FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY: LOCKDOWN IN CATHOLIC HENDRED

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 2020

Luke 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 Peter 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

Deuteronomy 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 Luke 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 (John 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,**

C2 General

> **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

Hebrews 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 ayer, 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 s. 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.

C2 General

Friday in the Third Week of Lent

20th March 2020

Mark 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 2020

John 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 2020

Isaiah 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 2020

Ezekiel 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 2020

Numbers 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

C2 General

and being healed and restored? Well, Jesus does! In John 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 2020

Daniel 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 2020

John 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

C2 General

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 2020

Jeremiah 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 2020

Matthew 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

6thApril 2020

John 12:1-11

The Anointing at Bethany

JOHN'S Gospel lays out the final week of Jesus' life spaciously, 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 (Matt 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 Mark 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 2020

John 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 –ot 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.

C2 General

Wednesday in Holy Week

8th April 2020

Matthew 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.

C2 General

Maundy Thursday

9th April 2020

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.

C2 General

GOOD FRIDAY

10th April 2020

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 mantlepiece. 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**

C2 General

> **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 2020

John 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.

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

C2 General

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 2020

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 2020

John 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.

C2 General

Wednesday in Easter Week

15th April 2020

Luke 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 2020

Luke 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 (Luke 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

C2 General

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 2020

John 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.

C2 General

Second Sunday of Easter

19th April 2020

John 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 s 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

C2 General

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 2020

Luke 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 warden*. (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**

C2 General

> **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 hung 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

C2 General

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 2020

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 2020

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 2020

1 John 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, the 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 2020

John 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' (*John 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 2020

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

C2 General

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 Corinthians 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 2020

John 10:1-10

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 (John 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 (John 10:11-18), today's Gospel (John 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 (John 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 2020

Matthew 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

C2 General

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 2020

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 (Matthew 15:21ff) – called by Mark the Syrophoenician woman (Mark 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

C2 General

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 2020

John 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 2020

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.

C2 General

Friday in the Fourth Week of Easter

8th May 2020

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.

Fourth Sunday of Easter

10th May 2020

John 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 Jesting 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' (John 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).

C2 General

Monday in the Fifth Week of Easter

11th May 2020

John 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.

C2 General

Tuesday in the Fifth Week of Easter

12th May 2020

John 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 2020

John 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.' Luke 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.'

C2 General

St Matthias

Thursday 14th May 2020

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 2020

John 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 John 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 John 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' *(philoi)* 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.

C2 General

Sixth Sunday of Easter

17th May 2020

John 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' (John 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' (John 20:22).

Monday in the Sixth Week of Easter

18th May 2020

John 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' (Isaiah 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 2020

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

C2 General

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 2020

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.

What is fascinating about the encounter is, first, that, in neither the Jewish academic world nor in Gentile circles, does Christianity cut through. We

C2 General

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 2020

Matthew 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 come down' – a bit of a comfort when a ball gets temporarily stuck in the

C2 General

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….

C2 General

Friday in the Sixth Week of Easter

after the Ascension of the Lord

22nd May 2020

John 16:20-23

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 2020

'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 outpouring of the Holy Spirit on us, and on the worldwide Church. There have been some splendid Pentecostal events. One I shall never forget

C2 General

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!

C2 General

Monday in the Seventh Week of Easter

25th May 2020

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 2020

Philippians 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 2020

1 Thessalonians 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).

C2 General

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)

27th May 2020

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 2020

John 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

C2 General

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 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.

C2 General

PENTECOST

31st May 2020

John 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 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

C2 General

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.

C2 General

Monday after Pentecost

1st June 2020

2 Peter 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 2020

2 Peter 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 (Isaiah 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 2020

2 Timothy 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.

Thursday after Pentecost

(Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Eternal High Priest)

4th June 2020

Hebrews 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 Hebrews 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

C2 General

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 creato**r** 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.'

C2 General

Friday after Pentecost

(St Boniface, Religious, Bishop, & Martyr)

5th June 2020

`

2 Timothy 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 Timothy (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 2020

John 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 2020

` *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.

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.

be working out in the next few days what gifts we might be waiting for.

Tuesday *(Week 10, Year II)*

9th June 2020

` *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 2020

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.'

St Barnabas, Apostle

Thursday 11th June 2020

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.

C2 General

Friday *(Week 10, Year II)*

12th June 2020

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 2020

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 –

C2 General

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

C2 General

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 2020

' *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.

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)*

(St Richard of Chichester)

16th June 2020

Matthew 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.

C2 General

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 2020

` *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 is 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 Pharoah, crossed the Red Sea on dry ground (Ex 14:16). The parting of the river was brought about by Elijah's mantle, rolled up, 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

C2 General

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 2020

Matthew 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

C2 General

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 horizonal 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 2020

Matthew 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 *Miserentissiumus 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 of Ordinary Time (Year A)

21st June 2020

'*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

C2 General

we highlight this when the Gospel is read. We stand. The reader is an 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 (Luke 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'..

C2 General

SS John Fisher & Thomas More, Martyrs

Monday 22nd June 2020

Matthew 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

C2 General

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 11, Year II)*

(St Etheldreda, Abbess)

23rd June 2020

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.

C2 General

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 2020

Luke 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 Canticle 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.

C2 General

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.**
>
> *Matt 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 2020

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 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 2020

2 Kings 25:1-12 and Psalm 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.

C2 General

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY of Ordinary Time (Year A)

28th June 2020

SS PETER & PAUL

Monday 29th June 2020

Tuesday *(Week 12, Year II)*

(First Martyrs of the Church of Rome)

30th June 2020