse, God in Christ redeems us from bondage to the Law. Clearly St Paul wants us to look beyond the commandments of the Law. If we are 'men of faith', we are sons of Abraham: Abraham heard the Gospel before the Law was given. By saying 'In [Abraham] shall all the nations be blessed, those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith.' In other words the nations – the Gentiles – and not just the Jews are children of Abraham and heirs of God's promises 'who receive the promise of the Spirit through faith'. We shall be looking at all this further in the coming week.

Monday (*Week 28, Year II*)

12th October

Galatians 4:22-24, 26-27, 31-5:1

There is no other Gospel

IN A puzzling passage, St Paul – who argued in an earlier chapter that the Galatians are, in Christ, descendants of Abraham, now introduces us to the two women from whom descendants of Abraham can be traced. One is his wife, Sarah, and the other is his maid-servant, Hagar, with whom the apparently barren Sarah encouraged her husband to have sexual relations. In the end Sarah produced Isaac, and Hagar, Ishmael. From this we get two different covenants: the covenant at Sinai where the Jewish Law was given and a second, unspecified covenant. The first covenant is about keeping commandments and derives from Abraham's union with the slave-girl Hagar but the second is about freedom and derives from Abraham's union with the free woman, Sarah. In a verse omitted from the reading, we learn that Mount Sinai in Arabia corresponds to the earthly Jerusalem, and bondage, whereas 'the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother' (verse 26). This is somewhat different from the viewpoint of the Jewish Christians in Galatia, against whom Paul is arguing. They would equate Hagar and her son Ishmael with the Gentiles, and Sarah and her son Isaac with those agitating that new Christians should keep the Jewish Law. St Paul, by contrast, links Hagar and Ishmael to Sinai, the earthly Jerusalem, slavery, and the Jewish Christians with their wrong-headed approach. He links Sarah and Isaac with the Galatians and all Christians who are free of the Torah with all its commandments.

We are heading for a discussion about 'Law' and 'Spirit', a set of constraints and the experience of freedom, but, for now, we note that the heavenly Jerusalem is our mother. It is this passage, in fact, which gave us Mothering Sunday and the tradition of domestic servants being freed to go home and see their mothers, a brief opportunity for rest and refreshment mid-Lent.

Tuesday 13th October (Week 28, Year II)

(St Edward the Confessor)

Galatians 5:1-6

The Nature of Christian Freedom

CHRIST has set us – you, me, and the Galatian Christians – free. This first verse of chapter 5 can be seen as a conclusion to yesterday's discussion of, on the one hand, Hagar, Ishmael, Sinai, and the earthly Jerusalem, and, on the other, Sarah, Isaac, freedom, and the Jerusalem which is above. The remaining verses of today's first reading spell out the consequences of bondage to the Torah, the Jewish Law, with its many commandments. That bondage is expressed by accepting male initiation by circumcision, which marks the covenant with God in much the same way as male and female initiation by baptism marks our incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church. St Paul establishes that, as he sees it, bondage to the Law is a severing with Christ: we should rely on grace – that is God's saving help and the gifts of the Spirit. It is through the Spirit, by faith, that Christ makes us one with him.

Wednesday (Week 28, Year II)

14th October

Galatians 5:18-25

The Works of the Flesh and the Fruit of the Spirit

'FLESH' in today's first reading, like 'Spirit', is a technical term. Broadly, we are offered a choice between living the life of an animal – being born, growing, gratifying out desires, decaying, and dying – or entering into the divine life, where there is new birth and, with constant growth, the purging of our frailties, and transition to eternal life with God, in his nearer presence. St Paul paints a picture of the life of the flesh with a long list of bad behaviour. He then gives us the contrary picture: the nine 'fruits of the Spirit'. There is no cheap grace: it is not a question of have faith and do what you like. We can expect the experience of the crucifixion of the flesh with its passions and desires to be demanding and painful and, clearly,

walking by the Spirit also requires of us considerable effort. The key point is that we cannot succeed with our own efforts and in our own strength.

Thursday (*Week 28, Year II*)

15th October

St Teresa of Jesus, Virgin and Doctor of the Church

Ephesians 1:1-10

Spiritual Blessings in Christ

ST PAUL, writing to 'the saints', might here be addressing various churches and communities, and not just the church in Ephesus. Whether this letter is authentically by St Paul is sometimes questioned and Ephesians is accordingly set amongst the 'deutero-Pauline' letters. Yet, like the Letter to the Romans, and unlike other epistles, there is no mention of co-workers. Having established his authority, St Paul launches into the longest sentence in the New Testament, a sentence which takes us from verse 3 to verse 14 of the first chapter, that is, it finishes four verses after the end of our reading. The English translation breaks up the sentence but we still have essentially one thought: the way God has blessed us in Christ. We are part of God's foreordained plan, destined to be his sons – and, whether we are male or female, it is 'sons' because it is sons who inherit. St Paul uses the word 'grace' more than once: God lavishes on us the riches of his grace and that is the way we become 'holy and blameless'. The passage reads like a *berakah*, the form of Jewish blessing that we know best from the prayers at Mass over the bread and wine. 'Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation....' The words here are certainly poetic, with beautifully crafted imagery, and it may be that what we have at the beginning of Ephesians is a liturgical or catechetical extract, words used in the worship of the New Testament Church or in its teaching.

Friday 16th October *(Week 28, Year II)*

(St Margaret Mary Alacoque, Religious)

Ephesians 1:11-14

Stamped with the Seal of the Holy Spirit

THROUGHOUT Christian history, there has been a debate about what is usually called 'Predestination'. Do I get to belong to Christ, and to the Church, because I have chosen to or because God has chosen me for this. And, if God has chosen me, do I have any choice? And, if I don't have any choice, in what sense do I have any free will and in what sense do I deserve any credit for belonging to Christ, and to the Church? This is one of those unanswerable questions – which is why debate has raged for two thousand years. The answer, in the Letter to the Ephesians, seems to be that, though God has called us and chosen for us the way in which we should walk, we do have the opportunity to both choose and reject that way. In some sense that it is a 'fork in the road' kind of decision – two different ways present themselves and we can choose to walk in either direction. In another sense we are constantly making decisions, good and bad, making our way towards God or choosing other paths. We shall be exploring this further in the next couple of weeks.

Monday (*Week 29, Year II*)

19th October

Ephesians 2:1-10

We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works

TODAY'S First Reading brings together some rather different clusters of ideas. We have some ancient cosmology 'following the prince of the power of the air'. We have some Jewish apocalyptic ideas 'dead' then 'made alive', then 'raised up .. to sit in the heavenly places' awaiting 'coming ages'. We have the prejudice that Gentile ways are sinful: 'Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.' In these respects, the Letter is similar to the Qumran Literature, the work of a Jewish sect. But we also have clues that the passage is derived from a baptismal liturgy, either an actual liturgical text or built from the ideas in the liturgical text. 'We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works' is very much what might be said to those who are baptised also that we are saved through faith not by works. And yet, being saved by God, we are then equipped for good works in his name. As the prayer of thanksgiving in the Church of England Communion Service puts it – in words which are now part of the Order of Mass in the Ordinariates: 'And we most humbly beseech thee, O heavenly Father, so to assist us with thy grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in'.

Tuesday (*Week 29, Year II*)

20th October

Ephesians 2:12-22

Christ is our Peace

CHRIST is the cornerstone of the new temple, the dwelling place of God in the Spirit. This is the new reality of the Church and those who are drawn into membership of the Church are no longer outsiders but 'fellow citizens' – 'aliens' is the word used where we heard 'sojourners'. Here we have a

meeting place of both Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles are characterised as 'having no hope and without God in the world'. The barrier between Jews and Gentiles was a physical barrier in the Jerusalem Temple and this barrier has disappeared in the holy temple of the Lord. As we found yesterday, there are resonances in this passage of what might have been a liturgical hymn. 'Christ is our Peace' certainly has a poetic rhythm too it and the picture described, and the phrases used certainly conjure up a hymn or poem: 'peace to those far off and peace to those near', 'no longer strangers and sojourners but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God'. Nowhere is Scripture more eloquent or elegantly crafted.

Wednesday (*Week 29, Year II*)

21st October

Ephesians 3:1-12

The Mystery of Christ has now been revealed

IN A passage which has many similarities with verses from the Letter to the Colossians (Col 1:23-28), we hear St Paul proclaiming himself as a prophet, in a manner of speaking. He is one to whom the mystery pre-eminently has been made known – along with the apostles and other prophets. The mystery is that the Gentiles belong with the Jews in the Body of Christ. Like the Jews, they share in the promise. For his part, St Paul has the particular grace and calling to preach to the Gentiles so that what was first known only to the apostles and prophets, and in particular Paul, might reach the widest audience. This includes confronting 'the principalities and powers in the heavenly places'. We notice that 'heavenly places' includes both parties in the cosmic struggle between good and evil. The revelation of the mystery was the work of the Spirit and we can infer from that that it is the Spirit who not only makes things known but who gives us boldness and confidence in Christ.

Thursday (*Week 29, Year II*)

22nd October

St John Paul II, Pope

Ephesians 3:14-21

Prayer for the Readers

A PRAYER for the Ephesians, and for whoever reads the Letter, today's reading feels very much like the end of the Letter. It isn't: we are only halfway through. The various prayer requests are followed by a doxology, an ascription of praise to God. The requests themselves are three-fold: first, that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith; second, that, rooted and grounded in love, we may be strengthened to receive knowledge; third, that, with knowledge of the love of God, we may be filled with the fullness of God. These prayer requests are not distinct: they are cumulative. Faith leads through love to knowledge. Knowledge is the knowledge of Christ's love and leads thus to divine in-dwelling. Not emphasised but there to be seen is the reliance on the Holy Spirit which strengthens us in the inner man. It is this in-dwelling of the Spirit which generates the love which is the motor of our growth. The doxology acknowledges the power at work within us – the activity of the Spirit – enabling us to exceed our own expectations. Glory is given to God 'in the Church and in Christ Jesus', the only time this formula is used in the Bible.

Friday (*Week 29, Year II*)

23rd October

Ephesians 4:1-6

One Body, one Spirit, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism

ST PAUL describes himself as 'a prisoner for the Lord', a phrase he also used at the beginning of the last chapter. As far as we know, this is not a reference to him being under arrest but to his status in Christ, imprisoned,

we might say, by love. He begs us to walk – ‘walk’ is the actual word used – in a way worthy of our calling. This is a way of love involving lowliness, meekness, patience, and forbearing one another. It is recognisable both as the way of Christ, the way Jesus conducted himself, and the way characterised by the fruits of the Spirit. We came across the list of these in Galatians chapter 5 a little while ago, but these qualities underlie much of what we read in St Paul’s Letters. We must be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. As we do, we discover that the communion of love centres not only on the Holy Spirit, but life together in one Body. In Christ there is one Lord, one faith, one Baptism. This unity is a unity in and with the fullness of the one God and Father of us all.

Monday (*Week 30, Year II*)

26th October

Ephesians 4:32-5:8

Follow Christ by loving as he loved you.

TODAY’S passage from Ephesians begins with an encouragement to kindness and mutual forbearance. These virtues contrast with the verse before the passage which highlighted bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, slander, and malice as undesirable characteristics of a Christian community. We then hear of further problems. These include immorality, impurity, and covetousness, filthiness, silly talk, and levity. We are reminded of the contrast between what life was like before conversion to Christ and what life should be like amongst the converted, as distinct from those around. We cannot make too many conclusions either about the Christian communities to which the letter is addressed, nor about the social contexts in which they are set, but the notion that immorality and the rest ‘must not even be named...as is fitting among saints’ rather suggests that then, as now, there were inconsistencies and problems, with many falling short of what was required of them by their Christian profession.

Tuesday (Week 30, Year II)

27th October

Ephesians 5:21-33

The Christian Household

WHAT we have here in Ephesians 5 is what could be described as a 'household code', a way of seeing how the domestic family fits in with the understanding of the Church and wider society. Here we seem to be more concerned with the Church than with society, though this ordering of life has been massively influential throughout Christian history. There is clearly a godly way of understanding the family as an expression of the relationship between Christ and his Body the Church. The husband represents – and needs to live up to – the role of Christ. The wife – with her children – represent the community of the Church and embody the love and charity which are the life of the Church. This godly understanding is sacramental – husband and wife become one flesh, which accords with the teaching of Christ. Two become one in the unity of marriage. It is easy to see the problems can emerge: there has been plenty of scope for tyrannical patterns of patriarchy in all this, and the place of slaves, later in the discussion, highlights other problems too. In short, this 'household code' cannot justly be adopted in our modern context, without careful attention to what is necessary. One thing is the emphasis on the need of the husband to love his wife sacrificially. Another is our understanding of the dignity and rights of women as autonomous human beings, with equal rights and opportunities. It should make us cautious when we look how long this new understanding has taken to emerge, how great inequalities remain, and how, in many parts of the world, 'household codes' remain oppressive.

SS Simon & Jude, Apostles

Wednesday 28th October

Ephesians 2:19-22

No Longer Strangers and Aliens

ONLY last week we heard today's reading from Ephesians 2. It was then part of our *lectio continua* – our daily reading in course. Today it is set for SS Simon & Jude. Christ is here seen as the cornerstone of the new temple, the dwelling place of God in the Spirit. This is the new reality of the Church, founded on the apostles and prophets, and those who are drawn into membership of the Church are no longer outsiders but 'fellow citizens' – 'aliens' is the word used where we heard 'sojourners'. Here we have a meeting place of both Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles are characterised as 'having no hope and without God in the world'. The barrier between Jews and Gentiles was a physical barrier in the Jerusalem Temple and this barrier has disappeared in the holy temple of the Lord. The holy temple of the Lord itself is no longer seen as a building in Jerusalem but a dwelling place of God in the Spirit, a living temple built with living stones.

Thursday (*Week 30, Year II*)

29th October

Ephesians 6:10-20

The Whole Armour of God

I HAVE to confess that, though, as a child, I lacked military instincts, this passage from Ephesians 6 was a favourite of mine. I think it may even have been the passage read at my confirmation in the Church of England, at the age of 10. It may just be that, for a child, the metaphors used were clear, consistent, and striking. The spiritual armour and weaponry are labelled and the enemies listed are formidable: principalities, powers, the world rulers of this present darkness, the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. The readers of this Letter would be as familiar with the sight of the Roman soldier, armed for battle, as we are familiar with the sight of a policeman in uniform. The battle being waged between the Sons of Disobedience and the Children of Light is a constant theme in Ephesians and today's passage is on continuity with the earlier discussion of the

tension between the undesirable characteristics of a Christian community - wrath, anger, clamour, slander, and malice and the rest - that we were hearing about earlier in the week and what the life of the community should be. At the same time, the world rulers of this present darkness, and the various dismal battalions of evil, impact not only - or evenly mainly - on Christian congregations.

Friday (*Week 30, Year II*)

30th October

Philippians 1:1-11

Salutation and Prayer for the Philippians

THE LETTER to the Philippians is indisputably by St Paul himself, though we cannot be certain at what stage, or from what place, it was written. We cannot even be certain that it is of a piece: it could be two or three distinct letters brought together. Philippi was a 'leading city of the district of Macedonia' (Acts 16:12), ten miles inland from the Mediterranean. The church there was the first church founded in Europe and its founding by St Paul was acknowledged nearly a century later by St Polycarp in his letter to the Philippians. There is some mention of Paul's work in Acts 16. Paul is devoted to the Philippian Christians and want them to be blameless, shining like lights amidst a perverse and crooked generation. There are troubles facing the Church there. As elsewhere, there is internal strife caused by the usual human foibles. Then there is external pressure from those who rightly view the Christian Gospel as hostile to the Pagan gods. Third, there is opposition from those whom Paul refers to as 'dogs'. These are those who insist on circumcision. This is less of a problem than in Galatia. Perhaps Paul is at this stage anticipating and pre-empting opposition from the Judaising tendency. For now, St Paul is greeting his beloved Christian community in Philippi with real affection, thanking God for their flourishing, and praying that they will grow in maturity and understanding.

ALL SAINTS' DAY

Sunday 1st November

Called to be Saints

NOVEMBER is the month of Holy Souls, the month in which we remember the Communion of Saints. We are members of the Communion by Baptism, a membership which transcends death.

November is a spectacular month for the Church. It begins with All Saints and All Souls and ends with the Solemnity of Christ the King and Advent Sunday. Christ who is celebrated as the Omega and Alpha on Christ the King is celebrated as the Alpha and Omega. The American commercialization of Hallowe'en is a reflection and distortion of all this but the ghouls and the ghosts, the death masks and the skeletons, give us a marvellous opportunity to make contact and proclaim the Christian Gospel. Meanwhile the pumpkins are seasonal and make very good soup.

Our hope in the Risen Christ is summed up in this passage:

1 Peter 1:3-9 A Living Hope

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, ⁷ so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸ Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. ⁹ As the outcome of your faith you obtain the salvation of your souls.

Our membership of the Communion of Saints is expressed in this passage:

1 Peter 1:3-9 A Chosen People

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. ¹⁰ Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.

ALL SOULS' DAY

Monday 2nd November

Romans 5:5-11

Now that we are reconciled, we shall be saved by the life of Christ

TODAY'S passage from the Letter to the Romans shows us how Christ's death accomplished our justification, our salvation, and our reconciliation with God. St Paul tells us that 'while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). We are reminded of the verse: 'Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends' (John 15:13) but St Paul goes further. Christ did not die for good men. He died for sinners: you and me. This belief that Christ's death makes us righteous (justifies us), saves us (rescues us from eternal perdition), and reconciles us with God, is the reason 'Hope does not disappoint us' (Romans 5:5). St Paul's fuller discussion of death and resurrection is in 1 Corinthians 15 and he makes this telling point: 'If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied' (1 Corinthians 15:19). The Theological Virtues of Faith and Love have their place but on All Souls' Day what sustains us most is Hope, Hope in Christ.

Tuesday (Week 31, Year II)

3rd November

Philippians 2:5-11

The Mind of Christ

AFTER the introductory verse – ‘Have this mind among yourselves’ – is what is generally agreed to be a Christian hymn. We cannot be sure whether St Paul wrote it or simply inserted it. We cannot be sure whether it was written in Aramaic or in Greek. It is clearly in two halves – the first half about Christ emptying himself, the second half about God raising him to glory – but we cannot be sure whether the hymn is six three-line strophes or three four-line strophes. The passage is only one of twenty hymns in the New Testament (and I too was surprised to find that there are as many as that [the passages are listed in Raymond E. Brown’s *Introduction to the New Testament* p. 491]). The importance of the passage – whether Paul inherited it or composed it – is that it picks up the theme of Christ as Servant, the controlling image in Isaiah’s prophecies of the Messiah. It also gives us the twin notions of abasement and exaltation descending and ascending – which are at the heart of the Gospel. A further layer of meaning is that this Christ, whom we celebrate, pre-existed as God and became fully human. His humbling was what he deliberately did rather than something which befell him.

Wednesday 4th November (Week 31, Year II)

St Charles Borromeo, Bishop

Philippians 2:12-18

Shining as Lights in the World

FOLLOWING on from the hymn earlier in the chapter, which we heard yesterday, St Paul encourages the Christians in Philippi to imitate Christ by shining as lights in the world. They do this partly by working out their own salvation, that is, not by earning salvation nor even by working at the implications of being saved for the way they live but by allowing God to work in them, willing and working for his good pleasure. There used to be a common cliché – ‘Let go and Let God’ – which perfectly expresses the

thought that the Mind of Christ enables us to give control of our growth in holiness to the Holy Spirit of God.

Thursday (*Week 31, Year II*)

5th November

Philippians 3:3-8

Whatever gain I had counted as loss

THE SITUATION in Philippi is a complex, with much disagreement. There is internal disagreement, even amongst those who have worked alongside Paul. Then there is opposition from outside the community from those who think the Christian movement is a strange set of teachings, a teaching which disregards the gods of the ancient world. Thirdly, in today's passage, we detect St Paul having the same problem with the Judaisers in Philippi as we heard about with the Galatians. The issue is whether Christianity is a Jewish sect, which requires all who join to submit to Jewish laws, in particular male circumcision, or a new movement for Jews and Gentiles which one can join without submitting to the Jewish Law. St Paul here deals with it by burnishing his Jewish credentials. His Jewish background is impeccable. What he stresses is that all this counts as loss - is swept away – compared with personal knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord.

Friday (*Week 31, Year II*)

6th November

Philippians 3:17 - 4:1

Our Commonwealth is in Heaven: Stand Firm

THE LETTER takes up yesterday's theme of dissension and continues with the denunciation of the enemies of the cross of Christ. Some scholars think that this chapter – Philippians 3 – forms a separate letter, and it is perhaps unfortunate that the Lectionary omits the central part of the chapter (3:9-16). Here we are dealing not with different opinions but scolding those who

pretend to belong to the Church but whose membership is belied by their behaviour. Two thousand years after St Paul writing to the Philippians we have enough evidence that this kind of nominal membership, which makes no demands on our ethical and moral life, is endemic in the Church. As the Gospels put it, wheat and tares grow side by side and are not sorted out until the harvest. Meanwhile, faithful Christians are exhorted to 'stand firm' and await the coming of the Saviour at the end of time, knowing that 'our commonwealth is in heaven' – one of the loveliest phrases in the New Testament.

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

Remembrance Sunday

8th November

LIKE any good meal, what we receive from the table of God's Word today is a delicate balance of different things. We are content here just to see what is on the menu. The first reading, from the Book of Wisdom, tells us that 'to fix one's thought on her – Wisdom – is perfect understanding'. The Jewish Wisdom tradition links fear of the Lord with Wisdom and avoiding evil as understanding. Wisdom is greatly prized not least because she is an embodiment – the embodiment – of God the Holy Spirit, active amidst creation. No wonder that the Gospel contrasts the wise virgins with the foolish virgins. The wise ones are Godfearing, the foolish ones are – well – foolish. But, staying with the Gospel, we notice the characters in the drama and the setting of the drama. The characters are not just the bridesmaids – five wise and five foolish – but the Bridegroom himself. No mention of the Bride, though eventually – in the Letter to the Ephesians and in the Book of Revelation – we discover that the Bride is the Church, the assembly of God's Faithful People. Not only is Scripture itself a meal to feed us, but it has another meal in mind, the Marriage Feast. It's rather like the way that the Liturgy of the Word leads to the Liturgy of the Eucharist. We notice the emphasis on how everything ends up – the Marriage Feast in Heaven – and we remember that we are in the last month of the Church Year, the month of Holy Souls, the month in which we prepare to meet Christ the King, both liturgically and in our own pilgrimage. The earliest of the books of the New Testament, the First Letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians, describes imaginatively for us how things will eventually end. One of the most comforting messages in the Christian Gospel is the verse in the Epistle 'since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus,

God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.’ This is a comfort for us all in the month of November and it is particularly a comfort to the bereaved and, especially on Remembrance Sunday, especially those who lost loved ones in battle and conflict.

THE DEDICATION OF THE LATERAN BASILICA

Monday 9th November

Titus 1:1-9

Appoint Elders in the way that I told you.

THOUGH today’s feast has its own proper readings, we are proceeding with the weekday *lectio continua*, not least because on the Monday of Week 32, Year II – we begin a brief acquaintance with the Pastoral Letter to Titus. We cannot be sure of the date: it could be from about AD65, if St Paul was the author, but most scholarship thinks it is later, towards the end of the century, or even beginning of the second century. The writer would then be a disciple of Paul, seeking to maintain St Paul’s legacy. In today’s extract we have the customary epistolary greeting, long and formal but without the thanksgiving which so often follows the greeting, and in verse 5 we are straight into the body of the letter. The presenting issue is Church structure and order. For that we need godly bishops – in this case in Crete but, by implication, wherever the Gospel takes root and the Church is to flourish.

Tuesday 10th November (*Week 32, Year II*)

St Leo the Great, Pope, Doctor of the Church

Titus 2:1-8, 11-14

Living holy lives in expectation of the coming of our God and Saviour

IN TITUS chapter 2 we move on to consider community relations and right belief. First, we have a household code, such as we encountered in Ephesians 5 nearly a fortnight ago. The code in Titus is less well-ordered: not wives/husbands, children/fathers/ slaves/masters but older men/older women, younger women/younger men/slaves. Older men are portrayed as

teachers but the cement in the fabric of the household are the older women, teaching younger women the vital tasks of building up the family. All of this is set in the context of the gift of the grace of God appearing for our salvation, training us in righteousness, and purifying us to be a people zealous for good deeds.

Wednesday 11th November (*Week 32, Year II*)

St Martin of Tours, Religious, Bishop

Titus 3:1-7

Because of his compassion, God has saved us

FOLLOWING yesterday's reading about community relations and right belief, the third of the three extracts from the Letter to Titus this week continues with practical instruction about how to live the Christian life. Christians will be good citizens, hard-working, charitable, peacemakers, gentle and courteous. Our compassion and understanding should spring from realising how we were before we received the gift of salvation, and that all that we have and are is because of divine mercy and not our own deeds. We are not only justified – accounted righteous – but made righteous as we grow in the hope of eternal life.

Thursday 12th November (*Week 32, Year II*)

St Josaphat, Bishop, Martyr

Philemon 7-20

Paul's Plea for Onesimus

THE LETTER to Philemon is the shortest of the Pauline writings – only one chapter long. It deals with the question of an escaped slave, Onesimus, who was part of Philemon's household. Philemon was a wealthy Christian whose home was probably used for the local church to meet. The language of fathering suggests that Onesimus had been a convert through Paul's preaching and that Paul is endeavouring to bring about a reconciliation of slave and master, with Onesimus being received back not as a slave but in the fashion Philemon would receive Paul himself. This is more than simply freeing a slave: it is moving him into the radical freedom of the Christian

fellowship. The question presents itself whether Paul is here seeking to undermine the whole business of slavery, a prominent feature of the Roman Empire and thereafter for the best part of two thousand years or whether it is special treatment for one particular slave that Paul is seeking. Almost certainly it is special pleading in this case: the Early Church was not able or willing to challenge the ordering of wider society. This was not lack of concern for justice but the belief that the coming of the Kingdom and the consequent re-ordering of things was imminent. Meanwhile we can infer St Paul's own attitude to slavery, perhaps, from Galatians 3:38:

²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Friday (*Week 32, Year II*)

13th November

2 John 4-9

Only those who keep to what they are taught have the Father and the Son with them

THE SECOND Letter of John was probably written about AD 100 and by the same writer ('the Presbyter' or 'Elder') who wrote I John and III John. We should imagine a Johannine community (called here 'The Lady') – a group of Christians formed by, and gathered round, the Gospel of John, the Fourth Gospel. We can work some of this out by realising how similar some of the themes of 1 John are to John's Gospel and how II John has preoccupations similar to those of 1 John. As we imagine these dispersed communities – we know there was more than one of them – we come across 'the deceiver and the anti-Christ' (2 John 7). It is important that the Johannine communities know who is preaching the true Gospel and who is bringing false doctrine. The crucial problem seems to be 'men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh'. The Johannine books focus on Light and Life, Love and the Incarnation of God's Love in Jesus Christ. Anything which contradicts this is false doctrine. Those who embrace false doctrine do not have God. Those who live by true doctrine have both the Father and the Son.

ST EDMUND OF ABINGDON, Bishop

Joint-Principal Patron of the Diocese

Monday 16th November

Rev 1:1-4; 2:1-5

Introduction and Salutation and the Message to Ephesus

THE APOCALYPSE – or ‘The Revelation to St John’ – was granted to a prophet called John, who was neither St John the Son of Zebedee nor the author of the Gospel and Epistles of St John. He is therefore often referred to as ‘St John the Divine’. The book, the last in the New Testament, seems to date from the 90s. The Emperor Domitian died in AD96 and he notoriously persecuted Christians. It has been suggested that the Number of the Beast, 666, which figures in the Book (13:18), expressed in Roman Numerals as DCLXVI, stood for Domitian, an absolute dictator and a notorious persecutor of Christians. Expressed in Roman numerals, 666 is DCLXVI— *Domitius Caesar Legatos Xti Violenter Interfecit*—which translates as ‘The Emperor Domitian violently killed the ambassadors of Christ.’ Today’s reading gives us the introduction and the first of seven messages to the various churches in the western part of Asia Minor. Though the whole book appears to us surreal and strange, it is very much what one expects from visionary apocalyptic literature, common at the time. There are also traces of this literature in the Gospels (Mt 24:1-35; Mk 13:1-31; Lk 21:1-33). We appear to be looking ahead to some future End-Time but the writing is often occasioned by, and reflective of, what was seen as the turmoil of the present. The apocalyptic sensitivity of the Early Church was heightened by the devastation of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple in AD 70. The major misunderstanding of the book is when interpreters look to the future for the meaning of what is prophesied. Rather we should learn what was happening at the time and how it is to be understood, and then how it might assist us interpret our own times.

Writing to each of the seven churches, the prophet is addressing them with the words of Christ, variously described. Each message continues with a characterisation of the church, the good things and the bad things, as appropriate. What follows is admonition and encouragement to do better. The short messages each end with a promise to those who prevail in the struggle.

Tuesday 17th November

(St Hugh of Lincoln, Religious, Bishop)

Rev 3:1-6, 14-22

The Message to Sardis and the Message to Laodicea

TODAY we get to hear the messages to two more of the seven churches. Yesterday it was the message to the Church in Ephesus. Today it is messages five and seven, to Sardis and Laodicea. We have passed over messages two, three, and four, to Smyrna, Pergamon, and Thyatira, and we have missed out message six, to Philadelphia. In each message there are local and topical references. For example, the reference in the message to Sardis about the Lord coming like a thief at an unexpected hour not only has biblical resonances (Mt 24:43; 1 Thess 5:2) but also refers to the difficulties of the city, twice captured by surprise. Similarly the Laodiceans, whose lukewarmness means that they will be spewed out, calls to mind the very different temperatures in the hot springs at nearby Hierapolis and the cold drinking water of Colossae. Many of the details of the seven messages are now lost to us but what is certainly of abiding importance is the need to watch eagerly for the coming of the Kingdom and to be aflame with hope and zeal.

Wednesday 18th November

(The Dedication of the basilicas of Saints Peter and Paul, Apostles)

Rev 4:1-11

The Heavenly Worship

THE DESCRIPTION of the heavenly worship in Revelation 4 fits well with our commemoration today of the Basilicas of St Peter and St Paul in Rome. This scripture passage is often thought to be a looking forward imaginatively to what things will be like when we are finally gathered into the presence of God. It has also been suggested that it reflects the experience of worship in the Early Church. Whichever of these – either, neither, or both – we glimpse the heavenly court in session, with imagery drawn from the Book of Ezekiel and the Prophet Isaiah. Instead of mythical figures, precious gems are used to describe the Lord God sitting upon his throne. Lightning and the four living creatures echo the vision of the cherubim in Ezek 1:4-13 and 10:18-22. The 'Holy, holy, holy' reminds us not only of the Sanctus at Mass but also of Isaiah's vision (Is 6:3). The additional words, 'who was and is and is to come!', declare the eternal glory of God, resounding throughout creation, and transcending the trials and tribulations of the present. The seven churches to which St John the Divine has written need to withstand the transitoriness of their embattled circumstances and look beyond to eternity. An interesting feature of the passage is the number twenty-four, two groups of twelve. This number of elders does not happen outside the Book of Revelation and we should presume, perhaps, that what the prophet has in mind are twelve representatives of the old Israel, the Old Covenant, the heads of tribes, and twelve of the new Israel, the New Covenant, the apostles.

Thursday 19th November *(Week 33[ii])*

Rev 5:1-10

The Scroll and the Lamb

YESTERDAY we had a vision of the Heavenly Worship. Today we have a complementary vision of the Lamb. The prophet is told to see the Lion of

Judah (see Gen 49:9-10) and the Root of David (see Is 11:1-10; Rom 15:2) who has conquered and has dominion over the nations, and instead sees the Lamb. The image of the Lamb is possibly derived from the morning and evening temple sacrifices (Ex 29:38-42; Num 28:3-8) or from the Passover Lamb (Ex 12:1-27; Lev 23:5-6) or from the Suffering Servant (Is 53:7). These striking images tumble over one another as do the sevens as they accumulate: seven seals, seven horns, seven eyes, seven spirits of God sent out into the world. In the vision of the Heavenly Worship, God is hymned as the Creator: the scroll is his, it is in his right hand. We met this scroll first in Ezek 2:8ff. The writing is on both sides of the scroll: nothing can be added to God's Providential plan. Like wills in the Roman world, the scroll for security's sake has seven seals on the scroll. In the vision of the Lamb, God the Son is hymned as the Redeemer. He alone is worthy to take the scroll and, when he does so, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders – that is, the heavenly court – fall down in worship, with harps in their hand and golden bowls of incense. Their worship is our worship because the incense is the prayer of the saints – that is, the prayer of faithful Christians. The apocalyptic language takes a while to unpack and is ultimately impossible fully to comprehend but points to the otherness of God, his mystery and his majesty.

Friday 20th November (*Week 33[ii]*)

Rev 10:8-11

The Open Scroll

JOHN the Divine is no longer in heaven but on earth. He is now being commissioned to transmit a bitter-sweet message. Drawing on imagery from the prophet Ezekiel (3:1-3) the mighty angel in this passage bids John eat the little scroll. This 'mighty angel' appears earlier in the Bible (Dan 4:13-14) and later in the Book of Revelation (10:1; 18:21): he is portrayed as vast, astride sea and land. The scroll too is new. It is a little scroll this time, and an open scroll, so that the message is plain. The Gospel is bitter-sweet because it inaugurates a time of testing and trial as well as a time of beatitude and salvation. The Gospel message is to be proclaimed neither amidst, nor against, 'peoples and nations and tongues and kings' but with a view to them severally. We can see, for example, who the kings are meant to be when, later in the book, we hear of 'seven kings' (17:10) and 'ten kings' (17:12). The 'seven' are Roman Emperors – though we cannot

be quite sure which of the fourteen Roman Emperors are being indicated – and the 'ten kings' are in the future.

Monday 23rd November (*Week 34[ii]*)

Rev 14:1-5

The Lamb and the 144,000

TO MAKE sense of today's reading from Revelation 14, we need to look first at chapter 13. We learnt last week that the Apocalypse may date from the 90s. The Emperor Domitian died in AD96 and he notoriously persecuted Christians. As we said last week, it has been suggested that the Number of the Beast, 666, which figures in chapter 13 verse 18, expressed in Roman Numerals as DCLXVI, stood for Domitian, an absolute dictator and a notorious persecutor of Christians. Expressed in Roman numerals, 666 is DCLXVI—*Domitius Caesar Legatos Xti Violenter Interfecit*—which translates as 'The Emperor Domitian violently killed the ambassadors of Christ.' But it's possible, that the Roman Emperor referred to is not Domitian but Nero, who ruled from AD54 to AD68. This would fit with the number of the beast written in Hebrew, with numbers expressed as letters, and consonants adding up to 666. With these different theories we cannot get very much further than saying that the First Beast of chapter 13, with ten horns and seven heads, refers to empires and kings and the seven hills of Rome. The Second Beast in chapter 13 is a parody of Emperor-worship, promoted by a pagan priesthood. The two Beasts represent considerable adversity and discouragement for the Christian community of Asia Minor and it is for that reason that the woes of chapter 13 are followed by the consolation of chapter 14.

In today's reading, we pick up once more the themes of the heavenly worship, which were there in the reading from chapter 4 a week ago. 'God' and 'the Lamb' are distinguished – Father and Son – and the four living creatures and twenty-four elders are once more in attendance on the throne of God. There are twelve times twelve faithful Christians – 144,000 – all marked with the name of the Father and of the Lamb. This is to reassure the persecuted Christian community that they will endure through and survive the tribulations of the present. There is a mention of harp music – a sign of the ethereal – and although the reference to chastity is defined in terms of sexual purity, its literal meaning, it has been suggested

that the chastity referred to is refraining from going along with idolatry. Infidelity to God in the Bible is not infrequently associated with images of adultery and immoral living.

Tuesday 24th November (*Week 34[ii]*)

St Andrew Dung-Lac, Priest, & Companions, Martyrs

Rev 14:14-19

Reaping the Earth's Harvest

OMITTED from our semi-continuous reading of the Book of Revelation are the solemn admonitions of three angels, stressing the need to glorify God in view of the Day of Judgment. There is woe in store for Babylon – that is for Rome – and a warning that apostates and idolaters will endure hell. This leads us to today's reading, when the sickle of wrath is wielded and the harvest of the earth is thrown into the great wine press of God's wrath. The imagery is from Joel 3:12-13, where the harvest and vintage put an end to the pagan nations. It is not uncommon as a metaphor for judgment – Is 17:5; Jer 51:33; Mt 13:30, 39; Mt 27:12 – hence the sickle rather than the sword. The phrase 'one like a son of man' describes the one who does the reaping and, though it is not here a proper name for Christ, he is the one to whom we are referring. The imagery is from the Book of Daniel (Dan 7:13) and we met him thus described in Rev 1:13. Particularly at this time of year, we are reminded of Charles Wesley's hymn 'Lo! He comes with clouds descending' and, of course, of the ending of Christ coming in judgment, professed in the Creed, and spelt out in the farewell discourse of St Mark's Gospel (chapter 13). Both in St Mark and in Revelation the Second Coming of Christ and the judgment of the nations seemed imminent. We now know that this end-event is probably not imminent but that we need to live as though it were.

Wednesday 25th November (Week 34[ii])

(St Catherine of Alexandria, Virgin and Martyr)

Rev 15:1-4

The Song of Moses and the Song of the Lamb

WITH the sea of glass the prophet is once more in heaven, with the heavenly cast whom we have already met. The harps are a symbol of worship and the congregation for the heavenly worship are those who have conquered in the fight, all 144,000 of them. The beast and its image and the number of its name are all vanquished. The song which they sing is called the Song of Moses and the Song of the Lamb but, unlike the Song of Moses in Exodus 15, this song does not rejoice in the downfall of its foes but in the glory of God. Nevertheless, linking Moses and the Lamb, the song links the two deliverances, the deliverance from the Egyptians and the deliverance from the pagan nations. The phrases of the Song are drawn from Old Testament verses: Psalms 111:2; 139:14; Amos 4:13; Ps 145:17; Deut 32:4; Jer 10:7; Ps 86:9; Mal 1:11; Ps 98:2. We set against the terrifying imagery of the Apocalypse its huge optimism that the battle has been fought and won and that we are now in 'finishing time'.

Thursday 26th November (Week 34[ii])

Rev 18:1-2, 21-23, 19:1-3, 9

The Fall of Babylon and the Rejoicing in Heaven

YESTERDAY we had the Song of Moses and the Lamb because we were celebrating the winning of the battle, the final victory of God over the forces of evil. This theme continues today – two or three chapters later - with a rather gleeful account of the disaster which has befallen pagan Rome. We have missed out the seven bowls of God's wrath, which are like the plagues which befell Egypt at the time of the Exodus. The final plague leads to the destruction of Rome, whose fate we should have lingered over in chapter 17. It is small wonder that various Protestant Christians, hostile to Catholicism, have seen the denunciations of pagan Rome in the Book of Revelation as prophetic of the fate of Roman Catholicism. But, it has to be said, the enemy in Revelation is paganism and an empire which persecutes

and martyrs Christians. In today's reading, we have another heavenly canticle, preceded by declarations by two mighty angels, different from John's angel-guide. When we hear of salvation, what we are really hearing about is victory.

Friday 27th November (*Week 34[ii]*)

Rev 20:1-4, 11-21:2

The Thousand Years, the Dead are Judged, and the New Jerusalem is revealed

WE STAY with the victory which we have been exploring for the last couple of days and, with the victory, comes the end of Satan, his utter vanquishing. The faithful departed come back to life and we are at the throne of judgment. The deeds of the faithful are revealed, as they are written in the Book of Life, and Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire, as are any whose names are not recorded in the Book of Life. Then is revealed the new heaven and the new earth, and the new Jerusalem, prepared as a bride for her husband. The Marriage Feast of the Lamb is about to commence.

Saturday 28th November (*Week 34[ii]*)

Revelation 22:1-7

The River of Life

ON THIS, the last day of the Church's Year, we finish in the last chapter of the last book of the Bible. We are not quite at the end: there is an epilogue and benediction which fittingly balances the opening of the book, its salutation and opening vision. But we are at what feels like the end of the book. We encounter the River of the Water of Life and the beatific vision amidst eternal Light.
