

Fr Frank Drescher

# **Fruits of the Desert**

Food for Thought in Times of Change  
and Challenge

Dedicated to the faithful in the various parishes of my vocation journey,  
who have become my teachers in faith, hope and charity.

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## Preface

In the tradition of Ignatian spirituality, there are so-called Desert Days.<sup>1</sup> These are a special form of religious retreat where participants live a simpler lifestyle than usual for a certain period of time, usually in more or less strict seclusion and silence. The years 2020 and 2021 have, in a sense, sent the global community into involuntary “retreats” in the form of prolonged lockdowns because of a worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and its threats to human lives and our public health systems.

The new experience of “life in the desert” turned out to be very challenging for many, if not most of us. Indeed, only few people feel called to live as hermits, and very few of the general population in our Western societies were ever exposed to prolonged periods of solitude and silence. We know from the history of Christian spirituality, but also from modern psychology, that when people find themselves in situations of loneliness, they are often thrown back on themselves, that is, on their interior world of thoughts, concerns, needs and desires. They begin to ruminate or search for meaning in what they are experiencing. We also know from the early monk fathers that, left alone in the wilderness, we meet our demons who lurk in the depths of our psyche. However, we have also learned from Christian hermits of all times that we can truly encounter God in the desert, if we open ourselves up to him unreservedly and listen attentively for his voice in the silence of our soul.

With these thoughts in mind and with my training in spiritual direction, I decided to do exactly what a retreat director would do in a house of formation or retreat centre, namely, to make effective use of the time spent in silence and solitude by offering food for thought and spiritual reflection to our parishioners, trying to make their long days at home as fruitful as possible in a spiritual sense and also keeping the human spirit occupied with something other than itself. I had therefore begun to write spiritual reflections several times a week shortly after my arrival as a curate in the Parish of Blanchardstown, and to incorporate them into my celebrations of Holy Mass, which were then broadcast via webcam. By doing so, I wanted to give the people in our parish some sort of *short retreat talks* for the day, trying to make life in the desert rich and fertile for both of us, the parishioners and myself. This is where the idea for the title of this book comes from, namely from the growth and cultivation of spiritual fruits in the solitude of the desert.

Originally, and for the first number of months, I had no intention of publishing my homilies and reflections. That, however, changed after I was frequently asked by the faithful for my manuscripts, as people felt moved or inspired by my thoughts and wished to have another look at them at their own pace. This eventually encouraged me to take this step of publishing a selection of my homilies.

It follows from the above that this book was never intended as a scholarly contribution to the theology of spirituality, which is evident from my writing style or the lack of footnotes in large parts of my manuscript. Rather, it is a collection of my personal testimonies of faith, delivered during the first year and a half of my priestly ministry in the Archdiocese of Dublin. In other words, it is written as a book of faith by a Christian for his fellow Christians, who serve the Lord in the Church and in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> The term derives from Jesus’ forty days in the desert near Jericho, but also recalls the 40 years of wandering of the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. Such Desert Days (“Wüstentage”) are especially cultivated in German Catholic spirituality, but also worldwide in houses of religious life and formation, for example, in the form of a weekend in strict silence for the purpose of intensified prayer and spiritual reflection.

At the end of a long and not always easy writing process, I am now both happy and relieved to have completed this book of spiritual reflections. I know myself deeply indebted to the Holy Spirit, who saved me from many a valley of writer's block, so that in the end I was still able to put something on paper for my listeners, even on days of drought. That reminds me of a stanza from the Sequence of Pentecost (*Veni Sancte Spiritus*):

“O Thou Light, most pure and blest,  
Shine within the inmost breast  
Of Thy faithful company.  
Where Thou art not, man hath naught;  
Every holy deed and thought  
Comes from Thy divinity.”

With these time-honoured words from the liturgical tradition of the Church, I hope and pray that this book will help many people to find inspiration and stimulation for their own spiritual lives, and perhaps also a new approach to one or another Bible passage that is sometimes difficult to understand or to put into the practice of a Christian life, trying to imitate Jesus in everything to the glory of God the Father.

Dublin, Advent 2023.

Fr Frank Drescher

## Advent – Christmas – Epiphany

### Day of wrath and doom impending...? – On the true meaning of Advent and the Second Coming of Christ on the Last Day

Today we celebrate the First Sunday in Advent. Since the days of the Early Church, the season of Advent has always been a time of penance and reflection. With fasting and other acts of penance, Christians have prepared themselves for the coming of Christ. This “Lenten” character of Advent is also reflected in the colour of the vestments used for our liturgies in these four weeks, which are purple.

The original liturgical colour of grief and penance was black, and in many countries black copes or chasubles are still used for funeral services. But, even though we are sorrowful and truly contrite for our sins, we await the return of Christ with a sense of great joy. It is this joy, combined with the bright light of Christmas, that shines through the darkness of our sinful human existence and turns black into purple, a royal purple that reminds us of the Kingship of Christ, our Lord and Redeemer for whose arrival we prepare ourselves in the coming weeks.

In some Christian splinter groups and pseudo-Christian cults, the end of the world, the main topic of our Scripture readings these days, is awaited with fear and terror. There the Last Judgement is imagined as an awful slaughter wreaked on the sinful human race, rooted in a misreading of the Apocalypse, the last book of the Bible. But this understanding of the Last Judgement is not Christian, and the Church rejects it. This is why, as part of the liturgical reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council, we largely abandoned the old traditional hymn *Dies Irae*, which many of you will still remember as part of the Requiem Mass:

“Day of wrath and doom impending,  
David’s word with Sibyl’s blending,  
Heaven and earth in ashes ending.”

Whatever will happen on the Day of Judgement remains mysterious to us, and Holy Scripture describes the indescribable with images, a powerful imagery that inspired human fantasy and creativity for many centuries. But in spite of our uncertainty about the exact details of God’s plan for the world, there is one thing we can be sure of: God does not want to destroy the world, or to “dissolve it in ashes” as the old hymn suggests, but to renew and complete it.

This time of delay that we experience, and as a Church we have experienced it for nearly 2000 years now, is a time of grace bestowed on us. Christ’s second coming might be delayed, but the age of our redemption has already begun. As members of the Church we already are citizens of God’s Kingdom, and our baptismal certificate is our passport into the heavenly realm, so to speak.

I actually know of people who want to be buried with their baptismal certificate. The late German Cardinal Meisner was such an example. At the pearly gates of heaven he showed his ticket, and with God’s grace he was granted entry. At least I heard him speaking about this plan in a homily at Mass in Cologne Cathedral many years ago.

Even if we are impatient, and after a year of this global pandemic, our patience is naturally exhausted, we should be grateful for every extra minute that is granted to us. For with every moment that Christ’s return is delayed, more and more people are given the opportunity to hear

the Gospel, repent, change their life and obtain salvation through Christ, who lives and works in and through his Church.

Yes, the Last Day, the Day of Judgement, will be a day of ultimate justice, but it will also be a day of immeasurable mercy. As I said before in another homily, our Judge is also our Maker, and no one knows our weak human condition as Christ does. The Gospel gives us hope, but it also admonishes us with regard to our daily conduct: we will be judged according to the judgements we make (Mt 7:1-2) and will receive according to our own generosity (Lk 6:38).

However, our “baptismal ticket” does not guarantee us automatic admittance to heaven. We are still called and encouraged to co-operate in our salvation (Phil 2:12) and to avoid eternal damnation, which is the fruit of obstinate and unrepentant abiding in what is evil in the eyes of God.

If we see it from this perspective, this very Advent in the midst of a huge global crisis bears great opportunities in it, hoping to face a lenient Judge on the Last Day.

“Do good to everyone, help the oppressed and foster peace, love your neighbour. This is a true fasting in the eyes of God.”

There is some truth in these lines taken from a well-known German Lenten hymn. The Early Church believed and taught that fasting, praying and almsgiving have a sin-eliminating effect. That was in a period in which the sacrament of reconciliation was reserved to the gravest of sins such as murder, adultery or worshipping false gods, whereas every day sins were forgiven through works of mercy, like giving food to the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, providing medical care to the needy etc. Bringing back to mind this discipline of the Early Church might help us and also give us consolation particularly in a time where the sacrament of penance is not easily available to everyone.<sup>2</sup>

If I may give you, my brothers and sisters, this one advice for Advent, consider following the practice of the Early Church: fast, pray, give alms, and trust in the Lord. Be assured, God desires all people to be saved, and he never rejects a repentant sinner. With this in mind, let us now enter into this renewed period of Advent and let us look forward with joy and hope to the coming of Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> The concept that the practice of charity is an effective means of obtaining the forgiveness of sins was already known to our Jewish brothers and sisters in ancient times. The Babylonian Talmud, a collection of religious tracts (compiled between ca. 200 and ca. 500 AD), recounts the following incident to illustrate this idea:

“It happened once that Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai was coming out of Jerusalem, followed by Rabbi Yoshua, and he beheld the Temple in ruins. ‘Woe to us,’ cried Rabbi Yoshua, ‘for this house that lies in ruins, the place where atonement was made for the sins of Israel!’ Rabban Yoḥanan said to him, ‘My son, be not grieved, for we have another means of atonement which is as effective, and that is, the practice of lovingkindness, as it is stated, *For I desire lovingkindness and not sacrifice*’ [Hos 6:6].” Avot D’Rabbi Natan 4:21, transl. A.. Cohen (1965). (Spelling of names adjusted to more recent conventions).

It is also written:

“Rabbi Yoḥanan and Rabbi Elazar both say: When the Temple was standing, the altar effected atonement for the transgressions of a person, but now that the Temple is not standing, a person’s table effects atonement for his transgressions, if he provides for the poor and needy from the food on his table.” Cf. Menachot 97a, transl. Koren-Steinsaltz. (Wording slightly changed).

On this, see also: *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2019, par. 1434. Source of the two quotations from the Talmud: <https://www.sefaria.org/>

## **The Feeding of the Multitude – On the spirituality of food and drink in Christian life**

In our Gospel reading (Mt 15:29-37) this morning, we hear about one of the many powerful signs the Lord performed during his earthly life: it is the feeding of a multitude with only seven loaves of bread and a few fish.

By doing so, Jesus once again revealed himself in his divinity, making use of the creative power that is inherent to him as the uncreated, eternal Word of God who made heaven and earth. But Jesus is not only God (the Son), much more he is *God with us*, a merciful and compassionate God who takes pity on his creatures, whose fragile nature he took upon himself. The Lord knows the sensation of hunger very well out of his own experience, for after he “fasted forty days and forty nights” in the desert at the beginning of his ministry, “he was famished”, as it says in Matthew’s Gospel (4:2).

If you think about it, is it not interesting that Jesus’ very first miracle was the transformation of water into wine through an act of creative power? (Cf. Jn 2:1–11) And now in our Gospel passage today, Jesus performs another food-related miracle through his creative power, this time providing enough food to satisfy a large crowd of hungry people.

Looking at these two miracles of provision, the wedding feast at Cana and the feeding of the multitude, one cannot help but get the impression that Jesus is actually preparing his followers for a third and even greater miracle, foreshadowed in these two acts of divine power.

The miracle I am talking about is, of course, the transformation of bread and wine into his sacred body and precious blood at the Last Supper. And now, looking into the text once again carefully, it becomes clear that the Evangelist Matthew is indeed alluding to the Last Supper, if we just look at the wording of verse 36 in today’s Gospel reading:

“He took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.”

The similarities between these verses and the institution narrative of the Last Supper (cf. Mt 26:26) are striking, and not by coincidence. The miracle of the feeding of the multitude is meant to point to the Lord’s last and greatest miracle before his crucifixion and glorious resurrection from the dead.

In the said miracles of provision Jesus demonstrated to his followers that he indeed had the power to transform bread and wine into his sacred body and precious blood. And it is beyond any reasonable doubt that Jesus literally meant what he said: This is my body and this is my blood. For with this truly divine food, the Lord chose to leave us supernatural sustenance for the pilgrimage of the Church through the ages, as well as a foretaste of the heavenly wedding banquet that awaits us one day at the end of our earthly journey.

I always marvel at the fact that Jesus decided to be with us “to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20) particularly in the Holy Eucharist, whenever we come together to break the bread of life and share the cup of salvation. Both signify God’s desire to strengthen and sustain us spiritually, especially in times of difficulties and challenges. But even beyond that, these gifts express in the most perfect way something about God’s very essence and character, about the passionate, self-consuming love he feels for us humans who are created in his image.

Food and drink are at the centre of our Christian life, and this not only when we celebrate Mass together. Christ himself loved to eat and drink in company, and did it often so that he was accused of being “a glutton and a drunkard” (Mt 11:19).

Our reliance on regular and good nutrition is a constant reminder of our dependence on God’s providence. We cannot guarantee ourselves that we will still have enough to eat tomorrow, next month, next year. Even more, the very need to eat confronts us with our own finitude and mortality, because if we stop eating and drinking, we will die. This gives our daily consumption of food and drink an almost spiritual, even religious character. No wonder that the dining rooms in monasteries usually look like chapels.

When we ponder and meditate on everything I have said in this homily, it is almost impossible to enjoy a meal, even a very simple one, without saying grace before and after in sincere gratitude towards our Creator.

### **“Love and then do as you wish” – The yoke of discipleship**

These are beautiful words we have heard in our Gospel reading (Mt 11:28-30) today. Jesus invites us to throw off our heavy burden and come to him who will give us rest. The yoke of his discipleship is easy and the burden of his commands is light.

As beautiful as these words sound, they are actually not very easy to understand. What does Jesus mean when he speaks about a burden and a yoke?

In a Jewish context, the yoke is a symbol of the law that was given to Israel. It has a certain weight in itself that must be carried, but it also serves as a support as it makes the heavy work on the farmland easier for the farmer and his draught animals cultivating the soil. As a parable, it illustrates how God directs his people in the promised land through his life-giving instructions to make them grow and prosper.

The Pharisees, however, took the law and interpreted it in such a way that it was hard for the people of the Holy Land to bear. In all fairness, they did not have any bad intentions. They simply interpreted Israel's history in a certain way: whenever Israel disobeyed and transgressed God's commandments, one of their neighbouring peoples arose against them, laid siege to Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple and led the people into exile. That is why the Pharisees wanted to secure the law in such a way that it could practically no longer be violated. If, for example, it was forbidden to hammer a nail on the Sabbath, then the Pharisees also prohibited touching a hammer. So one could not even be tempted to violate a commandment. They called this strategy: building a fence around the Torah, God's holy law. This fence should prevent any transgression.

However, the Pharisees often overdid it quite a bit. To give you an image (and here I deliberately exaggerate a little), let's say there is the following commandment: do not eat sweets before lunch, for they are unhealthy and spoil your appetite. This is a good rule and completely reasonable in itself. The Pharisees now, the concerned and attentive parents they are, not only forbid touching the biscuits on the kitchen table, but they take them all away and put them in a biscuit tin. The biscuit tin they place on top of the kitchen cupboard. Then they take the chairs and the table out of the kitchen so that no one can climb on them. After that they close the kitchen door and lock it with the key from outside, twice, and the key they keep safe in their pocket. Because eating the biscuits might not only spoil one's appetite, but that act of transgression might cause an earthquake that could bring the entire house down...

Jesus could only shake his head over all this fearful nonsense that made the lives of the people a misery. Jesus, God's wisdom incarnate and Lord over the Law, swept aside all these superfluous rules and put the entirety of the Law into two plain and simple commandments: Love God, and love your neighbour. Jesus said,

“This is my commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.” (Jn 15:12)

Yes, Jesus' commandment of love also bears a certain weight in it, but it is much easier to remember than all the various rabbinic rules and regulations, and also much easier to put into practice.

St Augustine has established the following rule concerning the fulfilment of God's commandments in everyday life:

“Love, love with the love of God, and then do as you wish.”

What is done out of pure love or charity can never be wrong, as long as it resembles the fatherly love of God Almighty, who only desires what is good for us and for our fellow human beings.

Love, and then do as you wish. And in following St Augustine’s advice, let us not forget the elderly, the needy, the lonely and those who are sick, everyone who has been particularly hard hit by this Corona crisis. In the name of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

## **On John the Baptist and how Martin Luther changed Christmas forever**

In today's Gospel reading (Mk 1:1-8) we encounter John the Baptist, the last and greatest prophet of the Old Testament. His appearance is humble and rough, and we probably would not want to sit next to him on the bus... For his sustenance he has only what divine providence supplies him with, which is locusts and wild honey, the fruits of the wilderness. John's prophetic mission takes up his entire existence, no earthly concern shall distract him. He is the caller in the desert, and his shouts are as simple as they are demanding and challenging: Repent! Prepare the way for the Lord!

Whatever John the Baptist represents, says or does, it bears witness to a great longing, a consuming desire for the Lord our God. In John we find a zeal that is typical of the great prophets of Israel. He is filled with that yearning expectation which is only, and eventually, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, God incarnate.

Just as St John expected the coming of the Lord in his days, so we too should expect Christ's arrival at all times. Yes, we should be expectant as if the Lord could be standing at our door tonight, tomorrow, anytime. In Judaism there are actually some ultra-orthodox men and women who go to bed fully clothed so that they do not have to welcome the Messiah in their pyjamas should he suddenly appear during the night. This is what I call true and faithful expectation...

Now, let us take a brief look into this world as it is, every year at Christmas time, and it will not take long to see how much the original attitude of waiting has changed. One might think that Christ is no longer the focus of our attention, but rather the various gifts of God's good creation, which people consume with great enjoyment during the "holidays" or which they turn into more or less useful Christmas presents.

All these secondary things have come into focus in such a way that many people in the western world no longer understand the true meaning of Christmas. Even here in formerly very Catholic Ireland we will soon enough be at that point, it would appear.

The custom of having Christmas celebrations at home and exchanging gifts is actually not that old, as a quick look into history tells us. In earlier times (and in some Catholic countries even today), children received their gifts on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December, St Nicholas' Day, the feast day we would have celebrated today if it were not for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent this year. In other countries it is customary to give the children their gifts only on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, which is Epiphany Day, in memory of the three gifts that the Magi brought to the new-born Jesus.

The custom of giving presents to children at Christmas dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century to one of my fellow Germans who is known by the name of Martin Luther. He was critical of the veneration of saints, which of course St Nicholas and the Three Wise Men enjoyed among the wider population. But Luther wanted, in all fairness, to put an emphasis on the importance of Christmas, which until then had been celebrated mainly liturgically in the local churches, and not in the homes of the people as we know it today.

When Luther came up with his changes and adaptations around Christmas, he also thought of the little children whose curiosity he wanted to awaken and whose interest he wanted to draw to the birth of Christ, in order to catechise them. And so he suggested that in the reformed territories of Germany the children should be given little gifts on Christmas Day.

Luther's intentions may have been good and reasonable from his point of view. He wanted to promote Christocentric forms of piety, teach children in the faith, and strengthen Christian family life by bringing Christmas home to the people. But in the end, Christmas in Western culture has developed into something that he himself never thought possible, up to the point that in the secular Christmas there is nothing left of our joyful and undivided expectation of Christ that we share with the great prophets such as St John the Baptist.

This year a number of things are very different. You all noticed it for yourselves. A certain anxiety is mixed into the seasonal mood of many these days as it was hardly ever known among us in recent decades. Will Christmas be celebrated this year and if yes, how? Will we be able to see and meet our loved ones? What about the elderly, the sick, the vulnerable? Will they be able to be with us, or with anyone, this year?

I certainly do not welcome this pandemic and we would all be far better off if this virus had never started spreading a year ago. However, if this pandemic causes us to think about a number of things again, things that we have taken for granted, or if it makes us reassess our individual priorities, I will not complain.

I know, I am preaching to the choir in this congregation. But I still have hope for many in this country, the island of St Patrick and St Brigid after all, and from where St Killian once brought the Gospel to Germany. Perhaps a disaster like this can help us not to completely forget about God in view of all the knick-knacks and trinkets in this world. St John the Baptist serves as an excellent reminder to us all in these matters, as he freed himself from such distractions to look at and point solely to Christ, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Let us now and in the coming weeks prepare the way for the Lord and make a straight path for him. Amen.

## **“Put everything to the test and keep what is good” – On the origins and meaning of the Advent wreath**

In our Gospel reading (Jn 1:6-8, 19-28) today we encounter once again St John the Baptist, the last and greatest prophet of the Old Testament. The radicalism of his lifestyle attracts many people, disciples but also sceptics, to turn to him and talk to him. Some of them put John through his paces to find out what kind of message he has to bring or what claims he makes about himself.

Is he perhaps the long-awaited prophet Elijah who is to herald the coming of the Messiah? Or is he even the Messiah himself? By what right does he perform his actions that refer to the looming end of the world, calling out in the wilderness and baptising repentant sinners?

Yet, being asked about all this or even confronted about his message and actions, John points away from himself to the One who is to come after him. And this one is so much greater than John himself, so much that John would not dare to stoop down and untie his sandals. This attitude of pointing away from himself and towards Jesus makes John a prophet of hope, if not *the* prophet of hope. It makes him a prophet of the imminent expectation, who serves as an example how to expect Christ, our Lord and Redeemer. As a Church we do live in constant expectation of Christ's return, as we profess at the memorial acclamation: we proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your resurrection until you come again. And even if Christ's second coming is delayed, we take this gratefully as a period of grace and patience granted to us. A few weeks ago I spoke about liturgical colours during the season of Advent and about how the radiant light of the approaching Christmas Day penetrates the black that the priest would appropriately wear at Mass as a sign of repentance during Advent, but the light of Christmas brightens black up into a royal purple. This special Sunday, however, the light of Christmas shines through even brighter, and the purple of penance turns into a joyful rose. Grief and penance pause for a day and we are invited to celebrate this Sunday joyfully. The Christmas Day is very close now, and we are redeemed, after all. We are just in expectation of the fullness of redemption, living in a world in travail. This why one of the four candles on the Advent wreath is pink and the priest's chasuble looks a bit brighter this Sunday.

It is actually worth taking a closer look at the Advent wreath here in our church, as it is full of Christian symbolism that appears to be very little known to many who decorate their home with an Advent wreath. And it gives me another opportunity to share something of my native culture with my Irish brothers and sisters, because the Advent wreath originates from Germany and its various Christmas traditions.

The circular form of the Advent wreath is an ancient symbol of eternity in many cultures. For us who are baptised in Christ it serves as a reminder of God's infinite love and mercy.

In ancient times the people of Germany took evergreen plants into their homes, especially during the barren winter months, as a symbol of life, health, fertility and, last but not least, hope: as the end of winter comes closer and the snow slowly begins to melt, the green grass gradually shines out from under the snow cover, heralding the coming of spring. And this ancient custom of decorating one's home with evergreens during the dark and cold season is where the popular German “Tannenbaum” comes from. In the Christian Church, fir branches or trees and other evergreen plants represent the hope of eternal life brought to us by Christ.

Candles are likewise an old symbol of hope and often served as a light offering, as for example in the pagan cults of the Roman civilisation. Nowadays they represent the four weeks of the

Advent season, but also Christ the Lord himself, who is the Light of the world shining bright for us and saving us from darkness.

All these various symbols work very well to illustrate what Christians believe and therefore could be easily adopted by Mother Church. Here she follows the advice of St Paul that we heard in our New Testament reading today: “Test everything, keep what is good”. (1 Thess 5:21)

Incidentally, the tradition of using an Advent wreath to count the remaining time until Christmas is not that old at all; in fact, it is a rather recent invention from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And there is actually an interesting story behind it, which I would like to share with you.

At that time, a well-known Protestant pastor from Hamburg named Johann H. Wichern (1808–1881) took care of homeless children, offering them a home, education and a Christian upbringing. Each year at Advent the same thing happened at the orphanage, the children came to him every day asking him if it was Christmas yet. Eventually, in the year 1839, he took a large wooden ring made of an old cartwheel, and attached twenty small red candles and four large white candles to it. This way, the children could easily count off the days until Christmas. Not long after, probably for reasons of cost, the number of candles was reduced to four, three of which now are purple and one that is rose coloured. To count down the days until Christmas, children now have the Advent calendars.

Catholics adopted the custom of using Advent wreaths only about a hundred years later, but then it quickly spread throughout the Catholic areas in Germany as well. German immigrants brought the Advent wreath to the United States, and the British royal family, of German descent, spread their native Christmas customs throughout the British Isles. This is how Advent wreaths and the Christmas tree eventually came to Ireland, where you see them everywhere now.

The Irish, however, have not simply copied a German custom, but they added something of their own to it that is completely unknown in Germany: it is the white candle in the middle of the wreath that is lit on Christmas Eve and that bears witness to our Christian joy and hope. The Advent wreath here next to me therefore combines German and Irish traditions, and if you look closely at our wreath in its beauty, you will notice that it proclaims the holy Gospel even without the use of words and yet more eloquently than many a homily. So the next time you come across an Advent wreath, feel free to take a moment to look at it closely and to meditate on the mysteries of our Christian faith.

### **“Are you the one who is to come?” – Jesus, the “unexpected” Messiah**

This is an interesting question that John the Baptist addresses to Jesus from prison in our Gospel reading (Lk 7:19-23) today:

“Are you the one who is to come, or must we wait for someone else?”

What is interesting about this question is not so much its content, but the fact that it is asked in the first place. Are you, Jesus of Nazareth, really the long and desperately awaited Messiah?

One would think that a prophet of John’s stature would know the answer to this question beyond any doubt. But John was not only a great prophet, he was also a child of his time, and as such he had of course a number of expectations about the Messiah. And this Jesus of Nazareth is so very different from all these expectations. Starting with his birth in a smelly stable instead of a stately chamber....

The Messiah that the Jews were eagerly awaiting was thought of as a powerful political ruler and military leader in the image of King David, his ancestor. The most common expectation was that the Messiah would crush the enemies of the Jewish people and redeem Israel from every oppressor, eventually subjugate every Gentile nation on this planet and make Jerusalem the capital of a world empire with the Temple of Jerusalem in its centre.

John, the Jewish prophet, believed in Jesus, of course. But this man, upon whom John saw the Holy Spirit descend like a dove, made no move to gather an army and launch a war against the pagan empires of the world, particularly against the Roman oppressors. And so Jesus gave him an answer that John could not only understand, but immediately wiped away every doubt, every confusion from his mind:

“The blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them.”

Yes, Jesus is indeed the Messiah and all the miracles he performed testified to this truth. The messianic age of which the prophets of the Old Testament have spoken has finally dawned with Jesus. But God’s plan for the world turned out to be quite different from human expectations, or the (very understandable) wishful thinking of a people groaning under Roman occupation...

In Jesus, God stretches out his hand not to strike humanity, but to heal it and guide it. The messianic world war against a sinful and rebellious humanity is cancelled and the Last Judgement is postponed for the time being. With Jesus, a time of grace and deferral of punishment has begun in order to give even the worst sinner the opportunity to repent and turn to God the loving Father.

God does not want the sinner to perish in his evil deeds, but to mend his ways and live. John recognised this message in the saving action of Jesus, and so he could depart from this world in peace, even at the hands of a gruesome despot. Everything is in God’s good hand and we have no reason to fear whatever may happen.

Advent is given to us as a time of contemplation and repentance. Let us use the remaining time to return to God who calls us to salvation.

In this spirit, let us now joyfully receive Jesus who descends to us in the most holy sacrament of the altar to be with us and save us.



## **“The Word was made flesh and dwelled among us” – On the importance of the Angelus Prayer in our daily life**

With our celebration of the Fourth Sunday of Advent this annual period of penance, but also of our joyful preparation for the birth feast of Christ the Lord, is slowly coming to a conclusion. The four candles of the Advent wreath are lit and the fifth candle, the white one, stands ready to announce the arrival of Christmas Eve in only a few days from now.

With the beginning of Advent four weeks ago, the new liturgical year commenced and has as a first and special highlight the Christmas feast next week. In today’s Gospel (Lk 1:26-38), we have heard the announcement of this most important event in history, the coming of our Saviour into the world. As the chosen gate of salvation, the Virgin Mary willingly made herself available to God’s plan:

“Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to thy word. And the Word was made flesh and dwelled among us.”

When I prepared this homily and read the Gospel passage for this Sunday, I remembered a story one of my classmates at university told me many years ago. He grew up in the north of Germany, in a rural region. Very rural, and very Catholic... One of his early childhood memories was of his late grandmother and his auntie sitting at the kitchen table in the farmhouse and busily peeling potatoes around lunchtime. When the bells rang at twelve noon, they would immediately begin to say the Angelus prayer:

“The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary:  
And she conceived of the Holy Spirit.  
Hail Mary...”

However, saying this prayer did not distract them from diligently peeling the potatoes at high speed... Well, after all, the farm workers would soon be back from the field for lunch, and of course they expected their meal to be on the table on time after all the hard physical work in the morning.

I have never forgotten this story, because it spoke to me in a special way. It told me how people “in the good old days” used to make their religion, their faith practice, very naturally a part of their daily lives. And Christ, as a country boy himself, certainly did not mind taking part in the potato peeling with the women in the kitchen.

In Ireland today we have a recurring debate about whether the ringing of the Angelus bells should still be broadcast on the public radio and television at the traditional times. I find this debate rather strange, I have to admit, given how deeply rooted in the Christian faith this country used to be until not too long ago.

Well, as we all know, the relationship of the Irish with their Church is complicated for several reasons, and as a newly ordained priest who was not even born here in this country, I do not want to dwell upon this very subject in this homily. However, what I would like to suggest to my Irish brothers and sisters is that we should not give up the Angelus prayer too quickly and too lightly in this country. Not only does it remind us of Christ’s immeasurable love that was willing to give up all heavenly glory to come down to earth in order to save us. This pious practice can also help us to sanctify our daily lives and make us aware of Christ’s presence throughout the day, time and again.

I admit that my own discipline regarding the Angelus prayer used to be much better in the past. But still, this prayer has due to its contents a special meaning for me, and I try to pray it whenever the Angelus bells send me a reminder. Which is rare enough in Ireland these days...

Sometimes I resort to a compromise solution, which I came to know in my home diocese in Germany: I sometimes pray the Angelus in a shortened form as a table prayer before lunch or dinner. In this way I have integrated a memorial of the Lord's incarnation into my daily life, even if not exactly at twelve noon or six o'clock in the evening every day. But it gives me a moment of quiet and rest, and helps me grow in faith, hope and charity just before I receive the material sustenance I need in order to fulfil my duties in the vineyard of the Lord.

In this spirit, may I now invite you to pray with me this shortened version of the Angelus prayer so that I can introduce you to it?

The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary:  
And she conceived of the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

Behold the handmaid of the Lord:  
Be it done unto me according to Thy word.

And the Word was made Flesh:  
And dwelt among us.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee;  
blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.  
Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners,  
now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God,  
that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Let us pray:

Pour forth, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy grace into our hearts; that we, to whom the incarnation of Christ, Thy Son, was made known by the message of an angel, may by his Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of his Resurrection, through the same Christ Our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> In this way of praying the Angelus, all the inserted *Hail Marys* are omitted except the last.

## The New Ark of the Covenant

In our liturgies these days, we are now rapidly moving towards Christmas. In our Gospel reading (Lk 1:39-45) this morning we heard of Mary's pregnancy, and how she visited her relative Elizabeth, who also had miraculously become pregnant in her advanced age. We heard how Mary and Elizabeth met in the hill country of Judea, and also how Jesus and his forerunner John the future Baptist met for the first time. Although still in the womb, John was already filled with the Holy Spirit (cf. Lk 1:15), and so even before his birth he prophetically pointed to the Saviour and Redeemer by leaping for joy, welcoming their august visitor. As this occurred, Elizabeth was also filled with the Holy Spirit and greeted her younger relative, the mother of her Lord (which means the Queen Mother), joyfully and reverently with the famous words that have eventually found their way into the Hail Mary:

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

Mary is blessed because she believed the word of the Archangel Gabriel to her and gave her “yes” to the conception of the Son of God for the salvation of the world. And so she responded to Elisabeth's greeting with the words that have also found their way into the liturgy of the Church as the so-called Magnificat prayer:

“My soul glorifies the Lord,  
my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.  
He looks on his servant in her lowliness;  
henceforth all ages will call me blessed.”

Mary brought God to the house of Zechariah, both in her heart and in her womb, and this momentous event, though still hidden from the eyes of the world, nevertheless did not go unrecognised by those who put their trust in the Lord.

If we take a closer look at the whole scene, we will soon recognise an episode from the Old Testament in this passage from Luke's Gospel. In the Second Book of the Prophet Samuel, it is described how King David has the Ark of the Covenant brought up to Mount Zion. He wants to give it, and with it the earthly presence of God, a permanent and dignified dwelling place in Jerusalem, which is of course situated in the hill country of Judea. Upon the arrival of the Ark, David exclaimed filled with awe:

“How can the ark of the Lord ever come to me?” (2 Sam 6:9)

After that, King David leapt and danced with all his might before it, filled with exuberant joy at the arrival of the Ark of the Covenant.

The parallels between the two passages in the Scriptures are so obvious that in the Second Book of Samuel we can clearly recognise a foreshadowing of Mary's visit with baby Jesus in her womb to the house of Zechariah. The Evangelist Luke obviously alludes to Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant, because both Mary and the Ark carried the Word of God within them: in the Ark it was recorded on the two stone tablets with the ten commandments, whereas in Mary's womb the Eternal Word of God himself has taken on flesh and is awaiting his upcoming birth in the town of David.

In the Book of Revelation, written by St John, we again find this connection first uncovered by St Luke in his Gospel, namely of Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant:

“Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail. [And a] great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant [...] And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron.” (Rev 11:19-12:1-2,5)

In the passages I spoke about this morning, we find very early and truly beautiful examples of Mariological reflections, as they were made even in the New Testament. However, we also discover an important underlying principle for such reflections: good Mariology is at the same time always Christology. In other words, Mary’s attributes and privileges are always thought of in relation to her Son, with reference to him and never independent of him.<sup>4</sup>

If we think about it, it was in precisely this way, in this spirit, that Mary lived her earthly life: never was it just about her alone, but always about her relationship with her Divine Son and how she could serve him best in his salvific mission. Like John the Baptist, her whole existence served to point to her Son, from the manger to the cross. In this she became the archetype of the Church. And as at the wedding feast at Cana, so she says to the followers of her son at all times and places: “Do whatever he tells you.” (Jn 2:5) Mary has indeed become the ark of the covenant that has carried God’s life-giving Word within her in order to deliver it to the world.

Let us be inspired by the joy of King David, of Elizabeth and of John the Baptist at the arrival of the Word of God for the salvation of the world. And let us receive with the same joy Christ the Lord, whose Nativity we will celebrate in a few days from now. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> For a contemporary, biblically founded Mariology I recommend the following book: Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary: Unveiling the Mother of the Messiah*, Random House USA Inc, Image Publishing, New York, United States, 2018. I also recommend: Tim Staples, *Behold Your Mother: A Biblical and Historical Defense of the Marian Doctrines*, Catholic Answers Press, El Cajon (CA), United States, 2017. And: Joseph Ratzinger, Hans Urs von Balthasar (authors), *Mary: The Church at the Source*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco (CA), United States, 2005.

## **Christmas Eve – On why Christ gave up his heavenly glory and became man**

As dusk falls today, one of the highest feast days of the liturgical year begins for us, which is Christmas. We celebrate the birth of the Son of God, who came into the world to save us.

Here, in front of the altar in this magnificent church, we find a beautiful nativity scene that illustrates what God's love was willing to do for us. Here beside me we have the Advent wreath, now brightly alight. All the five candles are lit, including the white one in the middle, which announces that the light of the world has come into our midst to enlighten us.

Candles are a wonderful symbol of God's love. In order to shine and brighten up the darkness, a candle must consume itself. This is the price it is prepared to pay, because only in this way can it be true to its very nature. A candle that does not burn and shine is nothing but a stick of wax. And love that is not prepared to make a sacrifice is not worthy to be called love. A sacrifice costs and therefore a person is only willing to make it for something or someone that really matters to him.

Jesus was willing to make sacrifices for us that cost him, quite a lot so! We all know of the sacrifice of his own life, of his passion and cross, in order to save us from sin and death. But Jesus made another sacrifice for us that weighs no less heavily than the cross: he gave up his heavenly existence, all his glory as the Second Person of the Trinity, to come down to earth and take on our frail and needy human nature. Even more, Jesus did not only share in our lowly earthly existence, but he has swapped his heavenly throne for nothing better than the manger and the cross. What an exchange!

But why on earth did Jesus do that? What moved him to descend from being God in heaven into a small human body, exposed to cold, hunger, fatigue, even the ability to suffer and die? In an attempt to answer this question, I once heard an interesting parable:

Once upon a time there was a young, beautiful queen who lived in a huge, wonderful palace. On her coronation day, she showed herself to her jubilant people in the beautifully arranged park of her palace, which her father had once laid out for her to inherit. She wore her impressive coronation robes, the silken gown, the royal fur coat, the priceless crown jewels. As she walked down the rows of her humbly bowing subjects, she heard something in the background. She listened intently to the noise and suddenly realised, it was cries for help! Those cries came from her little child. He had fallen into the duck pond on the grounds, although she had strictly forbidden him to play around there. Without a second's hesitation, she stripped off her heavy coat and pushed the crown off her head. As she started hasting towards the pond, she threw off all the heavy gold and shiny jewels that weighed on her. Then she jumped into the pond to save her child. All her royal splendour meant nothing to her when her own child was in the greatest danger.

The love of Christ can be compared to the love of a mother for her child who needs to be saved. This child is the whole of humanity. But even if we were the only man or woman on this planet, you or me, Jesus would still have been willing to pay any price for our rescue. In God's eyes, human beings are of infinite value, and it makes no difference to him whether he comes to the aid of all people or just one.

Part of the nature of Adam's sin, the original sin, is a deep-seated suspicion against God and his unconditional will to salvation. We constantly ask ourselves, can it really be God's will that

we do this or refrain from doing that? How can we be sure of it? Maybe we sometimes just know better than God or his Church? With hesitation grows doubt, and with doubt grows uneasiness about God. And it is this uneasiness that keeps us from accepting God's loving embrace.

God knew that in the end there was only one way to overcome original doubt, this original human mistrust against him. He had to become human himself, to live among us as one of us. That way he could not only give us an example how a human being should live and die before God. He could also show to us what God's love was willing to do, or even to give up for us. This willingness to humble himself and to endure the worst violence without raising a hand against us is God's everlasting message to us: Do not be afraid, I love you. Nothing will ever separate me from you. Come to me, my arms are always open. Like my outstretched arms on the cross, I will never put them together, except to embrace you.

How we live our lives, how we behave towards God and our neighbour, this is how we choose to respond to God's love. It is only the deed that matters, words alone must remain empty and void. This, too, is the message of the manger and the cross.

Now, at the turn of the year, in the greatest crisis of our country since the Second World War, we find ourselves once again being asked: How do we want to live before God and our neighbour? How will we express our love in response to God's love? What is it that truly matters to us in this life, and the next?

As a little anecdote to conclude this homily: I once told the story of the young queen who throws off all her glory in order to save her screaming child in another parish. After Mass, one of the parishioners came up to me and said: "But now you haven't told us one thing, will the child be saved?" After a short moment of thought, I answered: "You have to tell me. You are this child. Are you ready to grasp the saving hand?"

In this Spirit, let us now celebrate the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

## **On the Prophetess Anna and the wise women in our parishes**

In our Gospel reading (Lk 2:36-40) today we encounter Anna, an elderly widow, who together with Simeon and John the Baptist belongs to the last three prophets of the Old Testament. A prophet in the Biblical sense is not someone who foresees or predicts the future, as if he is some kind of a “sacred fortune-teller”. He or she is rather someone who has received a special gift from the Holy Spirit, which is the ability to see the world through the eyes of God. They have the gift of seeing God's work in the world, they have an eye for *the bigger picture*. When or where necessary, they admonish and warn, or more generally proclaim God's deeds and God's counsel to his people. If you look at the original meaning of the word prophet in ancient times, it means nothing other than spokesperson of an important personality, which can include a deity.

The prophetess Anna became a widow at a young age, which used to be a terrible blow for women at her time. With the death of her husband, a woman used to lose all her social security, especially if she was childless or, even worse, became a widow as a young mother with little children. Often, all she had left to survive was to beg for food or money, or to find a new husband quickly who would provide for her. Anna, too, was hit by such a blow of fate. However, she did not become bitter over this, but worshipped God in his holy Temple night and day, fasting and praying (cf. Lk 2:37).

She lived in the temple courts day and night and conversed with God. Through her complete self-dedication to her creator, she became holy, wise and insightful into the matters of the divine, of that which is God's. As the decades went by, it was given to her as a special grace to see the world through God's eyes, which means she became the prophetess who met Jesus in the Temple. And through the gifts of grace bestowed on her, she was able to recognise in him the promised Messiah who had been so desperately awaited by his people in times of need.

When the time came for Jesus to be presented to God in the Temple, it was God the Son himself who entered his Father's house. He entered what he could have rightfully claimed as his home, taking up his residence in the midst of his people. But those who were his own, his holy possession through the covenant of Abraham and Moses, often did not recognise him when they saw him, because they did not see the world with God's eyes. But Anna, the prophetess, instantly recognised the child to be the awaited Messiah and excitedly proclaimed him. Many in Israel expected a mighty warrior who would overthrow the Romans, but she saw that God's love does not threaten or force, not even the worst enemies of his chosen people, but invites us into his love through the smiling features of a little baby.

It was the believing eyes of Anna, and Simeon's, too, that saw God's plan and self-revelation in this very special infant. And it was the obedient hearts of Mary and Joseph who welcomed the God-child unconditionally into their lives, out of a love that knows neither questions nor objections against God, the loving Father of all humanity created in his own image.

If we look into the history of salvation in general and of the Church in particular, we see that it is often the older women who have learned to see the world through God's eyes, which are the eyes of love and wisdom. They have sacrificed themselves as a living offering to God over many decades by being there entirely for their family, often at the expense of their own self-development or self-realisation. This, too, is a form of holy poverty that is pleasing to God, just like Anna's, because it corresponds to his very own, self-giving nature. As a result, many of these women have become holy, wise and insightful, and often speak for God in unexpected ways or with unexpected messages of higher wisdom, which is of course wisdom of the heart.

But how often are these women overlooked, or not taken seriously because of their personal humility, modesty and simplicity of life?

In every parish there is at least one Anna, often in the guise of an elderly lady with a number of children and grandchildren already grown up. And such an Anna can be seen in or around the church every day, where she seeks God's holy presence and converses with him as an old confidant.

From the very beginning, the Church has been sustained by the testimony of women, and not only by their testimony, but by their ability to give themselves up entirely out of pure love, a love that does not ask questions and does not calculate. There is a reason why the Church is usually portrayed as a woman, or why we call her *Mother Church*. We owe our many Annas greatly and would do well to listen to them carefully. And when I say "we", I mean especially us men in the Church.

## **“And the Word was made flesh” – On the meaning of the Eucharist for our Christian life**

Today we celebrate the first Sunday after the Christmas Octave, the eight days of Christmas, and we are still visibly in the Christmas season, as we can tell by the decorations here inside our beautiful parish church. Our Gospel reading (Jn 1:1-18) this morning keeps the commemoration of the incarnation of the living Word of God, the Second Person of the most Holy Trinity, alive in our liturgy. Unlike the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke, we do not encounter a picturesque nativity scene with poor shepherds and exotic visitors from the East in the Fourth Gospel. The Gospel of John starts off much, much earlier with its narrative. It tells us of the pre-existence of God the Son “in the beginning”, characterised as the living and powerful Word of God, “Logos” in Greek, through whom all things were made. This mighty Logos emptied himself at the fullness of time, making his way into time and space, all the way down to earth in order to achieve the previously unimaginable, namely, to become a human being, in everything like us but sin. The all-powerful, trans-dimensional Godhead willed to smile at us as a little baby in a manger.

Even if it sounds repetitive to the listeners and is also a challenge for the preacher to find the same Gospel text again and again in our readings within only a few days, it is still important to keep this fundamental truth of faith, Christ’s incarnation, in mind. Christianity lives from commemoration, from the remembrance of God’s saving deeds for humanity; when we talk about active remembrance, that which is remembered becomes a reality, becomes the real presence of the salvific deeds of Christ, and this has a profound effect on each and every recipient of such a healing and saving deed who is in the right disposition.

What I have just explained becomes particularly clear in our celebration of the Eucharist. It is not a re-enactment of the Last Supper, nor is it a mere remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice. Our celebration of the Eucharist is a real and true participation in the Lord’s last meal with his disciples, which is becoming a tangible reality here on the altar and in the reception of Holy Communion. Together with the apostles and the entire Church of all times we are invited to participate in this one heavenly meal.

Whenever we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, this our parish church truly turns into Calvary, the very place where Christ gave himself for the salvation of the world. This altar here becomes the one True Cross whenever we gather for the celebration of Christ’s death and resurrection. Christ’s body and blood, separated when the Lord sacrificed himself on the cross, are truly present here under the species of bread and wine in order to form a real symbol of his death for us. And through the act of Holy Communion, we experience God’s self-consuming love whenever we faithfully receive the eucharistic gifts.

However, apart from witnessing Calvary here at Mass, something different takes place, too, whenever we gather to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. At Mass, not only does the sacrifice of the cross become truly present, but something else becomes real, turns into tangible reality. It is what we have heard in today’s Gospel: Christ empties himself, strips himself of his heavenly glory, descends from heaven during the Eucharistic Prayer and takes on the humble form of bread and wine. By doing so over and over again, Christ remains faithful to his promise to be with us until the end of the age and to strengthen us on our path of discipleship. Our parish church turns into Bethlehem, that translates as “House of Bread”, and the altar turns into the manger on which Christ Jesus rests as “something that is to be eaten”. At the elevation of the gifts we worship Christ who has come down to us, joining the Three Wise Men in giving homage to the God-made-man. These all are true and repeating Christmas moments during

Mass, which makes the use of festive vestments and of incense appropriate, although the latter is very rare here in Ireland.

Now, why is it so important for us to gather regularly to celebrate the Eucharist, so important that the Early Church kept doing it even under the threat of persecution and death? Because the ongoing and repetitive celebration of the mysteries of our Christian faith consolidates for us our salvation, which is offered to us through Jesus Christ but also endangered through mortal sin. Eaten bread is quickly forgotten, says a proverb, and in a way this also applies to the bread of faith, nourished through the Bread of Life. Once we fall into forgetfulness of God, we cease to be like Christ.

There is the real danger of becoming like animals whose lives revolve merely around eating, sleeping and procreating. And the kingdom of heaven remains closed to such beasts. Therefore we must keep the faith alive in us, constantly reassure one another of it and strengthen each other in it as the communion of the faithful. And above all we do this by celebrating the mysteries of salvation throughout the liturgical year, by receiving the Word of God and the Holy Eucharist as often as possible. We cannot be without these, as the early Christians testified. I am thinking here particularly of the Holy Martyrs of Abitinae who in the year 304 were seized during the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist under Emperor Diocletian and were executed for this crime against the Roman State. Without that which is the Lord's we cannot be: this was their only defence during their trials.

As we now approach the day of the Epiphany of Christ, let us recall the words of St Thomas Aquinas and join with the Three Wise Men in adoring the King of the World, who made himself so low for us that we must get down on our knees in order to be able to look him in the eyes:

“Come, adore this wondrous presence,  
bow to Christ, the source of grace.  
Here is kept the ancient promise  
of God's earthly dwelling-place.  
Sight is blind before God's glory,  
faith alone may see his face.”<sup>5</sup>

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on us as we enter into this New Year 2021. May it be a better year than the one we are leaving behind us. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://dublindiocese.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Hour-of-Prayer-for-Life-May-2018-Resources.pdf>

## **Epiphany – On giving birth to Christ in this world**

Today we celebrate one of the oldest feasts of the Church, the Solemnity of the Epiphany, which is even older than Christmas. Only Easter is more ancient as it goes back to the times of the Apostles. Sometimes Epiphany is called “Little Christmas” because of the festive commemoration of the arrival of the Three Wise Men at the stable in Bethlehem in order to pay homage to baby Jesus.

In Ireland there are different traditions around this feast day. Here it is called “Women’s Christmas”, as I found out when I prepared this homily. After the exhausting days of the Christmas season with all the cleaning, decorating, cooking, washing up, looking after the children etc., the women gave themselves day of rest and enjoyed their lives. They often used to meet up with their lady friends and I was told that the 6<sup>th</sup> of January was the only day of the year when you could see respectable women in the pub during daytime. It sounds a bit like an Irish version of Mother’s Day to me.

In Germany it is customary for children to dress up as the “Three Holy Kings”, into whom popular belief has turned the unnumbered Magi in Matthew’s Gospel. Organised by their parishes, the little holy kings and queens go from house to house in their respective parish, following a golden star on top of a staff one of them carries, and sing hymns and carols for the people they visit. As a “thank you” for this little joy they bring, they receive some sweets for themselves and a monetary donation which is passed on to needy children in poor countries.

Liturgically, however, there are three major events in the life of Jesus that are actually commemorated today, although the popular focus is on one of them only. Besides the visit of the Three Wise Men, today is also the commemoration of Christ’s baptism in the River Jordan and of the Wedding Feast at Cana. What they all have in common is that the divinity of Jesus is revealed in them. And that is what the Word Epiphany points to, as it originally means the apparition (or appearance) of an Emperor or a deity of the Greco-Roman world.

In the visit of the Magi, the peoples of the world symbolically go on pilgrimage to the newborn Messiah to worship him, represented by the Three Wise Men who were later seen as three kings, one from each continent known at that time. These were Europe, Asia and Africa, which explains why one of the three Kings in a nativity scene is usually depicted with dark skin. But worship is due to God alone, otherwise it would be idolatry. In receiving rightfully an act of worship from the peoples of the world, Christ’s divinity and universal rule over the world is revealed.

Interestingly, it is the Three Wise Men, not the people of Jerusalem, who set out to find and worship the Lord. Only some of the poorest of the Jewish people, the shepherds, set out to find and worship their Lord and King. The patriarchs, prophets and great leaders of Israel all began their careers as shepherds, such as Abraham, Moses and David. And so the great descendant of the shepherd-king David revealed himself to humble shepherds, turning them into prophets themselves. In faithfully following the call of an angel, they became prophets of the one Good Shepherd, to whose arrival they bore witness to their people Israel. Therefore, the shepherds, too, have found their deserved place in the nativity scene right next to the Three Wise Men.

In recent weeks, I have repeatedly pointed out that Christmas does not end with the passing of the feast. Christmas is an ongoing process that takes place unceasingly in the Church and in the world. Christ comes down to us again and again and takes on a lower form in order to give

himself to us and to be with us until the end of time. But we also have a part in bringing Christ into the world.

The medieval German Dominican and theologian, Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), summarised this idea in the following way:

“What good is it to me if Mary gave birth to the Son of God 1300 years ago and I do not give birth to the Son of God in my own person and time and culture? ... We are all meant to be mothers of God.”<sup>6</sup>

Through baptism and the worthy reception of the Eucharist, we, the community of believers, have been and are being conformed to Christ in an ever-increasing process. That we have opened ourselves to this process and are joyfully undergoing it is evident in the way we live. We are conformed to Christ exactly when we love our neighbour, who is created in the image and likeness of God. And we are conformed to Christ only when we make him perceptible to our neighbour, particularly through the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. This is how we continually bring Christ into this world, as his living body with many members.

Lord Jesus Christ, true God and true man, we pray for your perpetual assistance through your Holy Spirit, that we may become more and more like you, re-created in your likeness, in this life and for all eternity. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Cited in Matthew Fox, *Christian Mystics: 365 Readings and Meditations*, Novato, California, 2011, p. 148. In this source, the number of years since the birth of Christ in Meister Eckhart's quotation is incorrectly given as *1400 years*. In view of Eckhart's biographical data, I have corrected this to *1300 years* in the quotation.

## **The Baptism of Christ – A new birth of water and the Spirit**

With this Vigil Mass tonight we begin the celebration of the solemnity of the Baptism of Christ. Curiously, we celebrate this momentous event in the life of Christ twice within only a few days, on Epiphany Day last Wednesday and now once again this Sunday.

The reason for this is that three important events in the life of Christ are celebrated all together on Epiphany Day. These are the revelation (or epiphany) of Christ's divinity in the manger, at his baptism in the River Jordan and at the Wedding Feast of Cana. However, since the other two events recede behind the visit of the Three Wise Men in popular piety, this highly significant event that marks the beginning of Christ's public ministry, his baptism by John the Baptist, received its own feast day on the Sunday after Epiphany.

Christ's public ministry began, as we heard in our Gospel reading (Mk 1:7-11) today, with an act of utmost humility that was pleasing to God, namely, his lining up together with repentant sinners in order to be baptised, though he himself was entirely free of sin and guilt.

But if Jesus was free of all evil in the first place, why did he choose to step into the waters of the Jordan and to be baptised? The answer to this question is complex, but it is worth pursuing in order to understand the meaning of our own baptism as the key sacrament to our salvation.

In an attempt to answer that question it is useful to know that in Judaism at the time of John the Baptist and the Second Temple, the act of submersion in water was a bit different from our common understanding of baptism today. Today we let water run over a person that wants to be baptised as a sign of washing away the stain of original sin. But in Second Temple Judaism, the symbolism of water was much richer, much more complex than just its mere cleansing effects.

In Biblical times, water symbolised the underworld, the realm of death. In deep water it is cold and dark, and one is exposed to death if one does not soon find one's way back to the surface and to dry land. Therefore, submersion into this potentially dangerous medium corresponded to a symbolic death of a sinner in some kind of a watery grave for his evil deeds.

However, there is a second and quite different aspect to water as a powerful symbol in the Scriptures. The living (i.e. running) water of a spring or river symbolises new life, because it makes the desert bloom, and if we do not drink fresh water frequently, we will die of thirst. As much as water can be life-threatening, it has also life-giving powers. Water can therefore very well be taken as a symbol of God's will to save the sinner from eternal death and damnation in the underworld.

Last, but not least, there is a third aspect to the symbolism of water that is worth mentioning. In a popular Jewish interpretation, a river or a pool filled with running water can symbolise the waters in a mother's womb. Emerging from such water after full submersion resembles a moment of new birth, of a new beginning.

Taking all this together, the original rite of baptism is designed as a symbolic death and resurrection of a repentant sinner. The old person dies in the waters of the Jordan, which also washes off the evil deeds of a repentant sinner symbolically. A purified, reborn person then comes out of the water, being raised to new life, a new beginning before God.

In the case of Christ himself, however, the act of baptism is not intended to purify him from sin, which would have rightfully caused St John's protest. Whoever is all clean already does not need a bath. No, in Jesus' case his baptism is rather a foreshadowing of his own death and resurrection for the salvation of the world. By submitting to baptism, Christ makes it his own and reshapes it from a mere symbol of repentance into an effective sacrament for the forgiveness of sins. He willingly joined sinners, not because he is one of them, but because he was sent to them in order to save them. Christ has become like them in everything but sin, so that he can reach out to them with his Gospel message and invite them into his kingdom.

In what I have said it became clear that Christ Jesus was not baptised because he had to be, but because he wanted to create a means of salvation for his followers of all times. Through the touch of his sacred body, he has transformed the deep waters of death into a gushing spring of life. And walking through the dark waters of the underworld, he prepared a safe passage for his Church into the promised land of the New Creation, just as Moses did when he parted the waters of the Red Sea so that the children of Israel could escape from certain death to safety on the other shore.

Christ gave us in baptism a means to be born again through water and through Spirit, as he said to Nicodemus in a famous conversation (cf. Jn 3:1-21). In baptism, he left us a sacramental participation in his death and resurrection, just as he left us a memorial of the same in the Eucharist. Both sacraments have the power to conform us to Christ, though in different ways.

Unlike Holy Communion, the Sacrament of Baptism cannot be repeated due to its very nature. However, our baptismal promises can be renewed, and should be renewed frequently. They commit us to die to sin and live for God, and therefore are our infallible guideline to Eternal Salvation. Therefore, may I invite you now to renew your baptismal vows here and now?

V. Do you reject Satan?

R. I do.

V. And all his works?

R. I do.

V. And all his empty promises?

R. I do.

V. Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth?

R. I do.

V. Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary was crucified, died, and was buried, rose from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father?

R. I do.

V. Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting?

R. I do.

V. God, the all-powerful Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has given us a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and forgiven all our sins. May he also keep us faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ for ever and ever.

R. Amen.

## **“The light to enlighten the gentiles” – The Presentation of the Lord**

Today is the fortieth day after Christmas, the day of the Solemnity of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple of Jerusalem (cf. Lk 2:22-40). After his birth and circumcision, Jesus is now presented as the firstborn to the Lord as a living sacrifice according to the Law of Moses, in memory of the firstborn of the Israelites who were spared by the angel of death at the Exodus from Egypt. At the same time, the fortieth day after the birth of a son is the day on which a Jewish woman restores her ritual purity, which means that she can now again enter the Temple of Jerusalem, the holiest place in the world.

Ritual impurity has nothing to do with personal sin or transgression, but is usually a period in which a woman recovers from the stress of childbirth and focuses entirely on the new-born, with her religious and marital duties moving into the background during this period of recovery. As a pious and law-abiding Jewish woman, Mary obeys the laws of the Hebrew Bible, even though she is personally the all-pure and undefiled Virgin Mother of God. Therefore, her purification offering is first and foremost an offering of thanksgiving for the grace of her unique motherhood.

We hear that Jesus’ parents sacrifice two turtledoves to the Lord. These are the purification offering of the poor people. Wealthier individuals offer a dove and a sheep. The Holy Family is not burdened with the care of earthly goods, they can focus their attention on God and his only begotten Son in their midst.

Normally, one’s firstborn is presented to the priests in the temple on the fortieth day after his birth as the property of God and is then bought back with a certain amount of silver coins. This custom still exists to this day in Judaism. But we read nothing of this in the text, that Jesus was ransomed with a monetary sacrifice. He is and remains the sacred property of his Father. In fact, Jesus does not enter the temple as a visitor and ordinary member of the Jewish people, but as the chosen King of Israel, the Messiah, who enters his Father’s house. There he is welcomed by the prophets Simeon and Anna, together with John the Baptist the last prophets of the Old Covenant. They receive their king in the name of their people and proclaim him to those present in the Temple as the Saviour of Israel.

The traditional procession of lights on Presentation Day, which unfortunately had to be cancelled this year in many places, is rooted in the custom of parading towards a king and welcoming him with candlesticks or torches in hand as he comes, or returns, to his palace.

At the reception of his King and Saviour, the aged and wise Simeon speaks the famous words that have found their way into the night prayer of the Church:

“At last, all-powerful Master, you give leave to your servant  
to go in peace, according to your promise.  
For my eyes have seen your salvation  
which you have prepared for all nations,  
the light to enlighten the Gentiles  
and give glory to Israel, your people.”

From these words comes the custom of blessing candles that illuminate our homes in this period of little daylight and long hours of darkness in the evening. They bring to mind the prophecy of Simeon that Christ is the light of the world, illuminating all peoples and nations. The symbol of the blessed candlelight in our homes is a memorial and thankful response that we, as a

formerly Gentile people, have received Christ, the Light, and welcomed him happily and willingly into our hearts. At a time in which the darkness of unbelief is spreading among our fellow human beings, it is also a reminder that we should not keep this light to ourselves, but that we should share it with the world. We are the light of the world, so let us make the light of our faith and good works shine to our fellow human beings, so that they too may invite the light of the Gospel into their hearts.

In this spirit, let us now proceed to the traditional blessing of the candles.

## **Lent – Easter – Pentecost**

### **Ash Wednesday – Short introduction to the liturgy of the day**

Today marks the beginning of a period of fasting for us, with Ash Wednesday and Good Friday standing out as particularly strict fasting days. With the renunciation of many culinary delights and other unnecessary pleasures, we members of the Church demonstrate that we are not indifferent to the events of Holy Week, that they do not leave us cold. We are deeply moved by the fact that Christ sacrificed himself for us, to atone for our sins. And as a consequence, we are also grieved by our sins that led to this great sacrifice.

By restricting ourselves a little in the coming weeks, we allow ourselves to focus on what is really important in our lives. We give God a greater space in our lives and hope that his loving and healing presence will have a transforming effect on us, towards the better, towards a greater likeness of ourselves to Christ. With this in mind, let us now celebrate the liturgy of Ash Wednesday.

### **Repent and believe in the Gospel – Ash Wednesday**

Today, on Ash Wednesday, a verse from Holy Scripture comes into the centre of our attention that we as Christians should always have in mind, that should always determine the way we live our lives. It is the words that Jesus proclaimed at the beginning of his earthly ministry:

“The kingdom of God has drawn near; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mk 1:15)

Previous generations of theologians have made of this the following: do penance, for the Last Judgement is near. However, that is not what Jesus had in mind. He never wanted people to undergo harsh penitential exercises in order to avert condemnation from the divine Judge on the Last Day.

When Jesus speaks of penance or repentance in our English translations, he actually means a *change of heart*. I already spoke about this theme, the meaning of a pure heart, a few days ago. A pure heart is an undivided heart, a heart that is completely directed towards God. An impure heart, however, disregards God and is primarily concerned with its own advantage, its own pleasure. Such a heart, however, cannot offer God a fitting dwelling place. It is full of selfishness, or self-centredness, and hypocrisy. Such a heart is disposed to all kinds of sins and will lead its owner eventually into eternal darkness, because it shuns the light that purifies the human soul, the light of God’s love, truth and mercy.

The words of today’s Gospel reading (Mt 6:1-6, 16-18) have to be viewed and understood against this background. Jesus comments on the three fundamental practices of Jewish piety, namely prayer, fasting and almsgiving. He warns against practising them like the hypocrites, who in the end only want to be seen and admired by other people. Such outward piety has nothing to expect from God: “they have received their reward” (Mt 6:2), as Jesus says. True piety, however, comes from a pure heart, or is aimed at the purification of one’s heart; it does not seek the spotlight, but wants to please God alone, our heavenly “Father who sees in secret”.

Fasting, praying and almsgiving belong together fundamentally, which is confirmed by our Gospel passage today. For praying without works of charity is just easy and convenient, even sanctimonious if it is done without any consideration of our neighbours. Fasting without prayer

and generosity towards the needy is eventually nothing but a diet. And almsgiving without God in our heart can quickly degenerate into a patronising attitude, or into feigned generosity without true charity, seeking only a clear conscience in the face of one's own prosperity, or the comforting feeling of being "a good person".

Genuine works of repentance aim to free the human heart from selfishness or self-preoccupation, and to constantly redirect it towards God and our neighbour, in whom we encounter Christ.<sup>7</sup> Such a contrite and generous heart is pure in the sense of the Scriptures, and pleasing to God.

True penance can be achieved not only by abstaining from food, but by every act that brings us closer to God and widens our hearts for the needs of others. We are now more than a year into an ongoing Lent, and therefore we should not overdo it with signs of repentance this year. A prolonged lockdown is already penance enough, because it turns us all more or less into hermits, constantly exposed to our own inner lives.

May I perhaps share something from my own spiritual practice with you. Last year I downloaded the New Testament as an audio book and listened to it during extended walks in the countryside. And I was surprised at the powerful effect that the spoken Word of God had on me. But this should not really have surprised me, because the gospels were indeed written down not to be read, but to be listened to. They were made and intended for proclamation in the assembly of the faithful. Perhaps you wish to try something similar? It has definitely brought me closer to God and my neighbour by confirming my vocation on my way to priestly ordination last year, and the exercise in the fresh air has done me a world of good, too.

Perhaps you, too, can find a timely penitential practice for this period of a prolonged lockdown that suits you personally. But do not forget the poor and the lonely in whatever you do. Even a phone call or video chat with a faraway family member can have a purifying penitential effect. Again something I know from my own experience.

In this spirit, let us now bless the ashes and sprinkle them on our heads as a sign of repentance.

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<sup>7</sup> See with regard to the aforementioned also paragraph 1434 from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

"The interior penance of the Christian can be expressed in many and various ways. Scripture and the Fathers insist above all on three forms, *fasting*, *prayer*, and *almsgiving*, which express conversion in relation to oneself, to God, and to others. Alongside the radical purification brought about by baptism or martyrdom they cite as means of obtaining forgiveness of sins: efforts at reconciliation with one's neighbour, tears of repentance, concern for the salvation of one's neighbour, the intercession of the saints, and the practice of charity 'which covers a multitude of sins.' [1 Pet 4:8; cf. Jas 5:20]"

## The experience of the desert in Christian spirituality

In our Gospel reading (Mk 1:12-15) on this first Sunday of Lent we hear of Jesus fasting for forty days in the desert and being tempted there by the devil. These forty days bring back to memory Moses, who spent forty days and nights on Mount Sinai conversing with God. They also remind us of the forty years the children of Israel had to wander through the desert before they were allowed to enter the Promised Land. In the context of the Old Testament, the number forty stands for trial and temptation, but also for a process in which something develops and comes to maturity. This symbolic number is borrowed from the duration of human pregnancy, which is about forty weeks.

During the forty days of fasting and temptation by the devil, Jesus, the Son of God made man, prepares for his earthly ministry. He calls his people to repentance, to purification of their hearts, and in the end willingly gives his life as a sacrifice of atonement for their sins, for *our* sins. For we too, through our baptism and confirmation, are chosen by God to be a holy people to him. We are called to be a people of priests and prophets to the living God, offering sacrifices of praise, devotion and charity, and crying out the Gospel into a world that does not want to hear it: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news!”

And every year again we are led into the desert for forty days during a period of fasting before Easter in order to free ourselves from distractions and to gather ourselves inwardly, because that is what the desert does: it takes the busyness of everyday life away from us so that we can focus on what really matters to us, not in the here and now, but in the face of an eternity that awaits us after our life here in this world. Again and again we have to decide anew how we want to spend eternity after our departure from this perishable earthly existence. This is the purpose of the liturgical year, namely, to celebrate and consolidate our redemption and salvation from sin and guilt, which have been offered to us through Christ, but which are in constant danger of being lost if we turn our hearts away from God and fall into grave, habitual sin.

The desert, however, is a dangerous place. In it, wild animals and the devil await us, as we heard in the Gospel today. The wild animals are our thoughts, our inner life, to which we are exposed as soon as the distractions of the world are taken away from us. And “the devil finds work for idle hands”, says a well-known proverb. St Benedict describes this in the following words: “Idleness is an enemy of the soul”.

There is a lot of truth in this, and after a prolonged period of being in the desert during a global pandemic, we all have our experience of this, we all have stories to tell of our encounter with ourselves and our thoughts, with the devil, and hopefully also with God. However, we are not the first nor the only Christians who live with this experience of the desert. In early Christianity there was a movement of Christians who fled the Greco-Roman civilisation with its distractions and temptations to seek God in the desert of Egypt. But, as you can imagine, there they first found the wild beasts, the devil and his whispers, the motions of their minds, their true inner selves. Only over many years of spiritual struggle and exercise did they come to meet God by purifying their hearts and turning their thoughts and willpower entirely towards God. Herein lie the beginnings of monasticism, from which we can learn a great deal in our present situation.

As a remedy for idleness and its evils, the above-mentioned St Benedict, the father of Western monasticism, recommends the following in his famous Rule:

“At certain seasons the brethren ought to occupy themselves in the labour of their hands, and at others in holy reading.” (RB, Ch. XVIII)

There is great wisdom in this. It helps to keep both the body and the mind busy, not with frantic busyness, but with the right measure, alternating with phases of rest. “Yet let all be done with moderation”, as the Father of the Monks writes.

What helped me not to lose my mind during the big lockdown in the year 2020 were longer walks in the fresh air. I used the time either for prayer, reflecting in the presence of God, or listening to spiritual audio books, of which there is a whole selection, including Sacred Scripture. I also found spiritual reading in the quiet of my home or in the parish church helpful. When we pray, we speak to God. But when we read, God speaks to us. And he has healing and helping words for us if we make the right choice.

I took the liberty of compiling a small list of book recommendations for this Lent, which can be found in the current parish newsletter.<sup>8</sup> In it you will find some books from the tradition of the monks or about the Desert Fathers, from whom we can learn a lot in spiritual matters, as I have already said. The Rule of St Benedict, which is not on the list, is also a powerful but often underestimated spiritual reading, even for those who are not monks and nuns. And I found it especially spiritually fruitful simply to listen to the four gospels during my walks and let the power of God’s Word have an effect on me. Perhaps you would like to try this out for yourselves.

With these means from the Jewish-Christian tradition, prayer, fasting, almsgiving and spiritual reading, we not only find a remedy for sin in times when many people do not have access to the sacrament of reconciliation. They also equip us not only to get safe and well through this Lenten season, but also to get through the many challenges of the ongoing lockdown intact in body and soul.

Let us now respond to the Word of the Lord with the profession of our faith.

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<sup>8</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *Domestic Monastery*, Paraclete Press, Brewster (MA), United States, 2019.

Anselm Gruen, *Heaven Begins Within You: Wisdom from the Desert Fathers*, Crossroad Publishing Co., New York, United States, 1999.

Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, HarperCollins Pbk., New York, United States, 1991.

Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids (MI), United States, 2016.

Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist: Unlocking the Secrets of the Last Supper*, Image, Reprint edition, New York, United States, 2016.

Peter J. Kreeft, *Prayer: The Great Conversation*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco (CA), United States, 1990.

## “Your will be done “ – On the Our Father

The words we heard in today’s Gospel reading (Mt 6:7-15) are most familiar to us all. It is the Lord’s Prayer, through which Christ taught us how to pray. In the tradition of the Church, we pray it three times a day, at the Morning Prayer, at the Evening Prayer, and at Mass. It contains everything a prayer needs: it is, so to speak, the essence of all prayers. And it contains also everything we need to live our human life in God’s presence. The Lord has entrusted the prayer to us so that we can pray even when we are at a loss for words.

Very often it is a false image of God that makes it difficult for us to pray. If we imagine the Lord as an angry and punishing judge who pettily counts up our sins and then consigns us to the fires of hell, then we do not want to pray, but rather to run away from him. And if we imagine God as hidden and distant, indifferent to our worries and needs, why should we bother to pray in the first place? And yet, we know that God wants our prayer. He has taken the first step by placing the desire to pray deep in our hearts. And he is not indifferent to us and our life with all its difficulties, but wants to take part in it. We know this by the fact that God sent his Son down to earth to share in our earthly existence, to redeem us from our sins and to save us from eternal death.

In preparation of this homily, but also in recent years, I have thought a bit about what kind of image of God Jesus wanted to communicate to us. In the Lord’s Prayer, he encourages us to address God as Our Father. He himself goes further and calls God “Abba” – “Dad” (Mark 14:36). The Early Church did the same following his example, because Christ shares his own sonship with us, takes us into his unique relationship with God the Father. For this reason, St Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans:

“You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, ‘Abba, Father!’” (Romans 8:15)

The parable of the Prodigal Son also gives us a powerful image of God and his true character as our caring and compassionate heavenly Father. Is this not the kind of father that makes it easy for us to think of him as “Dad”? Though we usually refrain from calling him that in our public or even private prayers, as it seems a little bit too casual in the view of God’s greatness and divine majesty.

Perhaps it corresponds most closely to the image that Jesus wanted to convey to us of God if we imagine him as the tender and loving father of a small child. What does the father do when the child comes to him, his dad, to tell him something really important? The dad “bends down, lovingly puts his arm around the child and lets the child whisper in his ear”<sup>9</sup>, as vividly described by the Lutheran pastor, Vince Gerhardy, in one of his reflections on prayer.

It is such an image of God, our Abba-Father, that makes it easiest for us to overcome our difficulties in prayer and confidently enter into his holy presence, whenever we feel the need or desire to talk to him, to seek his loving attention. And it is this image that allows us to fulfil the Lord’s command with a joyful and light-hearted spirit:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” (Mark 12:30)

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<sup>9</sup> Vince Gerhardy, *Sermon for the Eight Sunday after Pentecost: Teach us to pray*, dated 25th July, 2004. [https://www.gerhardy.id.au/pent08\\_04.htm](https://www.gerhardy.id.au/pent08_04.htm)

Perhaps it is also such an image that makes it easiest for us to pray the words that are the hardest to say, because they require an unshakable trust, come what may:

“Not my will, but yours be done.” (Mark 14:36)

We find these words also in our Gospel reading today, which means, we find them embedded in the Lord’s Prayer.

Perhaps these very words inspire us to pray the Lord’s Prayer a bit more consciously in the weeks to come, pondering its implications carefully in the shadow of the cross. And they also invite us to reflect a little more in depth on our own image of God. Where does it come from and how has it developed over the years? And how does it affect the way I pray?

Lent, which is moving very quickly towards Good Friday, gives us plenty of opportunity to do so.

## The Lenten Readings – A school of prayer

Our Gospel readings this week send us into a school of prayer. This is very appropriate for Lent, which rests on the pillars of fasting, almsgiving and prayer. In the ancient and rich tradition of the monks and nuns, I would want to add spiritual reading as another pillar. Whilst in our prayers we speak to him, in spiritual reading we give God an opportunity to speak to us.

All these pious practices carry within them the potential to transform us, to make us more and more like Christ. They turn our hearts and desires away from ourselves and towards God, and also towards our neighbour. In doing so, these devotional exercises promote our humility, an unfortunately very often misunderstood Christian virtue. Humility does not mean thinking lesser of oneself than one really is. That would indeed be false humility, a sin against truth. We know we are sinners, and we know what we deserve. But we also know that we are loved by God and saved by grace. Accepting these simple theological truths unreservedly requires indeed a certain amount of true humility, and of course, faith in the sense of trust.

The Californian pastor and spiritual writer, Rick Warren, put the meaning of humility in the Christian sense into the following words, “[It is] not thinking less of ourselves but thinking of ourselves less”.<sup>10</sup> True humility is therefore the opposite of self-centredness. It expresses itself in genuine attention to the other, to God and to our neighbour, and in caring for others as its fruit, “for the love of Christ compels us” (2 Cor 5:14). This opens up to us the true meaning of the Golden Rule, which we have heard in today’s Gospel, “So always treat others as you would like them to treat you”. In doing so, we fulfil the whole Law and the Prophets.

Through prayer we no longer live only for ourselves, but with and for God, the ultimate goal of our whole existence. Only in him do we come to serenity and peace. The spirit of true prayer leads us naturally to the words that Christ spoke in his darkest hour, “Not my will, but yours be done”. If we are able to pray these words without any reservation, then we have reached truly a great resemblance with Christ.

Humility is one of the fruits of prayer, if we understand prayer for what it really is meant to be. It is not a long list of desires and requests that we hope God will fulfil. Rather, prayer is placing ourselves wholly into God’s loving presence. In our Christian tradition, even silence can be prayer, if it is observed in the presence of God. For some classic spiritual writers, it is even the highest form of prayer, because it creates space for God to speak to us from the core of our heart, from our “interior castle”, as St Teresa of Avila calls it.

The notion of humble silent prayer as the pinnacle of spiritual growth is in line with Christ’s teaching not to use many words when we pray. After all, what can we tell God that he does not already know? Therefore, we are indeed well advised to keep our prayers brief and to think more of others than of ourselves when we pray. Intercessory prayer is a splendid form of imitating Christ, if we just think of Jesus’ so-called high priestly prayer for his disciples in the Gospel of John (17:1–26).

Prayer can of course also be reflective thinking in the presence of God, for example, about how we should lead our lives, what our resolutions for the future should be, about important decisions that need to be made, etc. In prayer, we include God’s will in these decisions, ask for his guidance and his blessing.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?*, Grand Rapids (MI), 10<sup>th</sup> edition 2012, p. 262.

If we follow the patterns of today's reading (Mt 7:7-12) and of the Lord's Prayer, then we can firmly trust that God our Father will answer our prayers. Indeed, as I have already indicated above, we do not need many words to bring our worries and needs before God. He already knows about them before we even speak them aloud (cf. Mt 6:8), even before we become aware of them ourselves. And as our loving and caring Father, God hears not only the prayers we actually say, but also those we should have said.

I would like to conclude this homily with a thought from a contemporary US American rabbi named Harold S. Kushner on prayer, which I found inspiring:

“People who pray for miracles usually don't get miracles. But people who pray for courage, for strength to bear the unbearable, for the grace to remember what they have left instead of what they have lost, very often find their prayers answered.”<sup>11</sup>

Let us now remain in silence for a moment, placing ourselves wholly into God's loving and healing presence, as I now prepare the gifts of bread and wine for the celebration of our Holy Eucharist.

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<sup>11</sup> Harold S. Kushner, quoted in: William Safire, Leonard Safir (ed.), *Words of Wisdom: More Good Advice*, Simon & Schuster, Reprint edition, New York, London et al. 1990, p. 297.

## Why all Christians need to be theologians in our time

In our Gospel reading (Lk 11:29-32) today, more and more people are gathering around Jesus, demanding from him a sign from heaven. Some of them perhaps only appeared out of sheer curiosity, hoping to see something spectacular. We have to remember, it was a time without radio and television. Jesus angrily rejects their demands for a miracle, calls the assembled crowd an evil generation and threatens them with the Day of Judgement. He is definitely not the sandal-wearing hippie or fool that our current popular culture frequently portrays him to be.

His audience are Jews, obviously, and he grabs them by their pride as God's chosen people. Jesus holds up to them the example of certain Gentiles mentioned in the scriptures, who behaved much more godly than his audience: the Queen of Sheba and the people of Nineveh.

The Queen of Sheba came from afar to visit King Solomon. She was deeply impressed by his wisdom and recognised God at work in him. Solomon's extraordinary, God-given wisdom was sign enough for her to accept faith in the living God.

The prophet Jonah, of whom we heard in our first reading today, was sent to Israel's deadly enemies, the Ninevites. He went to their capital with very little motivation, because he believed that these godless pagans deserved fire and brimstone. Therefore, he gave them only a single, very short sentence of a punitive message from God. This was, however, sufficient to shake the entire population to the core and make them repent. They saw in the prophet Jonah a true man of God, and such an unheard-of miracle, *a truly holy man*, and of all places right in their midst, was enough of a sign from heaven for them.

Now, with Jesus, the children of Israel have a man in their midst who is much more than Solomon and Jonah together, and yet they are unimpressed with him. The Lord is generally not averse to awakening or confirming faith in people through miraculous signs and deeds, if they have a pure and open heart. However he does not want to give in to the demands of a disbelieving crowd, just as he rejected Herod's demand for a miracle. Christ is not an entertainer, but the Word of God incarnate, spoken first to the covenant people and then to all humanity. Jesus does not compel people to believe in him, even though he could using his divine power. He rather invites people to follow him of their own free will and with a trusting heart. However, he does accept people's unbelief and rejection. In this he acknowledges and affirms our human freedom. It is a freedom of choice between possible alternatives.

Jesus has left us, too, the sign of Jonah for our here and now. He is truly the Holy One of God, free from all stain of sin and injustice. The four gospels bear witness to this. And even more, Christ has proven his claim of divinity by an even greater sign than Jonah's three days in the belly of the fish, namely, by his glorious resurrection from the dead. There can be no reasonable doubt about the historicity of this event, as biblical theology has by now sufficiently demonstrated.<sup>12</sup> But are these powerful signs of Jesus' life, death and resurrection sufficient to move a secularised generation of people to conversion and faith, who only want to accept what is visible and measurable?

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<sup>12</sup> See for example Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus*. Zondervan, Grand Rapids (MI), United States, 2016. Also: Nicholas T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God*, Vol. 3, SPCK Publishing, London, United Kingdom, 2017. And: Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach*, Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove (IL), United States, 2010.

Perhaps they actually would, if we as a Church did not write them off too hastily. I believe that we must invest a lot more in catechesis and evangelisation. In this we can learn from the enthusiasm and zeal for faith of some of our Evangelical brethren, particularly in the United States.<sup>13</sup> We can actually make a contribution ourselves to this endeavour, proclaiming the light of the Gospel into the darkness of our age, by using our spare time to explore the faith more deeply and learn to defend it.

I am convinced that Christian apologetics, which is the discipline of defending our faith through systematic argumentation and discourse, is a much underrated theological discipline in our days, sadly. And to work on this frontline is not only a task for professional theologians. I am actually convinced that theology should not be a privilege of ordained ministers at all. It is rather a responsibility of the whole Church<sup>14</sup>, if we really want as many people as possible to hear the Good News and be saved. For my part, I am ready to make my contribution to this, as you may have noticed from the content of my homilies, among other things. And I invite all of you to do the same within your means.<sup>15</sup> Then the Kingdom of God will continue to grow, with God's help and even in our time of secularised scepticism.

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<sup>13</sup> I am thinking here particularly of the likes of Lee Strobel, Gary R. Habermas, Michael R. Licona, William L. Craig, Nabeel A. Qureshi (RIP), etc., who explain the Christian faith with intellectual acuity, as well as with a great deal of patience and charity, defending it against attacks and criticism from all possible directions.

<sup>14</sup> I entirely agree with the following quotation by a well-known British New Testament scholar: "The Church will only be united and holy if it's doing theology as its core activity. And I don't mean that everyone has to go to seminary. I don't mean that everyone has to learn Hebrew and Greek. [...] Theology in the sense that I am meaning it is a whole people of God activity, each according to their gifts and abilities. Because sometimes [...] you get the most wonderful insights from the most surprising people. People who have left school at fourteen and have worked hard all their lives but have been faithful, believing Christ followers and who have discovered and discerned things that escape some of us with lots of degrees to our name." Nicholas T. Wright, Lecture: *How Paul Invented Christian Theology*, given on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March, 2014 at The Lanier Theological Library Chapel in Houston, Texas. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkcjFHYIugY> (From 24:01 to 24:57 minutes in the recording).

<sup>15</sup> "Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15). With this in mind, I recommend the following books as valuable resources, providing good reasons for the Christian faith in general and Catholic teachings in particular, and helping to defend them against attacks of all kinds: William L. Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*, David C Cook Publishing Company, Colorado Springs (CO), United States, 2010. Also: Trent Horn, *The Case for Catholicism: Answers to Classic and Contemporary Protestant Objections*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco (CA), United States, 2017. And: Dave Armstrong, *The One-Minute Apologist: Essential Catholic Replies to Over Sixty Common Protestant Claims*, Sophia Institute Press, Manchester (NH), United States, 2017.

### **“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” – On the Transfiguration**

In our Gospel reading (Mk 9:2-10) this second Sunday of Lent, Jesus climbs a high mountain with three of his disciples. But why do Jesus and his disciples take on this hardship? Can one not pray anywhere, for example in the seclusion of the desert, as Jesus did at the beginning of his earthly ministry?

Well, that has certainly to do with the symbolism of places. A mountain rises far up into the sky, which in ancient times was seen as the dwelling place of God, the location of heaven. When the clouds hang low, it almost looks as if heaven and earth are touching. On the heights of a mountain, in the fresh, pure air of creation and with a view stretching far over the earth, it is only natural that a human being feels much closer to God. It is for that reason that the prophets Moses and Elijah climbed high on a mountain to converse with God and receive his revelations from there. And it is for the same reason that Jesus and his disciples take upon themselves the arduous climb. That way they express their strong desire to be closer to God for a little while as they speak to him, to bring themselves into his holy presence, high above all earthly distractions.

And indeed, up there on the mountain, which tradition identifies with Mount Tabor, a view awaits the disciples that they did not expect. Jesus is transfigured, which means his body is filled with divine radiance and now appears in its glorified form. Jesus’ divine nature shines forth dazzlingly, radiant like the sun, and the disciples become scared out of their wits, as can be seen from Peter’s nonsensical words.

Fear is the natural reaction at an appearance of the Holy One. That is why the first words of an apparition to its recipient are always, “Do not be afraid”. The disciples must have been shaken, as with a sudden, unexpected earthquake to which an apparition of the Holy One out of nowhere can perhaps be compared. It can be bloodcurdling and it often takes a moment to recover from the scare until one realises what is going on right now.

It appears that for a short moment Jesus assumed his future stature in the resurrection body, in the world to come after the Last Judgement, in which heaven and earth will once again be joined together. Evidence for this comes from the appearance of the prophets Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration, who appeared in a similar form on the mountaintop.

We know of Elijah that he was taken up body and soul into heaven during his lifetime (2 Kgs 2:11). There he seemingly already received his resurrection body, with which he now appeared to Jesus (cf. Lk 9:31). Moses, too, according to a widespread Jewish belief<sup>16</sup> at that time, was taken up bodily into heaven by God after he passed away, for no one has ever found the place of his burial (cf. Dt 34:6). It therefore appears that the event of the Transfiguration gives us a small glimpse at the glorified human form that awaits us after our resurrection from the dead.<sup>17</sup> It is the same form that Our Lady assumed when she was taken up into heaven, body and soul.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. *The Assumption of Moses*, also known as *The Testament of Moses*. This text is a Jewish apocryphal pseudepigraphical work from the 1<sup>st</sup> century, of which large parts have been lost over the centuries. The Epistle of Jude (1:9) seems to be referring to its content. An English translation of the persevered fragments is available on the following website: Wesley Center Online, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/index.php?id=2124>

<sup>17</sup> A note for the theologians among my readers: at this point in my reflection, I am engaging in theological speculation, based on the Third Evangelist’s choice of words in Lk 9:31. It seems to entail an allusion to a physical transformation of the two great figures of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah, resembling in their appearance the Risen Christ. However, this detail can only be seen in the Greek original: οἱ ὀφθέντες ἐν δόξῃ (“they appeared in heavenly glory”). The 3<sup>rd</sup> person aorist participle passive form of the verb ὀράω (to look; to allow one’s self to be seen, to appear) points to ὤφθη (“he appeared”), which is a grammatically closely related form of the same verb

Both Moses and Elijah are outstanding figures in the Old Testament. Moses, the bearer of God's Law on Mount Sinai, can be seen as the representative of it. The same applies to Elijah, who appears as the representative of the prophets. Both, the Law and the prophets, were God's answers to the problem of sin. The problem of sin and evil was clearly pointed out in the Scriptures and known to humanity, but they were too weak to solve this problem by their own efforts. Only Christ solved it once and for all. He fulfilled both the demands of the Law and the prophets to perfection (cf. Jn 1:17), and at the same time paid the price in our place for their constant violation. In doing so, Jesus has cancelled our debts and overcome the fatal consequences of sin, namely eternal death and condemnation, once and for all. This has opened a path to salvation for humanity, to our own transformation through God's saving love. All this finds its foreshadowing in the Transfiguration, which for good reason took place before the eyes of a number of earthly witnesses, who would later assume prominent positions in the early Church.

Moses and Elijah prepare Jesus for the upcoming events in Jerusalem, as we know from Luke's Gospel (cf. Lk 9:31). Although God the Son from eternity, Jesus is also fully human, and he needs the encouragement and strengthening from heaven to willingly take on the unspeakable horrors of the crucifixion. But this event of revelation is also clearly addressed to Jesus' disciples, as we can tell from the words of the divine voice spoken to them from heaven, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" These words repeat and confirm the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God at his baptism.

All this makes clear beyond all doubt that Jesus is definitely more than a simple prophet. The prophets of the Old Covenant were known to perform great miracles through the power of God, from multiplying bread (cf. 2 Kgs 4:42-44) and raising the dead (cf. 1 Kgs 17:17-24) to parting the sea (cf. Ex 14). But Jesus is more than that, he shines with divine splendour. This is now evident to the disciples. All the more it is astonishing how they could abandon the Lord on Holy Thursday, whereas the Lord did not run away, but obediently accepted his destiny for the salvation and reconciliation of the world.

Together with the disciples, we too were given a glimpse in our Gospel reading today of what awaits all of us in the approaching Kingdom of God, if we remain faithful to Christ in our life and death. And through their testimony we become co-witnesses of this event, which we pass on in our proclamation of the Gospel to the world. For we can rely with great certainty on the witness of the Prince of the Apostles, who writes in his Second Letter to the early Christian communities the following account of his experience:

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(3<sup>rd</sup> person singular aorist indicative passive). In the New Testament, this verb form, ὄφθη, is often used for the appearances of Christ crucified and risen (cf. Lk 24:34; 1 Cor 15:5 f.), but can also point to apparitions of angels (cf. Lk 1:11; 22:43) and even of God himself (cf. Acts 7:2). Both of the two prophets appear in δόξα (dóxa), *heavenly glory*, which is a quality of God himself (cf. Ex 24:15-17, LXX) and of Christ crucified and risen (cf. Lk 24:26; Acts 22:11; see also Lk 9:26). Through this particular quality, their appearance on Mount Tabor is fundamentally different from that of the deceased prophet Samuel in 1 Sam 28, who rests in sheol (Lat. *limbus patrum*) and does not radiate δόξα, glorious splendour (Hebr. כְּבוֹד).

What the aforementioned uses of the aorist passive form of ὄραω have in common is that they point to apparitions from beings who have been with God in heaven. According to Saint Luke, this applies to Moses and Elijah as well, it would appear. In their transfigured state, the two prophets seemingly present themselves as beings of the New Creation, through prevenient grace already transformed into their resurrection appearance, perhaps for the purpose of revelation whose recipients the three disciples are. Based on the grammar and wording in Lk 9:31, this seems to be a plausible interpretation. I could go into much more detail here, but perhaps I will keep that for another time and publication.

“For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. He received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.” (2 Pet 1:16-18)

If we persevere throughout the challenges of our time and remain steadfast in all temptations, and by that follow the example of the early Christians, then we too can look forward to receiving a glorified body, radiant with the love of God shining through us. And we will forever share in the ineffable joys of heaven, together with Moses, Elijah, the Virgin Mary and all our saintly friends.

## **Taking responsibility for one another as a genuine expression of Christian life and faith**

The words of our Gospel reading (Mt 23:1-12) today fit well into the Lenten season and follow Jesus' admonitions about prayer, fasting and almsgiving that we heard on Ash Wednesday. Jesus exhorts his followers once again not to follow the example of the hypocrites and not to display their piety and its religious symbols in public. For those who trumpet and parade their piety before others in order to impress people do not have God in their hearts, but only pride and arrogance.

Now, shortly before the end of his earthly ministry and just before the events of the approaching Passover, Jesus once again confronts the Pharisees and the Scribes who just recently had unsuccessfully tried to trap and expose him in public and are now plotting his death. Normally, Jesus does not find too flattering words for the teachers of the Law. He repeatedly calls them show-offs, hypocrites, children of snakes and white-washed tombs that are clean on the outside, but filthy on the inside (cf. Mt 23). But today he at least credits them with the capacity to interpret the Law authentically to the people from the chair of Moses, which is the chair of legal decision-making about how to apply God's Law (cf. Ex 18:13-24). One can trust their interpretations and judgements, but it is better to keep one's distance from their personal conduct. The Pharisees may know every letter of the Law, but they ignore its core, its true purpose, which is promoting justice, mercy and faithfulness to God among his people. And even worse, instead of making their lives easier with their teachings, the Pharisees and the Scribes weigh the humble, hardworking people of Israel down with heavy burdens. Jesus explicitly warns his audience, particularly his disciples, against such behaviour.

The Lord knows that those who proclaim and interpret God's Word often fall short of what they are called to preach. This does not necessarily mean that they are hypocrites. It only means they are human. One can have moral and religious convictions and profess them publicly, even if one lacks the strength to live up to them in every respect. The principles of faith and morality nevertheless remain unaffected by our human weakness, they are good and just in themselves and show us the way to salvation. And when we fall short, we have the sacrament of reconciliation as a remedy for our frailty and sins.

Christ admonishes his disciples not to pretend hypocritically that they are morally perfect people, for they are not. And they are not to put themselves in God's place in their proclamation and be flattered with titles that should be reserved for God. He himself is the true Father of humanity, and the Son is our true teacher. From the acceptance of one's own limitations and imperfections comes humility, a humility Christ finds lacking in the religious leaders of his time.

Jesus makes it clear that those who have the greatest need for humility are those who are called to teach and preach in the assembly of the faithful. They must always be measured against their own standards and not hide reality behind mere appearances.

Shortly before his suffering and death, the Lord exemplified to us what it means to take responsibility for one another. He washed the feet of his disciples. And both require humility, washing and being washed in a spirit of ministry, love and compassion for one another. In order that I may not forget this myself, prone to intellectual vanity as I am, I have an image of the washing of the feet hanging in my home. It reminds me to always carry the fatherly love of God in my heart in the exercise of my priestly ministry, so that I may pass it on to those who address

me with Father out of respect and appreciation for my service in the Church. I know that I do not have this spiritual fatherhood of my own accord, but by God's grace and mercy.<sup>18</sup>

I would like to conclude this reflection on our Gospel reading today with some thoughts that I came across when I prepared this homily, and in which I have found much truth for the life of a parish:

Blessed are those who care for the elderly, the lonely and the needy in our community.  
 Blessed are those who clean the toilets, put out the garbage or do the washing-up.  
 Blessed are those who decorate the church, count the money or deliver the newsletters.  
 We are never as close to God as when we are serving.<sup>19</sup>

All these activities often happen unseen in the background and are performed with great humility and devotion by people who love and follow Christ. It is a love, humility and devotion that many in the Church can learn from, and in this I very consciously include the ordained ministers. And now, let us encounter Christ, the servant-king, our true Master and example, in the Holy Eucharist.

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<sup>18</sup> Some interesting information and reflections on the spiritual fatherhood of a Christian priest can be found in the following book: John Bergsma, *Jesus and the Old Testament Roots of the Priesthood*, Emmaus Road Publishing, Steubenville (OH), United States, 2021, p. 129-133. Very good is also the following talk by biblical scholar Brant Pitre, titled *Call No Man Father*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sbl7ZarBEQ>.

<sup>19</sup> This set of beatitudes was inspired by a meditation that I found on [www.sacredspace.ie](http://www.sacredspace.ie):

“In Jesus people saw a whole man. He did not bother about appearing generous, or courageous, or truthful – people quickly saw that he was these things. Lord, I have only to see the history of the church to realise how easily these words are forgotten. Ecclesiastics have exalted themselves, looked for titles and exercised leadership by domination rather than service. I need to come back to the memory of you washing your disciples' feet. Blessed are those who clean the toilets, put out the garbage, and care for the old and incontinent. We are never as close to God as when we are serving.” - Anonymous

## **They did not even know what they were asking for – The Sons of Zebedee**

In our Gospel reading (Mt 20:17-28) today, we heard Jesus foretelling his suffering in quite drastic terms. The response of his disciples to this, however, is quite different from what one would expect. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, sent their mother forward to make a request to the Lord. She pleaded with him that her two sons be given the places to the left and right of his throne in his kingdom. In other words, James and John desired preferential treatment in Christ's kingdom before all the other disciples, who, unsurprisingly, reacted with indignation.

This daring request is remarkable in two different respects. Firstly, by the act of handing over the Keys of the Kingdom to Peter, Jesus has already appointed a leader among the disciples and for the future Church (cf. Mt 16:18). And secondly, the disciples obviously misunderstood Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. They expect a march on the capital to take it from within, so that Christ can establish his worldly dominion from there and drive the Romans out of the country. Their ears are clogged with pride and ambition, so that they do not want to hear nor understand Jesus' words about his impending suffering and death.

Jesus, however, knows that the request is actually not coming from the wife of Zebedee (although we know how zealous mothers can sometimes be when it comes to their boys), but from her two sons. How do we see this in our Gospel passage? Because Jesus directs his response not to her, but to the two overambitious hotheads in his discipleship. However, Jesus does not rebuke them, but asks rather compassionately if they even know what they are asking for. Their answer demonstrates that they do not, although they boastfully claim that of course they want a share in the Lord's destiny. And so Jesus foretells that they will indeed take a good sip from his chalice, which in biblical terms refers to his suffering and death. And yet, they are graciously spared the places to the left and right of his earthly throne, which will eventually be given to the two thieves on Calvary.

Jesus then calls his twelve disciples together and explains to them that all authority in the Kingdom of God comes from service. They are not to behave like the pagans, that is, like their despotic rulers, but to follow the example of their Lord and Master, who came to serve and lay down his life for those he loves. In doing so, he continues the instruction he had already given them shortly before when his disciples asked him, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?", probably again to find out who will be given the leadership positions in the kingdom. The Lord's response was, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Mt 18:1-4)

For us here and now it is easy to look down on the disciples, or on their small and not so small follies. But how would we have related towards Jesus, at that time, and with the knowledge and expectations of that time? I personally tend to look at the disciples with a lot of sympathy, knowing my own weaknesses. And, to be honest, I am anything but sure whether I myself own what it takes to be a martyr. And there are also different ways of becoming a martyr. It is certainly much easier to die fighting for the Messiah than to end up with a slow, agonizing death on a cross. Peter also saw it that way when he dropped his sword on Holy Thursday and ran away, together with all the other disciples. But eventually, many years later, the Prince of the Apostles followed his Lord and received his "place of honour" as First Minister in the Kingdom of God, head down, on a cross in Rome.

The twelve apostles and with them St Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, can serve as role models for us in many ways. But above all, they show us that we do not have to be perfect in order to

follow and serve the Lord. On the contrary, our imperfections only prove that the Church is God's work, not the work of men and women. If it were our work, it would not have lasted 200 years, let alone 2000 years.

Let us now turn to the source of our life. And in doing so, let us pray that we may draw from the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar the strength we need to be faith-filled and credible followers of Christ.

### **A father's love and compassion for his ailing child**

In our Gospel reading (Jn 4:43-54) today, we hear about Jesus' second miracle, which he performs in Galilee. Both miracles are connected in a certain way, even if you only see it at a second glance. The first miracle, the transformation of water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana, refers to the heavenly banquet of the Lamb with his redeemed people. The second miracle points to the fact that in the new creation after the end of this world there will be no more sickness, suffering, pain or death. The Book of Revelation, which describes this new reality, draws among other things on the prophecy we heard in our first reading. It refers to a new heaven and a new earth. In times of crisis, when we become particularly aware of our human weakness and limitations, we also become aware of our need for redemption. We become aware that we need the Messiah to save us. For even if many things seem possible to us, we cannot save ourselves permanently from the consequences of sin, namely illness, suffering and death.

In our Gospel we encounter the painful sorrows of a parent, a father. His child has a life-threatening illness. But the father of the child has faith in Jesus, and this faith leads to the healing of his beloved child. Jesus makes it clear that he is critical of the obsession with miracles among his people. For whoever demands a miracle lacks faith, otherwise they would not need one. And so Jesus does not perform miracles to convince anyone of anything. His miracles rather serve to reveal God's love for humanity and to lead people to faith, or to strengthen and confirm already existing faith. The father of the sick child has already proven his faith in Jesus, otherwise he would not have set out on the long journey to seek Jesus and ask for the healing of his child. And this trust of the father was not disappointed, his trusting request had been granted. Some exegetes, by the way, think that the royal official in John's Gospel is identical with the Roman centurion whom we know from the other gospels. In this case, Christ's second miracle has yet another dimension, for it shows that Christ came to all the peoples of the world to bring them salvation, not only to the children of Israel.

Anyone who has ever had a seriously ill child knows the pain and worry that this causes. Our heavenly Father, too, knows this worry and pain for his own ailing child. We are this child, all of humanity after the Fall. In order to heal us, no way was too far and no price too high for him, culminating in the giving of his only, beloved Son for us and for our salvation. We express our gratitude by proving ourselves worthy of God's love in this life and by showing it in the way we live our lives. This includes of course our frequent and faithful gathering around the Lord's Table to receive the means of eternal salvation and life, namely God's Word and Holy Communion.

So let us hope and pray that the present crisis will soon come to an end so that we as Church may once again gather around the Lord's Table. For it is from there that we draw the strength to live a truly Christian life. And let us pray for those responsible in our country that they will realise that the celebration of the Eucharist is not a dispensable luxury, but that it is vital in the dimensions of Eternal Salvation, which transcends all temporal concerns and worries.

In this spirit, let us now encounter the Lord in the most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar.

## **“I am the Lord your God” - A warning against false gods in our lives**

Our first reading today is taken from the Book of Exodus (32:7-14) and tells us what happened shortly after the children of Israel were freed from slavery in Egypt. Only a short time before, God had made his covenant with them and sealed it with his Ten Commandments, which he intended to hand over to his chosen people through the hands of Moses as a document and charter. But while Moses was still up on Mount Sinai conversing with God, the Israelites already broke the first two of these commandments. They had a graven image made by Aaron out of pure Gold and worshipped it as their god. This provoked the wrath of God against the people of Israel, so much that he regretted the covenant he had made with them. In his rage he wanted to wipe them out completely and start with Moses all over again, that out of him should come a great nation, as he had once promised Abraham. But Moses interceded for the children of Israel and asked God to refrain from his judgement and to spare the people. And indeed, God relented and refrained from wiping out the children of Israel, who still exist to this day as the Jewish people.

God is presented in our reading with human characteristics and in human language. And how else should we speak of him? We only have our human language. If we look at this passage today, with our present understanding of God, it must seem antiquated, very strange and difficult to understand. This is because we as the human family have come to know God much better over the millennia. Our experiences with God, the Father of Jesus Christ, and with the Holy Spirit are different from those of Bronze Age nomads in a hostile Middle Eastern environment, always threatened by drought, famine and gentile enemies. In this respect, it is a good thing that these texts from the Old Testament appear strange to us today. It shows us that humanity has indeed learned a lot over the millennia. And with gratitude do we accept the revelation of God as loving Father of all creation, which was prepared by the prophets of the Old Testament and brought to full revelation in Jesus Christ through the Spirit.

For us in our here and now, we can learn two lessons from our first reading today. The first lesson is the strong power that intercessory prayer has and in which we can always put our trust. Moses interceded for his people many times, and God always showed clemency and mercy with them. We too can pray for each other and for our beloved deceased, and trust that God will hear us.

The second lesson we learn from our first reading is the constant warning against false gods. They seem at the first glance to be desirable and they make us many promises. But they do not offer us the freedom we find in the God of Israel, but only entrapment and servitude. In this respect, the Ten Commandments do not serve God in the first place, but they serve us and our salvation. The problem in our present day is that we no longer easily recognise false gods. They no longer come with golden hooves, but with four wheels and lots of horsepower. Or many bedrooms and a huge garden. And if we look closely, we realise that it is actually not us who own a sports car or a big house, but rather it is them that own us. We have to work hard for their upkeep and get into big trouble should we be unable to make an instalment payment. I know this from my own experience, because I myself once served in the court of Mammon, the god of money, and saw how he eats up his children.

The false gods of today bear such beautiful and enticing names as wealth, influence, success, property, prestige, power, beauty, success, health or performance. Pop and rock stars, too, can turn into idols, just like sports clubs or political parties and their leaders. Now that we know their names, let us beware of them and remain always faithful to the one and true God and his

life-giving commandments. Jesus himself taught us how that works, and we learn from him whenever we gather as Christians to listen to his teachings and example.

Let us now give praise, honour and worship to the living God in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

## **Christ's Triumphal (?) Entry Into Jerusalem – Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion**

This evening marks our transition into the final phase of the Lenten season. With Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (cf. Mk 14:1-15:47), the Passion Week begins, and with it also his entry into his redemptive suffering and death for us and for our salvation.

It is interesting that in the context of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, often we hear theologians speaking of a triumphant entry. However, if we look closely, the opposite is the case, it is an anti-triumphant entry. If we want to think of a triumphant entry, then we have to think of Alexander the Great who conquered Jerusalem peacefully. The gates of the city were opened to him without a single battle, and so he triumphantly took possession high on horseback of the capital of the land of Israel, which he henceforth incorporated into his world empire. Jesus, however, did not ride proudly into the city on the back of a horse, followed by an occupying army, but he rode on a donkey. And more than that, if we look at the Gospel of Matthew, we see that Jesus enters the city not only on a donkey, but on a female donkey with her colt (cf. Mt 21:4-7). It is almost as if Jesus, with his entry into Jerusalem, wanted to make fun of all earthly power, all showiness, all ostentation, all desire for fame, prestige and applause. Yes indeed, such a conqueror the world had never seen before. But what Jesus wants to illustrate with this sign is that his kingship is of a different nature than that of all the earthly powers. His kingdom is not built through military force and oppression, but through the humble service of his followers to one another. And so the second reading from the Letter to the Philippians (2:6-11) gives us this week's theme:

“His state was divine, yet Christ Jesus did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave and became as men are.”

He, the Lord and Maker of the entire universe, humbled himself to the point of ridicule, and even more than that, to death on a cross. Immediately before quoting this profound and moving hymn, the Apostle Paul makes it clear to his listeners why he sets before us Christ's example:

“Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mind-set as Christ Jesus.” (Phil 2:2-4)

He admonishes us against every kind of selfishness and ambition among one another, and calls us to treat one another as Christ treated us, which means in perfect mutual love.

Let us pray that the Holy Week will help us to conform ourselves more and more to Christ, who has revealed himself to us as a Servant-King. And let us pray that we will find our way to overcome every form of human pride as the obstacle to full conformity to our redeemer. May the mysteries of the coming week transform our hearts and help us find the way into Christ's heavenly kingdom, that he pointed out to us by his life. Amen.

## **On Judas, Peter, and the difference between human weakness and corruption**

In our Gospel reading (Jn 13:21-33) today, Jesus reclined at table with his disciples to celebrate his farewell meal with them. The passage offers some interesting details if we look closely. We often have Leonardo da Vinci's famous Last Supper scene in mind when we think of the Lord's Supper. But this depiction has nothing to do with the realities of that time. In antiquity, it was indeed customary to lie at the table, not to sit. Therefore, Jesus will have reclined with his disciples at the supper, with the two places on his left and on his right reserved for specially selected disciples. His favourite disciple, the one he loved, as Scripture says, was lying on the one side so that he could rest his head on the Lord's chest. According to tradition, this beloved disciple was John, who was still a teenager when he followed the Lord's call. On the other side of the Lord, there was another particularly favoured disciple. It was the one who was entrusted to look after the common purse, the one who was so much favoured that the Lord would feed him with his own hand, right into the mouth. This one was Judas, who was to betray and hand over the Lord on the same evening.

It is interesting that Judas should occupy this prominent position in the group of Jesus' closest followers, especially since Peter had already been appointed First Minister in Jesus' kingdom with the presentation of the keys. And yet with Judas, the Lord would have had great plans in his realm, had he not succumbed to the temptations of Satan and of money...

Jesus knew Judas' character because, as the incarnate Son of God, he had the gift of looking right into the heart of people. And yet, on the very evening of the betrayal, the Lord gave him plenty of opportunity to repent, to undergo a change of heart. The Lord washed his feet as a sign of humble service to him, and of heartfelt love. And that same evening, Jesus gave Judas a place of honour at his festive table. But still, Judas already had betrayal deeply rooted in his heart, and therefore showed no hint of remorse or repentance. With a heart as hardened as that of Judas, there is nothing even God in all his love and power can do, because he accepts human freedom unconditionally.

In the end by sending away Judas, Jesus remains completely Lord, not only over fellowship of the Last Supper, but also over his own destiny. He sent Judas out into the night, so that he could carry out the betrayal that was already a reality in his darkened heart. The Lord knew about his destiny, that in less than a day he would be hanging, bleeding and dying on a cross. And he humbly accepted it, fully submitting to the Father's will, blindly trusting in his all-loving and all-knowing providence.

It is interesting that in our Gospel passage today, Judas went out into the darkness of the night. By giving us this little detail, the Evangelist does not really tell us something new or extraordinary about the time of the day, which is rather obvious as Jesus and his disciples reclined for a festive evening meal. No, the Gospel writer tells us rather something about the condition of Judas' heart, that it was filled with darkness. That darkness did not allow for God to dwell in it, but it created an ideal living space for the devil.

With this state of his heart, Judas was very different from Peter, who also was to abandon the Lord later that same evening. Peter, however, did not act out of treachery, but rather out of human weakness. And that is a significant difference. For this reason, the Lord allowed him to remain at his table and to participate in the institution of the Holy Eucharist, the last and greatest miracle of the Lord here on earth. Peter, together with the other disciples, was granted something that Judas had been excluded from, namely, a participation in the Lord's sacred Body and precious Blood. And through their participation, Peter and the others were elevated to the

priesthood of the New Covenant, in order to preserve and celebrate the Lord's lasting presence in the Church until he comes again in glory at the end of the age.

As much as the Gospel readings of these days may upset us, unsettle us deep in our hearts, they also give us courage and consolation. For in remembering and recounting these events, we realise that even though we are sinners who deserve to be sent out into outer darkness, the Lord has mercy and compassion on us, because he knows of our weakness. And so he invites us, too, to take a seat at his table and celebrate his memorial until he comes again to be with us forever in his kingdom. For what really matters to him is not our moral perfection, but rather that we remain contrite about our failures, that we do not harden our hearts with pride, greed or ambition. And as long as we preserve in us a soft heart through God's grace, the Lord can form and shape it according to his own likeness.

Therefore, let us pray, particularly in these most sacred days, that we do not ever approach the Lord's table with pride and corruption in our hearts, be it here in our parish church, be it spiritually from a distance at home, attending via webcam due to the current situation. And let us pray that the Lord in his mercy may renew in us a pure, humble and contrite heart. A heart that yearns for salvation through our loving Redeemer, a heart that is able and willing to say,

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Amen.

## A place at the Lord's table – Holy Thursday

The six weeks of the Lenten season are now coming to an end and with our gathering tonight we enter into the Holy Triduum, the three days of the Lord's saving passion, death and resurrection. And in order for us to always commemorate the Lord's saving acts, he instituted the Holy Eucharist, which we have come together to celebrate here in our parish church tonight. Our Holy Mass, however, is much more than a mere commemoration. In the celebration of the Eucharist the sad and moving events of the very first Holy Week in history become truly present to us.

This is clearly and visibly expressed in the eucharistic signs of bread and wine. The altar bread is transformed into the true Body of Christ, and the sacramental wine is transformed into the true Blood of the Lord, which at the same time is a symbol of his soul. At the end of the Eucharistic Prayers spoken by the priest, the body and soul of Christ can be seen on the altar as separated from one other. This brings to our mind and memory the Lord's death on the cross, which led to the separation of Christ's body and soul. The sacrifice of the altar is completed through the consumption of the eucharistic gifts. In this sacrificial act, Christ's self-giving love for us is manifested, being truly made present and accessible to our earthly human experience.

By celebrating the Holy Eucharist together, we are all invited to the Lord's table. It is the very same table at which he sat with his disciples shortly before his passion. And it is the very same meal that we share here at Mass. In the celebration of the Eucharist, the historic deeds of the Lord are not repeated, nor are they re-enacted, but they become really and truly present here in our midst. For this very reason, our Eucharistic Prayer this evening says explicitly:

“On the day before he was to suffer, for our salvation and the salvation of all, *that is today.*”

And the Church invites us to celebrate this evening and this meal with a special awareness of these facts I just spoke about.

If we think back to the days leading up to Lent, we may perhaps remember the readings of those days. They were taken from the Book of Genesis and told us about the creation of the world and the Fall of Humanity. These very themes have accompanied us through the past weeks of spiritual preparation for Easter, and they now point to the events in Jerusalem and on Calvary.

In our first reading (Ex 12:1-8) this evening, we heard how the children of Israel were instructed to celebrate their first Passover meal. Liturgically, our celebration of the Eucharist does indeed have its origins there, in the commemorative meal of the Jewish people that that Lord himself celebrated many times with his family and friends. But theologically, our eucharistic meal goes actually back much, much further, namely to the Garden of Eden.

In that garden where heaven and earth once met, the first humans fell into disobedience to God and rejected God's friendship through their acts of rebellion. Through the presumptuous eating of the forbidden fruit, humanity lost their access to the tree of life. As a result of human disobedience, sin and evil entered the world, and eventually also death. Ever since we live exposed to conflict, violence and controversy, the law of the strongest. This permanent condition of humanity, caused by the effects of original sin, we cannot overcome out of our own will and strength, as history and our present age teach us.

However, this was not the end of the love story of God to his creation, to humanity. It was only the beginning of a new chapter, the beginning of salvation history. In the fullness of time God

the Father sent his Son into the fallen world to save us. Jesus showed us through his life and actions how we should live and die before God. And whatever we lack in our own strength and willpower, he graciously and generously provides for us. In a garden we lost God's friendship through disobedience, and also in a garden the new Adam restored this friendship, through unconditional and loving obedience of the Son of Man to God the Father. In order to atone for the consequences of our evildoing, Christ took upon himself our cross. And in willingly accepting it, he transformed the symbol of Roman cruelty and oppression into a perpetual sign of God's love for us. And if God's love is strong enough to transform a sign of terror and anguish into a sign of self-giving love, then he can also soften the human heart, transform it, purify it, and free it from every entanglement in sin and guilt.

This purification, however, must come from within. Just as the fruit of the tree of knowledge corrupted us from within, so the gifts of the Blessed Sacrament transform us from within. They conform us to Christ, whenever we receive them worthily and faithfully. For this is another mystery of the holy cross: God's all-transforming power of love has changed the Roman tree of terror into the heavenly tree of life.<sup>20</sup> And Christ has made himself the fruit of this tree. His body and blood give us a share in his divine life, a share in the eternal life of the Holy Trinity in heaven.<sup>21</sup>

With this in mind, let us now celebrate the sacred days of the Holy Triduum in humble gratitude and filled with trust in the transforming power of the sacraments, particularly of the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. And let us ask God that we all may soon be able to gather here again in our parish church, so that we may soon again receive the fruit of the tree of life. Amen.

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<sup>20</sup> Very nicely explained in the following video by the BibleProject on the *Tree of Life*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJLan-pJzfQ>

As a small note at this point: the videos by the BibleProject are well-produced and in most cases theologically reliable, aiming to teach biblical literacy to a wide audience through short and easy to follow videos. However, it needs to be mentioned that the makers are Reformed Christians, i.e. Calvinists, which is occasionally reflected in the content of their videos, especially when it comes to such key topics as *sacrifice*, the *Eucharist* and the *theology of the priesthood* in the Church of Christ. These topics have been controversial since the days of the Protestant Reformation. Therefore, from a Catholic perspective, appropriate attention and caution is advised when watching their videos on any of these subjects.

<sup>21</sup> It almost seems as if the makers of the video recommended in the previous footnote, on the *Tree of Life*, have – unintentionally – made a strong argument for the necessity of the actual presence of Christ in the fruits of the Eucharist: only when Christ is really and truly present with his Sacred Body and Precious Blood can he infuse us with his divine life through their worthy reception in the act of Holy Communion. Against this background, I honestly see no room for a merely symbolic understanding of the Lord's Supper.

## Good Friday and the Message of the Cross

When I prepared my homily for today's Good Friday liturgy, a verse from the First Letter of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians came to my mind. It says: For some, it is utter nonsense, for others it is a scandal, but we proclaim the crucified Messiah. (cf. 1 Cor 1:22 f.)

Only recently I came across an interview with the notorious atheist Richard Dawkins, in which - as always, condescendingly - he ranted about the *obvious nonsense* of the Christian faith.<sup>22</sup> Why on earth would a deity take on our mortal human nature, only then to subject himself to horrific torture and eventually die a miserable death on a cross?<sup>23</sup>

One does not have to be an atheist to think that way. We hear similar objections to the Christian faith from our Jewish and Muslim friends. Also, in today's secularised society, the Christian faith no longer seems plausible or sufficiently relevant to the point that people are leaving the church in droves.

Yes, let us look up to the cross, to the cross here behind me above the sanctuary, and let us ask ourselves, what is the point of it? Why should God, who dwells in heavenly bliss, come down to earth and submit himself to the cold, the hunger, the suffering of this world? And then, in the prime of his life, willingly climb up onto the cross in order to slowly suffocate and bleed to death there? These are good questions that are not easy to answer. And yet, I am convinced there are some good answers. We just have to open the Scriptures and look very carefully.

Let us think of Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. Saint Matthew tells us about the incident when Simon Peter reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. In response to this violent action, of course trying to defend his Lord, Jesus told the future Prince of the Apostles the following:

“Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? (cf. Mt 26:51-53)

Yes, indeed. Could Jesus, the Lord of the world and ruler over the angels, not easily have summoned a great heavenly host to smite his enemies, or carry them away to eternal damnation in hell for their wickedness? And yet, Christ chose not to do so.

A little later we read in Matthew how Jesus, while hanging on the cross, was mocked by all kinds of people. The Evangelist tells us there:

The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.” (cf. Mt 27:41-44)

Would this not have been a perfect occasion for Jesus to take on the glorified form that he already revealed to his disciples only shortly before, at the Transfiguration? Would this not

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<sup>22</sup> Dawkins strikes a similar note in his (in)famous book *The God Delusion*, in which he labels the Christian doctrine of atonement as “vicious”, “repellent”, even “barking mad”. Cf. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, Transworld Publishers, Black Swan Edition, London, United Kingdom, 2016, p. 287.

<sup>23</sup> In the same book, on the previous page, Dawkins states: “God incarnated himself as a man, Jesus, in order that he should be tortured and executed in atonement for the hereditary sin of Adam. Ever since Paul expounded this repellent doctrine, Jesus has been worshipped as the redeemer of all our sins.” *Ibid.*, p. 286.

have silenced the leaders of his people, the teachers of the law and the high priests, forcing them to their knees and into submission to their king, the divine Son of Man? And yet, Christ chose not to do so. Instead, he emptied the bitter cup to the end, to the death on the cross.

I firmly believe that he took upon himself the sacrifice of his body and blood for a very specific reason. Not only to give us a sign of his self-consuming love, which is also signified in the Holy Eucharist. No, he wanted to give us, his followers of all times and places, a very strong message, which is the message of the cross. This message says: *You can do all these things to me, and I still love you.* It says: *I am your God, your Redeemer, who loves you to the point that it hurts. Nothing can separate me from you.*

It is true, all division or separation that there is originates from us, not from God. If we look at Christ's outstretched arms on the wood of the cross, we understand: they are open, open towards us, so that he may offer each of us a loving embrace. God loves us always and forever, and that has become clear in his actions on Holy Thursday and Good Friday. The Lord does not want the death of the sinner, but that they may live, live forever in the kingdom of Christ, who is the Prince of Peace. All we need to do is turn from our evil intentions and deeds and return to God, like the Prodigal Son in his plight returned to his father, just to find him waiting and overjoyed at his coming home.

Today is Good Friday. And even though there is a weight and sadness about this day, it is yet a day of celebration. It is the feast day of God's immeasurable and everlasting love, which has redeemed the world from the consequences of sin and death. The cross behind me above the altar reminds us of this very love whenever we look at it. It is in this spirit that we venerate the Lord's holy cross in a special way today. And it is in this spirit that we now confidently, with humble spirit and contrite heart, bring our prayers and petitions before the Lord.

## Through the Eyes of Faith – Easter Sunday

In our Gospel reading (Jn 20:11-18) this morning we heard a passage that is very familiar to us. I suppose we have all wondered at some point how it is possible that Mary Magdalene could have mistaken the Risen Christ for the gardener. The common explanation is that the Risen Christ is identical to Jesus of Nazareth, and yet he is very different from the earthly “son of the carpenter” before his resurrection. It is only through the eyes of faith that one can recognise him. Or, as a well-known piece of world literature states:

“One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.”<sup>24</sup>

And these eyes of faith had to be opened to the disciples by the Risen Lord. This was the case with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, who only recognised the Lord when they broke bread in their midst. And this was also the case with Mary of Magdala, who only recognised the Lord when he called her by name. He is the Good Shepherd, and his sheep know his voice (cf. Jn 10:14). The Lord once delivered Mary from seven demons, and so she must have had a special devotion to him. She therefore came to his tomb to be near Jesus, even though he had now died in her eyes and gone to the realm of the dead. The belief is very human that a deceased person is somehow closer to the living at his grave site. The Evangelist John mentions that it was early in the morning and still dark. This tells us more than just the time of day, that it was before dawn. It reveals something to us about her inner state. She must have been in terrible grief over the loss of her Lord. But after all, Mary was not alone in her difficult journey to the tomb, even though the Evangelist does not mention any other names. We know this because Mary says to the two disciples Peter and John:

“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have put him.”

We know from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark that two other women were with her, namely, Salome and Mary, the mother of James. As women, they could take the risk of going to the tomb of a supposed rebel leader. The Romans often kept a watchful eye on who came to the crucifixion or burial site of a rebel, so that they could identify his supporters, arrest them and nail them, too, to the cross as a warning. Women, however, were not perceived as a threat by the oppressors. Therefore, the female followers of Jesus remained in Jerusalem after the terrible events, while the male disciples fled to Galilee and returned to their old lives, their old professions. The Risen One will find them there fishing.

However, not all of the eleven remaining disciples fled after the catastrophe of Good Friday. Two remained close to the crucified and buried Lord. These were, as we learn from our Gospel reading this morning, John, the disciple whom the Lord loved and who followed him to the foot of the cross. He was, according to tradition, still very young when he joined Jesus, he was still without a beard, and so that “milk face” was not considered a threat by the Romans. The other one who remained in Jerusalem was Peter, the leader of the disciples, who abandoned the Lord, but yet wanted to stay close to him. The evening before the Lord was crucified, he even dared to go into the courtyard of the high priest, where he was almost identified as a follower of Jesus. Despite all his human weakness, he remained faithful to the Lord, albeit in a broken way.

This love that united Peter, John and Mary Magdalene with the Lord was to be rewarded in a highly unexpected way. Peter and John became the first male witnesses of the empty tomb.

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<sup>24</sup> From *The Little Prince*, by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1943).

John even grasped the meaning of the empty tomb, he looked into the burial chamber and came to believe. Mary Magdalene, however, with her unconditional allegiance and devotion to the Lord, was chosen to be the first witness of the resurrection. The Lord appeared to her, made himself known to her, and commissioned her to serve as the apostle to the apostles. She was sent forth by the Lord to the remaining disciples to bring them the message of the Risen One.

We know from the other gospels that the other disciples locked themselves away, fearfully hiding from the public. Too great was their fear of their enemies, too great was their anxiety of being publicly exposed and perhaps even ending up on the cross themselves. This is not very heroic, but humanly understandable. How would we have reacted in that situation and with the understanding of that time? However, we also see that the encounter with the Risen One has a transforming effect. The remaining eleven disciples plus Matthias, who replaced Judas, eventually took courage and began to show up in public and preach. They proclaimed to the world something it did not want to hear, namely, the scandal and folly of a crucified and risen Messiah.

The Easter message is something that wants to be shared with the world. This is still the case today, about two thousand years after the events after the events took place. Today is Easter Sunday, just as every Sunday is an Easter Sunday. We acclaim during the celebration of the Holy Eucharist:

“We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your resurrection, until you come again.”

This is a profession that not only belongs to the celebration of the Eucharist, but must be taken out into the world.

As followers of Jesus, we must resist the temptation to hide from the public, to lock the door behind us. I see a ghetto mentality spreading in some groups within the Church, I see people who want to circle the wagons against the evil world out there. That, however, is not Christian. The world can only be saved when it hears the message of the Risen Lord and grasps it in faith. But in order to be able to do so, it must hear the Gospel. And like Mary Magdalene and the disciples about two millennia ago, we too are called to go out into the world and proclaim the Good News. Christ is risen, he is truly risen. Amen.

## He is truly risen! – Easter Monday

In our Gospel reading (Mt 28:8-15) today, we heard of the women's encounter with the risen Christ after the angel at the empty tomb had already brought them the message of the Lord's resurrection. The empty tomb in itself is ambivalent, it can mean all kinds of things. This is why, in the second part of our reading, the religious leaders in the temple were able to use bribery to spread the falsehood that the disciples had stolen the body from the tomb. In doing so, they created a long-living rumour that has persisted "to this day", as the Evangelist tells us.

However, the women did not have to rely solely on the empty tomb and the message of the angel. Still on the way to the disciples, the Risen One himself meets them. He greets them joyfully (in the Greek text he says to them, "Rejoice!") and tells them not to be afraid. All is well at last, the pain and suffering of Good Friday are overcome, death is conquered once and for all. The Eternal Son of the Father has now regained his divine glory, which he once left behind in heaven in order to become fully human and dwell among us. The women respond to this encounter in the only way that one can respond to the risen Lord: they fall down before him and worship. In this passage the text gives us a detail that is easily overlooked, but which is of the utmost importance for the theological debates of today. This detail is that they clasp his feet after falling down before him in heartfelt devotion.

By this little detail it is made clear that the women did not encounter a spirit, a mere vision or projection from the afterlife on the road, but indeed have met the truly and bodily Risen One. And this evidence of the authenticity, of the physical reality of the resurrection, is more than just an overwhelming proof of the truth of the Gospel. It is at the same time a promise to his disciples, to us all: if we faithfully adhere to the Good News and always strive to be as Christ-like in our lives as our weak condition allows, then the Lord will call us out of the grave and transform us, too, in accordance with his own image. With his mother he made a beginning after she fell asleep at the end of her earthly life, and we too will follow the new Adam and Eve into the new Garden of Eden, one day at the sound of the last trumpet (cf. 1 Cor 15:51 f.).

In Matthew's Gospel, an encounter with the Risen One always involves a mandate or a mission to bring the Good News. The women at the empty tomb were sent to the disciples, and shortly afterwards the disciples were sent by the Risen Lord to all the nations of the earth in order to baptise and teach them in his name. And we too are sent out into the world at the end of every celebration of the Mass, after we ourselves have encountered the Risen One in the Word of God and in the Eucharist. That is where the word Mass is derived from, it comes from the word mission: go forth to love and serve the Lord in the world out there.

For us in the here and now, there is also a Galilee to which we are sent by the Lord. It is not a distant place in times past, but it is our own neighbourhood, here in Blanchardstown. We live as Christians among a growing number of people who live in darkness and who are in danger of going astray. The light of the Gospel must be brought to them so that it may illuminate their path in life. Only in this way will they be enabled to follow the Risen Lord into the resurrection, into the glory of heaven. We have no control over what the response of our fellow human beings will be to the words of the Gospel. We have to rely on the Holy Spirit in these matters. Ideally, they respond to the Good News with faith and joy. However, rejection, denial and repudiation of the mysteries of faith are also possible and, unfortunately, even likely in our times. But this should not discourage us. The first Christians had to struggle with much more difficult circumstances and were nevertheless successful with their missionary work.

We are all recipients of God's promises and bearers of the Good News. And the readings of the period between Easter and Pentecost remind us that the Church of Christ must always be a missionary Church. We have received a great treasure that must be shared with the whole world. Yes, the Lord is truly risen, to the glory of the Father and for the salvation of the world. Let us pray for the courage and strength that it takes to remain always and ever faithful to our mission to spread the Gospel. Amen.

## Encounters on the road to Emmaus

Like all the resurrection accounts in the New Testament, the Emmaus story from our Gospel reading (Lk 24:13-35) today is very familiar to most of us. As we heard, two of Jesus' disciples were on their way to a small village in the vicinity of Jerusalem. These two, however, did not belong to the inner circle of Jesus' twelve disciples. We know this, because at the end of the story we learn how these two, of which one is named Cleopas (LK 24:18), returned to the eleven in Jerusalem in order to tell them of their encounter with the risen Lord (cf. Lk 24:33). From this little detail we can take it that such encounters with Christ crucified and risen were not at all limited to the twelve men who were later sent out into the world as apostles, St Matthias included in this number. Such encounters also occurred to the wider circle of Jesus' followers, including the women at the empty tomb, to whom the first appearances of Christ crucified and risen were granted.

In the Emmaus story, Jesus demonstrates how spiritual friendship, how spiritual support work in a way that can be helpful and fruitful for human growth. The Lord meets the two disciples where they are in their present life situation and faith journey. He takes them seriously and listens to them attentively. He then helps them to interpret what has recently happened in the light of their belief and of Sacred Scripture, using their existing knowledge of the Jewish religion. Where it is appropriate, he is not shy to rebuke them lovingly for their failure to understand what should be obvious to them. As the encounter continues, friendship between the companions on the road grows, so that Jesus is eventually invited to stay with the two disciples and have supper with them. And finally, in the breaking of the bread, they recognise him as the risen Lord.

From the Emmaus story, but particularly from Jesus himself, we can learn the essence of true and genuine spiritual companionship, for that story provides the perfect template for this. Learning from Jesus will always help us in situations when people seek our advice in matters of faith or spirituality.

As in our Gospel story today, a spiritual conversation can spontaneously happen with random strangers, literally on the road. Think about it, how many times in your lives has it happened that strangers you have just met coincidentally started telling you their life story, perhaps even pour out their hearts to you? Maybe it was a random encounter on the bus or train, on a bench somewhere outdoors, or in the waiting room at the doctor's office? In all these situations, you were asked to be and act like Christ towards the other, to interpret their current life or faith situation in the light of the Gospel. In such situations, there is indeed no better role model for us than Christ himself, supporting us with the Holy Spirit by giving us the right intuitions, the right words of compassion and understanding, of advice and consolation. And very often, it is not so much the pieces of advice we offer in such situations that turn out to be helpful, but it is simply the act of listening attentively, with charity, and with an open heart and mind.

Such an open-minded and understanding listener can help another person to bring order into their thoughts, to let out what troubles their hearts and find consolation in the company of a warm and charitable human being. Therefore, there is no need at all to put ourselves under unnecessary pressure of expectation in situations of a serious spiritual or faith conversation. It is simply enough to be there, to be as humane, humble and honest as our individual condition permits, and to just listen. The Lord gives us whatever we need in such situations, by virtue of our baptism and confirmation.

In gratitude for the light of the Gospel, but also for the good gifts each of us have received, let us now celebrate the Holy Eucharist.

## The risen Christ's unconditional love and forgiveness

Our Gospel reading (Lk 24:35-48) this Sunday morning continues the well-known resurrection account from the road to Emmaus in Luke's Gospel. After their encounter with the Risen Lord, Cleopas and the other disciple went back to Jerusalem to the eleven in order to tell them full of excitement about their truly eye-opening experience. They had to tell them that the testimony of the women returning from the empty tomb was indeed true, and how the Risen One interpreted the Scriptures to them on their way, and how he broke the bread, celebrating the first Holy Eucharist after his resurrection with them. At that moment he himself, Christ crucified and risen, entered into the midst of his disciples and offered them his peace.

In this passage, the evangelist Luke passes on to us a profession of faith from the early Church that Christ rose from the dead *bodily*, physically. The Lord invites the disciples to reach out and touch him. Then he eats a piece of broiled fish right before their eyes. He is clearly not a ghost, for ghosts do not have a material body, nor do they eat food. And also, the disciples certainly did not confuse Jesus with someone just resembling him. The Risen One bears the wound marks of the crucifixion on his body, through which Christ suffered for us and for our salvation.

When we look into the writing of the New Testament, we learn that two things have permanently and irreversibly changed God the Son. Firstly, there is his incarnation, the willing acceptance of human nature while giving up his heavenly glory. And even when the Risen One returned to the glory of our heavenly Father, he has done so in the human form of Christ crucified and risen.

Secondly, there is the physical experience of earthly suffering, of the unspeakable torments that human beings can inflict on each other. Jesus went through this experience, he came to know human life in its fullness, with all its ups and downs, all its joy and grief. The experience of suffering, however, must have been particularly formative, and the Lord will bear the consequences of this very human experience on his body for all eternity.

And yet, this experience has not caused him to become bitter. The Lord did not sink into grief over humanity, nor into anger or even hatred. Along with death, in his resurrection he also overcame the trauma of human mistreatment that was inflicted on him. When he met the eleven remaining disciples, he offered them his divine peace. In the original encounter in Jerusalem, about 2000 years ago, he will have used the word, Shalom. Shalom is more than just the absence of violence, conflict and controversy. Shalom means that all is well, everything is in perfect order. It means all-encompassing peace. And this kind of peace he speaks to his disciples.

I am always touched by the generous love and forgiveness that the Risen Lord offered to his disciples freely and unconditionally, even though they had all abandoned him just shortly before in the garden. In Matthew's Gospel for example, Christ sends the women to the eleven with the message of the resurrection, calling them "his brothers" (Mt 28:10). In John's Gospel, he prepares breakfast for them, the hard workers from Galilee, and also restores Peter to his leadership role in the Church. And now here, in Luke's Gospel, he speaks his peace to them and sends them as his witnesses among the nations. As apostles, they are to carry the Good News to all corners of the world, so that the nations may renounce everything that separates them from God and thereby find the way to salvation through Christ.

The words that Christ speaks to his disciples in today's Gospel, he also speaks to us in our here and now. We are his witnesses, the witnesses of Christ's resurrection. And through living in the

light of the Gospel, in the light of Easter, we are to let this light shine brightly on our fellow human beings through our good deeds, our lived testimony.

May this light, the light of the Gospel, renew the hearts of men and women in our neighbourhood, in our country, in the world. And may it lead them one day to heavenly glory, to eternal communion with the Risen Lord and the whole redeemed Church. Amen.

## **The Night is for Prayer and Study – An encounter with Nicodemus**

In our Gospel reading (Jn 3:7-15) today, we have heard how Nicodemus sought out Jesus in order to discuss with him and learn from him. We know that Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night time (cf. Jn 3:2). But why is that? Why did Nicodemus not come to talk to Jesus during the day?

One possible reason was that Nicodemus was a secret follower of Jesus, who only dared to come to him after dark for fear of Jesus' opponents among the Jewish leaders (cf. Jn 19:38). But I think that is only half the truth. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, in other words, a teacher of the Scriptures and religious leader of the Jewish people. Among the Pharisees, however, it was customary to study the Word of God at night time. And as we can see from the dialogue, Nicodemus came to Jesus that night in order to discuss matters of faith with him and to learn from Jesus, who is the greatest of all teachers, the Word of God incarnate.

The night is usually quiet and free of distractions, as we know from our own life experience. The chores of the day are done, the telephone stands still, the peace of the night enters into our homes. And in this atmosphere the human spirit is particularly receptive and open to thoughts that need silence and leisure. That is why the night is particularly suitable for prayer and study. Free from distractions, our mind, our spirit can focus entirely on God. The ancient monks knew this, and so it is an integral part of monastic life to get up at night and pray, recite psalms and meditate on the Holy Scriptures.

A little of this has been preserved in our liturgy, at least on one night of the year, at the Easter Vigil. The Holy Mass of the Easter night lasts longer than other Masses, and the Liturgy of the Word in particular is prolonged with many readings. Some people find this tiresome, and often the readings are reduced to the few prescribed passages of Scripture, so that the Easter Vigil does not last too long. However, this is contrary to the spirit of a vigil, for the word means night watch. In the early Church, Christians gathered after dawn and spent the whole night before Easter Sunday watching and praying. The time until dawn was filled with readings, hymns and prayers. At daybreak, they then went out into the Easter morning and celebrated the day of the Resurrection. I know parishes in Germany that meet at 4 a.m. to celebrate the Easter Vigil together in the original spirit of a night watch. Then, after Mass has ended, they meet for breakfast in their parish centre and share the joy of the Easter morning with each other. I was able to attend such a celebration once when I was younger, and found it a very special experience. It makes a difference if one celebrates the resurrection of the Lord and does not walk home and go to sleep afterwards.

Yes, the night is for sleeping. However, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is also for prayer and study. Even today, many devout Jews spend part of the night not sleeping but studying the Scriptures. Perhaps you might try doing as the monks do, the next time you cannot sleep in at bedtime or wake up in the middle of the night. Take one of the gospels, or a spiritual book, and let God speak to you. Then you, too, will have a share in the spiritual experience of Nicodemus conversing with the Lord that we heard about in today's Gospel.

## **Faith is never a private matter**

In our Gospel reading (Jn 3:16-21) this morning we hear one of the best known and most quoted verses from the New Testament:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (Jn 3:16)

The verse represents, in a way, a small creed, a summary of our Christian hope in a short form. It professes and proclaims the Eternal Son of God, who was sent into the world by the Father for us and for our salvation. And indeed, this verse is used by many Christians to publicly express their faith and hope in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. In preparing this homily, I spontaneously thought of the black markings that players in some sports put under their eyes. The marking is called *Eye Black* and is meant to reduce glare, as I found out in my research. And often the reference to the verse I quoted above is written there in small white letters, so that this short gospel of hope and salvation is proclaimed to the world whenever the athletes' faces appear in close-up.

This way of professing one's faith, using the eye black as an advertising space for the Gospel, is inconspicuous and subtle, but nevertheless quite clever. However, staying in the realm of sport, there are more obvious ways of publicly professing one's faith. Sometimes we see players blessing themselves on the pitch after a successful goal. Or it can even be more obvious when I think of Tim Tebow, a well-known and very successful former American football player, who rose to a certain fame by genuflecting in prayer in a special, quite iconic way on the sidelines or right on the pitch. In doing so, he created a highly recognisable gesture that is often imitated by his fans and has been given the name Tebowing. That shows how a person of strong faith, who is not ashamed of publicly professing his belief in Christ, can become a role model for others.

Such public expressions of faith sometimes lead to controversy, because a number of people who simply want to watch a football or rugby match feel disturbed in their openly declared and defended godlessness. That led to the result that the practice of displaying small messages on eye black has now also been banned in many places by the respective sports associations. However, at a time when religion is increasingly relegated to the private sphere out of the widespread misconception that faith is a “private matter”, such small signs are gaining in importance.

Faith is never a private matter, because a Christian cannot be divided into a public and a private person. One is a Christian as a whole, or not at all. And sometimes it is these small expressions of faith, for example if someone publicly blesses him- or herself in the canteen or in a restaurant in order to say grace before a meal, that may result in a number of people at neighbouring tables being confronted with God's existence, God's presence in our lives and in the world. Maybe this would be the first or only time that they think of God, on this day, in this week, even in this month. In this way, small signs can indeed become a way to proclaim the Gospel in a society that is becoming more and more forgetful of God. And who knows how many people in recent years have opened a Bible for the first time in a long, long time after having watched a football match on TV, just to look up what is behind that Scriptural reference written white on black under the eyes of a sportsman, and found that way to Jesus.

## **“We must obey God more than men” – True faith requires courage**

In our first reading (Acts 5:27-33) this morning, we witness how the encounter with the Risen Lord changed Jesus’ disciples. They no longer locked themselves in and hid for fear of the leaders of the people, but they came out and spoke boldly. The disciples, who were now turned into apostles, which means *envoys* of the risen Lord, preached publicly to the crowds in the temple. They were no longer afraid to even confront the High Priest with the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday at their interrogation before the council, called the *Sanhedrin* in Hebrew. The climax of the apostles’ clash with the authorities of the Sanhedrin culminates in holy resistance, which makes Peter say:

“We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

This courage comes from the transforming power of the encounter with the Risen One. And this transformation, the newfound courage of the apostles, should have been a warning to the council members not to raise their hands against the still young Church. For indeed something must have happened that led to this change in attitude, for Jesus’ followers now preached in public undaunted by death. And frauds or liars do not make good martyrs. Moreover, they will still remember the Lord’s words well, which are handed down to us in the Gospel of Matthew:

“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Mt 10:28)

Yet it was not the fear of the torments of hell that inspired the early Christians not to avoid martyrdom, when it was inevitable. It was the prospect of being united with the Lord in heaven, living there forever in such a resurrection body as the Lord himself assumed on the morning of Easter Sunday. What does this imperfect mortal dwelling that we inhabit for a few years here on earth matter in view of an eternity in the glorifying love of God?

The thoughts I have referred to in this reflection so far have inspired and encouraged Christians throughout the ages. And martyrdom is not a thing of the past. In many countries Christians are still massively persecuted today, and their faith and belonging to the Church can cost them dearly.

However, totalitarian worldviews are not limited to political systems that do not tolerate any authority other than that of the ruling class. We also find them in what a well-known German theologian once called “the dictatorship of relativism” (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger). It is a dictatorship that accepts everything as equally valid because it knows no truth except that of its own indifferentism. Claims of eternal truth are fought aggressively by people holding such a worldview and branded as intolerance or fundamentalism.

In our days, Christians no longer stand before the Sanhedrin or before Roman courts, but before the court of public opinion. And the angry mob that wants to shout down and silence the faithful no longer gathers in front of our houses, but on social media or in the comment sections below news articles online. To resist such mobs requires a lot of courage and steadfastness in faith, of a kind that we find in the early Christians. And we must counter all these hateful and aggressive voices, trying to silence the Church and bully the faithful into submission to postmodern ideologies contrary to the Gospel, with the one sentence we have heard in our first reading today: We must obey God rather than men. Amen.

## **On Saint Stephen, First Martyr, and what he teaches us about forgiveness**

In our first reading (Acts 7:51-8:1) today we have heard the well-known story of the martyrdom of St Stephen, the first martyr of the Church. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he gave a speech of admonition and repentance to the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Stephen, a man of righteousness in his heart, was on trial because of his Christian preaching. However, during his interrogation he turned the table and changed from the position of the defendant to that of the accuser. He reproached the religious leaders for their crimes, which they committed out of stubbornness and hard-heartedness. Unsurprisingly, the tribunal did not want to hear his accusations, and even less did they want to hear Stephen's preaching of Christ Jesus crucified and risen, the glorified Son of Man. The mere thought of the divinity of Christ was unbearable to them, and so they covered their ears. And therefore sadly, Stephen's admonishing words did not lead to the conversion of the religious leaders, but to his unjust death by stoning.

Stephen made the charge against his accusers, however, he is not the judge in this trial, and neither are the religious authorities. The true judge is Christ himself, who in Stephen's vision has already risen from his seat to pronounce judgement against the members of the Sanhedrin. And Stephen, fatally struck by the stones and now dying, pleads for forgiveness for his executioners with his last breath.

Saint Stephen in his virtuous life has become so much like Christ that in his dying he resembled the Crucified One. Acknowledging Christ as God, Stephen asked him to receive his spirit. And he also asked forgiveness for those who had inflicted death on him. The initial accuser at a tribunal of injustice has eventually turned into their intercessor, fulfilling the Lord's commandment, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44).

In all his work and in his death, we can learn from St Stephen how a Christian should live and die before God. And there is something else we can learn from him, namely, that it is not impossible to forgive our fellow human beings, no matter how bad and reprehensible their deeds against us were.

Forgiveness does not mean that nothing happened, that we were not offended or hurt. And forgiveness and pardon are not the same as reconciliation with the evildoer either. Full reconciliation requires the repentance and conversion of the one who has wronged us. It contains an element of healing. Forgiveness, however, means first and foremost that we forego revenge and retaliation, that we remit to the offender the punishment that he deserved in our eyes and also in the eyes of God. In other words, forgiveness means a full remission of punishment coming from the victim, and is by its very nature an act of grace and mercy.

Now, why should we forgive if we know we were wronged and have a seemingly justified desire that the other be punished for his or her misdeeds? Because we, too, have become the recipients of forgiveness, God's forgiveness. As sinners, we are dependent on the Lord's mercy. God, though he is just, has a heart for us sinners, and he wants us to live and not to die in our sins. Therefore he pardons us from the punishment we deserve, so that we may live and reform our lives. God's grace does not mean that he condones sin and evildoing, but it means that he gives every sinner the opportunity in this life to repent and be saved.

Moreover, from an earthly point of view, we cannot live as human beings among human beings without mercy and mutual forgiveness. How else could we ever live in peace as members of a society, a community, a parish, let alone as members of a family? As a wise man once said: an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.

Let us look into our hearts. Are there people in our life, in our life story, that we say we cannot forgive? I hope this is not the case. Let us be like Stephen, the hero of today's Bible story. Or even more, let us try to be like Jesus, who always forgave generously, even his executioners down from the cross. In the spirit of Good Friday and Easter, let us forgive our fellow human beings, for we too have been forgiven many times and many things by God.

However, if we find it too difficult not to wish another person into hell, or at least into purgatory for a long, long time, let us call upon the Holy Spirit. The gift of forgiveness ultimately comes from him, from his divine work in us, constantly conforming us to Christ, if we only let him. Therefore, let us pray:

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created, and you will renew the face of the earth.

In the name of Christ, the Risen Lord and Prince of Peace. Amen.

### **“My sheep hear my voice” – On what it means to belong to Christ’s flock**

These are interesting words that Jesus speaks in our Gospel reading (Jn 10:22-30) this morning. As you have surely noticed, our passage continues the motif of the good shepherd that we heard in our liturgy last Sunday. Jesus speaks in our reading about himself and his sheep:

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand.”

Jesus addresses these words to his opponents, who harass him in the temple and demand that he declare himself to be the Messiah.

John the Evangelist writes that the scene took place in winter, at Chanukah, the festival of the dedication of the Temple. This does, however, not refer so much to the season, but rather to the frosty atmosphere that Jesus is met with by certain parts of the population. His opponents want Jesus to make a statement about his own claims, only to disbelieve him. The entire scene is about confrontation and exposure, not about people openly and honestly seeking and asking for the truth.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, but his opponents among the Jewish people did not know his voice, nor were they prepared to recognise him for who he really is, the co-eternal Son of the Father. They are no sheep blending in with his growing flock of followers, whom he will raise up and preserve to eternal life in heaven on the Last Day.

Once again, the parable of the sheep and the goats from Matthew’s Gospel comes to mind in this context. When you compare sheep with goats, you realise how different these two species are. Sheep are docile by nature. They stay together, form a flock and gather around the shepherd whose voice they know and follow. Goats, however, are stubborn, they have their own mind. They are all over the place and do all kinds of things, except what the shepherd wants them to do. And it is precisely these character traits that the Lord alludes to in his parables.

The Lord calls us, his flock, to follow and trust him, even if we do not understand where the path is leading us or why we are going through what we experience in a certain moment. He, the Good Shepherd, knows the way and leads us to our salvation, to the green pastures and peaceful waters, as it says in Psalm 23. But we have to trust him, trust his guidance. If we want to act like rams, we are free to do so. At the end of the trail, however, there is no salvation waiting for us, and we also lose the protection of the flock around us in a hostile environment.

The second part of the verse that I quoted at the beginning poses a special challenge to our faith, to our trust in God, if we look at it closely:

“They shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand.”

Does this verse mean that bad things will not happen to us in this life if we follow Jesus, if we only entrust ourselves to Christ as the Good Shepherd? The cruel fate of many martyrs of all times seems to contradict this. And indeed, baptism does not mean some kind of a lucky charm, a special blessing of protection that keeps all harm away from us. On the contrary. When we take baptism upon ourselves, we also take the cross of Christ upon ourselves. And it is precisely in times and societies that are not favourable to us Christians that we experience this truth in a special way. We have been baptised into his death so that one day we will rise with him. In Christ we do not find earthly salvation, protection or even wealth, as the so-called Prosperity

Gospel promises its disciples in diabolical perversion of the Gospel of Christ. But in Christ we find the assurance of Eternal Salvation if we entrust ourselves to him and follow the path that has been pointed out to us in the gospels. In this sense, the words that Christ speaks to us in today's reading are words of hope. Christian hope. And this thought brings back to my mind a quotation from former Czech President Vaclav Havel that offers a spark of light in the darkness of Gethsemane and in the shadow of the cross:

“Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”

Jesus had that kind of hope when he went up on the cross for us, blindly trusting his Father in heaven, and everything started to make complete sense to him and his followers on Easter Sunday. And with the same hope in our hearts, let us now celebrate the Holy Eucharist with Christ our Good Shepherd, the victor over darkness and death.

## **“I have come as light into the world” – On how to avoid living in darkness**

In our Gospel reading (Jn 12:44-50) this morning, we witness Jesus’ last public words prior to his crucifixion, spoken in Jerusalem. And he cries them out in a loud voice, he wants his words to be heard by the people. Jesus’ words are a final appeal to his audience to understand him and his mission, and to accept Christ Jesus in faith.

With his words he delivers a short summary of the Good News, he professes his heavenly pre-existence and his earthly mission through the Father for the salvation of the world. And it is precisely these divine claims that will lead to his crucifixion only a short time later through the ones among his people who did not believe in him and rejected his mission, despite all the many signs and wonders Jesus performed.

Jesus is the light of the world, who came to save humanity from the darkness that surrounds us since the days of the fall, a darkness that constantly tries to engulf us to make us lose the right path that leads us to God. Light in John’s Gospel means: truth, life, joy, salvation. Jesus has come to shine brightly on us through his life and example, and to enlighten us through the hope of redemption and eternal salvation. But if we block this light from our lives, we should not be surprised if we go astray in the darkness and fall off the cliff at some point, sooner or later.

Following the light does not mean that we do not occasionally stumble over obstacles. We see them there, right in front of us on the path, and yet we trip out of ignorance or weakness. But Jesus stands beside us. He walks the path with us as our companion. And when we stumble, he reaches out his hand to help us up again. We only have to take it.

Not accepting and not following the words of Jesus already carries judgement and condemnation in itself, as we heard in our Gospel this morning. And now we live in a time and culture where the words of the Gospel are becoming less and less present to our fellow citizens. The majority of people in the Western world is still imbued with Christian values, with the principles of Christian ethics. The catechesis of past decades still has an effect on people who have long since renounced the Church. And to completely renounce Christian values is a step that many people shy away from still. And yet, what might it be like to live in a world that is utterly godless? Even the well-known atheist Richard Dawkins seems to be concerned about such a world, as a world without God would lead to moral decline. In an interview with *The Times* not too long ago, Dawkins said he fears the removal of religion would be a bad idea for society because it would give people “license to do really bad things.”<sup>25</sup>

If we want to see what a totally godless society looks like, we need only look at 21<sup>st</sup> century China. In the major cities there, we find an ultra-modern society that does not know God and whose values are not guided by the Gospel. People work, eat, sleep, reproduce, spend their leisure time in the virtual world of the internet. A deeper meaning or higher purpose in life, however, is missing for these people. And the totalitarian government of that Communist state lacks the corrective of having to answer to a higher authority than itself. I dread the thought of living in such a society that is not enlightened by the light of the Gospel. Is this the future we are heading towards here in the Western world, in a post-religious, consumerist, tech-savvy society that seems to be emerging after the collapse of the Catholic milieu in many countries?

This is where the missionary Church is called upon. Let us work tirelessly to make the light of the Gospel shine brightly through our personal testimonies, lives and examples. We do not have

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ending-religion-is-a-bad-idea-says-richard-dawkins-sqqdbmcpq>

to go far to do this, we can make this happen in our own neighbourhoods. If we here in Blanchardstown, in Ireland, in the Western world bundle many small lights, then it will become one big light that shines to our neighbours who are otherwise at risk of living a life in darkness, without a deeper meaning or higher purpose for their very existence on this planet. And may the Holy Spirit strengthen and support us with his gifts and fruits on our daily mission as messengers of the Good News, the Good News that Christ Jesus himself proclaimed in our Gospel reading this morning. Amen.

## Love that urges to serve is the source of true authority in the Church

In our Gospel reading (Jn 13:1-15) today, we are taken back to the night of the first Maundy Thursday. Even though we are in the middle of the Easter season, the events of Holy Week are ever present to us. The cross here behind me on the wall reminds us of this, and the celebration of the Eucharist also takes us back again and again to the same table at which the Lord celebrated the Last Supper with his disciples.

Interestingly, John the Evangelist does not record the blessing and distribution of bread and wine at the Last Supper, that means the institution of the Eucharist, which is the source and summit of the life of the Church. John remembers the night when the Lord took leave of his disciples in a different way. Christ the King made himself low, went down on his knees and washed the feet of his disciples, his closest followers and friends.

Jesus knew his disciples, he knew their character and had no illusions about it. Too often he heard them arguing about who among them should take the political and military leadership roles in his kingdom. Jesus knew their respective backgrounds, their weaknesses. They were zealots, tax collectors, loudmouths, immature teenagers with high ambitions for their lives. And he also knew that one of his closest friends was to betray him and soon hand him over to his enemies. Jesus clearly expresses this knowledge in our Gospel reading today. And yet, he humbly washed the feet of these twelve men with all their shortcomings and weaknesses, he, the King and Maker of the universe. He did so because he loved them, and because he indeed had great plans for them after his resurrection.

Jesus' disciples, as later apostles, were to found his Church and to carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth. But before that, they had to learn that Christ's Kingdom will not grow and advance by military and political force, but out of a spirit of service. Authority in the kingdom of heaven does not arise from the law of the strongest, from the oppression of the weak and lowly, but from a spirit of service. For this reason he gave his disciples the sign of the washing of the feet as one of his last acts on earth before his suffering and death. And he instructed his disciples to do the same when he told them:

“Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.” (Jn 13:14)

Authority in the Church grows out of charity, which urges us to humbly serve our neighbour. And our service as true followers of Jesus must, following the example he himself gave us, include the good and the bad, just and unjust people. For salvation is offered to all people, *every human being*, during their entire earthly lifetime, and through God's generosity everyone has a chance to humbly accept it until their last breath. And this divine generosity also included Judas, the traitor, for the Lord washed his feet, too.

Again, as we could see, Jesus made no distinction between good and bad people even in the upper room where the Last Supper was to take place, and Judas still had the chance to repent and refrain from his evil plan to betray the Lord. The devil, however, had already taken possession of his heart as Scripture says, and so Jesus eventually sent Judas out into the darkness to complete his evil work. By doing so, Jesus remained Lord until the end, even over his own destiny. He is Christ the Lord, the servant king.

Let us pray that we, too, may always remain faithful to the spirit of mutual service and not fall into despair of our neighbour, just as Jesus did not fall into despair of humanity. In all his actions

towards the different people he encountered on his earthly journey, the Lord has given us an example to imitate, an example of perfect love. And this example is the key to joy and salvation in the Kingdom of God. And now, let us approach the table of the Lord, who has graciously and generously called us to his service.

## On the true meaning behind the I am-words of Christ

In our Gospel (Jn 15:1-8) this Sunday we hear one of the seven “I Am” words of the Lord that we hear in our readings in these weeks after Easter. Jesus says of himself: I am the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:11). I am the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14:6). Before Abraham was, I am (Jn 8:58). With these I Am words, Jesus not only says something about the nature of his mission, which is the salvation of the world from sin, death and damnation. He also clearly reveals himself to his people as who he is: God with us (Matthew 1:23).

With his I Am words, Jesus refers to the words that the Lord God spoke to Moses on Mount Horeb, when he appeared to him in the Burning Bush. The Lord made himself known to Moses, and he sent him back to Egypt as his prophet for the deliverance of the children of Israel from bitter bondage. In that context the following dialogue took place:

Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I am has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:13-14)

There has been much speculation in the history of theology about the meaning of these words that God spoke to Moses, because depending on the aspect they can also be translated as: I am who I will be. In other words: I am the one who makes himself known through his deeds, through his saving actions. And only in this wording, in this translation from the Hebrew original, can the true meaning of the divine name be understood. For what God essentially says is the following:

Don’t ask long, Moses. Who I really am, you cannot understand. But look at my actions in the months and years to come, and you will understand *how* I am, and how I relate to the children of Israel. I am the God who is deeply compassionate and who desires the deliverance of his people from suffering and evil. I am the God who comes down from heaven (cf. Ex 3:8) to be with you and to walk with you. I am the God who is on the side of the poor, the weak and the oppressed, and not a God who favours the rich, the powerful, the oppressors. I am the loving Father of my adopted children, who looks after them always, but particularly in times of need, with great care. Therefore, Moses, look at my deeds, at my love and passion for my people, at my saving action in the time to come, and you will understand me, as much as mere human beings are able to understand me and my nature.

And all this, God’s self-revelation to his people Israel through Moses in the *I am who I will be*, also applies to the I Am words that Jesus spoke to his people during his earthly journey.

In our reading this morning, Jesus refers to himself as the vine and us, his followers, he calls the branches. With these words he again says something about himself, about his true nature *in relation to us*. The branches receive their strength, their life, from the vine. And so it is with the followers of Jesus: we receive our strength, our life, from him, if we only remain connected to him and do not allow ourselves to be separated from him, come what may.

The life that flows in Christ’s veins is the divine life that he himself receives from eternity from God the Father. It is the life of the Most Holy Trinity that God wants to share with us out of self-giving love. Christ offers his blood generously and abundantly for us and to us, his followers, who in return entrust ourselves to him unconditionally. The Lord’s Blood is the

source of Eternal Life, which he gives us anew each and every time we gather here around his table to celebrate the Eucharist. We receive his precious blood from the Tree of Life at Calvary, where it flows forth from the fruit of Eternal Life, his sacred body.

It is good news that our churches will soon be reopened for Mass attendance. As soon as the doors of our churches are opened up again, access will be available to the source of Eternal Life, the fruit of the Tree of Life that Christ turned himself into out of love for us.

Let us give praise and thanks to God for his self-consuming and saving love for us, his chosen people, then, now, and forever. Amen.

## The liberating peace of Christ

In our Gospel reading (Jn 14:27-31) this morning, we hear part of Jesus' farewell discourse. His hour draws near and he offers comfort and hope to his disciples. He promises them his peace. We know these particular words of today's reading well, because we hear and pray them every time we come together to celebrate the Holy Eucharist: Peace I leave you, my peace I give you.

At the time of Jesus, the Roman Empire was in a phase of continuous expansion, and during the reign of the Emperor Augustus, a period of relative peace, the Pax Romana, or in English, Roman peace, had begun. A time of internal stability and prosperity prevailed, based on Rome's military strength and the exploitation of the conquered and occupied provinces. Any rebellion against Roman supremacy was suppressed both consistently and brutally in order to secure this peace and prosperity for the Romans. Jesus became a victim of this Roman peace, for he was accused of being a rebel, having made a claim to be the Messiah, the king of Israel. For the Romans, such a claim to the throne of David was a potential threat to their domination of Palestine, so they made short work of any potential rebel leader. Nevertheless, they knew that Jesus did not seek a violent overthrow, but made his claim by peaceful means. We can see this in the fact that they nailed only him to the cross as the leader of his movement, but allowed his disciples to escape. For the Romans, this chapter was closed. Little did they know that Jesus was actually to conquer the Roman Empire, but in his own way, in a peaceful way. And indeed, only a few centuries later, the Roman Emperors were on their knees before him, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Jesus' peace is gentle, it is not based on oppression and violence. He never wanted to take that path. Jesus' peace is based on touching and winning the human heart through love. The Lord is a gentle conqueror and his peace is rooted in the fraternal relationship among his followers, among the members of his Church. No one should desire to dominate the other, no one should try to force and subdue the other. Those who join Jesus' flock should do so of their own free will, following an open and loving invitation. And those finding themselves in positions of authority are obliged to selfless service to the community. But whoever finds Christ's teachings, his demands on his followers, unacceptable or even offensive, is free to turn around and leave at any time. Just as the rich young man turned away from Jesus because he found Jesus' radical demands on the lifestyle of his followers unbearable. The Lord loved him, therefore he was willing to let him go.

It has become clear from what I have just said that the peace of Jesus is not an external state, but grows out of the personal relationship with him and with his Church. It grows out of the familial relationship of his followers with each other, who find in Christ their Lord and Saviour, and in the Creator God their heavenly Father. However, Jesus' family in the Western countries has begun to shrink noticeably. Many people that are leaving, or have left in recent years, never adhered to the Body of Christ with their whole heart, or belonged to it for the right reasons. Many of them were not actively involved in weekly worship, parish life and acts of charity. That makes it easy for them to turn around and abandon the flock of the Good Shepherd. But that is all right. Religious freedom works into two directions, it is always freedom for and from religion, depending on individual experience and decision making.

What I hope for from a smaller Church is a more intimate relationship between the faithful who remain. If the love among us grows and leads to genuine fraternity, a fellowship of love, we will develop an attraction for a good number of our fellow human beings again after a while. Then, hopefully, the Church will no longer be associated with violence and oppression, because

a number of its leaders had lost sight of the Gospel in their personal conduct. Then, one day, people will look at us again and say, “See how they love one another!”, as it was in Ancient Rome. But for now, we are undergoing a self-cleansing process that serves our renewal and helps us to refocus on what is essential, the Gospel of Christ in its purity, proclaimed to the world in words and good deeds.

Let us now turn to Christ, the source of our peace, strength and mutual love, in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar.

## Stop staring into the sky! - The Ascension of the Lord

Two of our readings this Sunday testify to the Ascension of our Lord.<sup>26</sup> The first account is taken from the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:1-11), and the second comes from Luke's gospel (Lk 24:46-53). We might assume that both narratives are identical in content, since they share the same author, St Luke. But there is indeed a difference. In our first reading, we hear the following passage:

“[When Jesus] was lifted up, a cloud took him from their sight. While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?” (Acts 1:10-11)

The two angelic figures dressed in white are not mentioned in Luke's gospel account of the Ascension, nor what they said to the crowd, “Why are you standing there looking at the sky?” I do not think this is a mistake. The gifted writer he was, St Luke knew exactly what he was doing when he added this little passage and phrase into his sequel. But what was his intention? Perhaps the key to understanding this passage lies in a Jewish legend which a wise rabbi once told me a number of years ago:

A group of famous rabbis were once having a dispute over the right interpretation of a commandment given to them in the Torah. Most rabbis agreed on a pragmatic, feasible and plausible interpretation close to the letter of the text. Only Rabbi Eliezer came up with a somewhat peculiar interpretation of that law. Insisting he was right, he produced several miracles for validation: A tree leaped from the ground and moved far away, a stream began to flow backwards, the walls of a study hall started moving and bending. But the other rabbis remained unimpressed, claiming that all this offered no proof in a debate over law. Finally, Moses himself appeared on Eliezer's request and confirmed his interpretation, but the rabbis would not listen to him, quoting a passage from the Book of Deuteronomy to him:

“Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven [...]. No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.” (Dt 30:11-14)

The story ends with God smiling at his people, because they very wisely and faithfully followed the instructions he gave to them in the Torah. (Cf. Bava Metzia 59a-b)

Since these days, the phrase “not in heaven” is understood to justify the covenant people's authority to interpret the Word of God authentically, using one's knowledge, experience, common sense and a little bit of worldly wisdom as well. As Christians, we would add prayerful discernment to this list.

There is a temptation for us to stand still, staring up to the sky for guidance and forgetting the Word we have already received. Just sometimes we need the odd man dressed in a white garment, telling us to stop staring into the blue, but to start moving and to live our lives here and now, in accordance with the Gospel. And it is not too difficult to live the Gospel with Christ at our side today, for, as he promises, “my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Mt 11:30)

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<sup>26</sup> This reflection was originally written as a homiletic exercise in the context of priestly formation in Mai 2019.

As the Church, “the assembly of the faithful”, we must interpret the Gospel in and for our lives, here and now, prophetically, each of us individually according to our ability. Which might come as a challenge, even for those ones blessed with many years of theology studies...

And yet we are blessed, blessed with support from above, for though the Lord ascended into heaven, he did not leave us orphans (Jn 14:18), but promised us the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth (cf. Jn 16:13), whom the Father sends in Jesus’ name; he teaches us everything, and reminds us of all that Jesus has said to us (cf. Jn 14:26).

This is what St Luke wants to remind us of in the Book of Acts, and thus that little variation in the narrative: We do not have to freeze in the moment and keep staring at the sky. The Spirit is right now descending on the followers of Jesus. The Spirit is dwelling in us and guiding us and instructing us and speaking through us. All of us who follow Jesus in our days, living in the light of the Gospel.

Even if we no longer see Christ in his human form here on earth, we know him to be with us in the Holy Spirit. Now and to the end of time. Amen.

## **Like the roar of a mighty windstorm – Pentecost Sunday**

This Sunday we celebrate the great and wonderful Feast of Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:1-11). According to Jewish tradition, it takes place on the fiftieth day after Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, on which we Christians celebrate the Holy Triduum. The term Pentecost is derived from the Greek word for fifty, hence the name of this feast, which marks the solemn conclusion of the joyful Easter season.

In Judaism, Pentecost was a harvest festival in which the first wheat harvest of the year was celebrated with offerings of thanksgiving in the Temple. It was also a pilgrimage festival, to which diaspora Jews from all over the world came to Jerusalem in order to worship God in the Temple and to give thanks for a good harvest. The long list of peoples mentioned in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles alludes to this ancient religious practice. If we take a careful look at our first reading, we will see that the list of countries is going from Rome and Greece down to North Africa, and from there across the Orient all the way to Mesopotamia (though not in this particular order). After the conquests of Alexander the Great, but also as a result of the Babylonian exile, traders and settlers had spread from the Holy Land all over the known world and founded Jewish communities. However, at least once a year, during the pilgrimage festivals beginning with Passover and concluding with Pentecost, hundreds of thousands of Jewish people from everywhere set out to dutifully worship the God of their fathers in their ancestral homeland. And that is the very reason why every year, during these particular seven weeks in springtime, Jerusalem was bursting with multinational pilgrims.

All this may sound very interesting, but why am I telling you all this in a homily that sounds more like a history lesson so far? Because it gives us an explanation of how and why the Good News of Jesus Christ was able to spread within only a few weeks over the entire known world of that time. And it did so in spite of the fact that the Jewish and Roman authorities did everything they could to put a quick and violent end to the still young movement founded by Jesus of Nazareth. However, as it turned out, the Romans and High Priests made their plans without God's Spirit.

Once again to make clear what I am trying to say: when Jesus was executed and buried in Jerusalem with great publicity, hundreds of thousands of Jews from all over the world were witnesses to the events in Jerusalem. They were also still around when the apostles appeared in public to proclaim the crucified and risen Christ, and that against all expectation and earthly reason. Overnight, the timid and fearful disciples of an executed itinerant preacher had become the courageous and eloquent witnesses of the risen Son of God, suddenly performing miracles before everyone's eyes and not shying away even from death and persecution anymore. For almost two months, countless Jewish pilgrims from all over the world witnessed all these events in the Holy Land, and when on the fiftieth day, at the end of the festive season, they were due to make their way home, the Holy Spirit descended on all those who had come to believe and had been baptised (cf. Acts 2:37-42). This is how the universal Church was founded from above, whose birthday we celebrate this Sunday.

The entire Roman state with all its logistics and military strength was incapable of stopping the spread of the Good News like a wildfire across their whole empire and beyond. Jewish-Christian communities were formed everywhere within weeks, even in Rome, the very capital of the Empire. And this foundation of the local community of believers happened even before Saint Peter and Saint Paul set foot in the Eternal City to preach there and tend their flock. When St Paul wrote his famous Letter to the Romans, there was already a Christian community awaiting his arrival. In this respect, one can say that the choice of the feast of Pentecost for the

foundation of the universal Church was a stroke of genius that only the Spirit of God was capable of.

For 2000 years now, the Church has existed on this planet, heading as a pilgrim Church towards the coming Christ. And for 2000 years it has survived all kinds of disasters and deadly violence from a world that hates us: we survived the Roman persecution of Christians under Nero and Diocletian, the period of the great migrations, the various Islamic attempts to conquer Europe from different directions. We survived the Renaissance Papacy, the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution, the Age of Enlightenment, the Russian Revolution, the Nazi terror, the Soviet Empire, etc., etc., etc.... At all times we had the Paraclete by our side, our Divine Helper. And even though the various periods of devastation were often accompanied by great and painful losses, in the end the Church emerged strengthened from them. For over 200 years now, we have been hearing from the self-declared intelligentsia of the Western civilisation that the Church has only a few decades left before the last empty churches will be closed and Christianity will disappear from the modern world. And once again, the prophets of doom reckon without the Holy Spirit.

At the moment we are going through one of the most serious crises in our history, caused by the unspeakable misdeeds of way too many ordained ministers of the same universal Church. As a newly ordained priest, and as one who was not even born in this country, it is not for me to go into too much detail here, or to tell the institutional Church how to deal with the scandals. But what I wish to say is that it is time to clean up the whole mess NOW, quickly and thoroughly, and finally put an end to the scandals. It is enough, and so it already was fifty or sixty years ago, or even longer. If we face up to our Christian responsibility now and resolutely, then with the help of the Spirit of Truth we will again and even stronger emerge from the current crisis. We will be smaller, yes, but also more trustworthy and most importantly, credible again. The Church has begun once before as a mustard seed. And who knows, this might be the Holy Spirit's plan for our time and Western civilisation again.

Let us open ourselves to the Holy Spirit unconditionally and with childlike trust. Let us pray fervently for his coming, for a new Pentecost in our age and culture. But let us also be prepared, because when he comes, it will be with a mighty rush from heaven like a violent wind. And he will bring change, transformation, renewal. Let us not be afraid of change, of that which is new but appropriate for our time, and embrace it as a gift from him who is our Helper from God, Christ's gift to his pilgrim Church here on earth. Amen.

## Various Solemnities and Feast Days

### Sunday of the Word of God - Christ's body and blood in the Words of the Holy Gospel

In our Gospel reading (Mk 1:14-20) today, we encounter Jesus once again at the beginning of his public ministry, shortly after his baptism in the Jordan and the forty days of fast in the desert. Starting from his home region of Galilee, Jesus begins to proclaim the Gospel and to call people to conversion. Jesus' proclamation is as simple as it is challenging: Repent and believe in the Gospel.

In Jesus' preaching, repentance refers to a change of heart. It means renouncing evil from the depth of one's heart and turning completely to God. This is what our parents and godparents promised on our behalf on the day of our baptism, and this promise we have publicly renewed and made our own on the day of our confirmation.

To believe in the Gospel is to believe in the dawn of God's kingdom in the incarnation and earthly ministry of Christ. Through this, the Gospel is given an additional dimension, for to believe in the Good News is to believe in the one who proclaims it to his people. In Christ's proclamation, messenger and message are one and the same. Accepting him and following him means sharing in his destiny, that is, in his suffering and cross, but also in his glorious resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven.

Throughout his entire earthly life, Christ anticipated the mystery of our salvation in his teachings and in his actions, so that his disciples could grasp and embrace this mystery when the hour had come, for Christ and for themselves. This mystery of our faith, of our salvation is what we make present and experience as reality in every celebration of Holy Mass. It has found its expression in a chalice acclamation that has now fallen into disuse: Dying you destroyed our death. Rising you restored our life. Lord Jesus, come in glory. Or in the shortest version: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Before Christ returned to the Father in heaven, he promised to be with us always, to the end of time. For this he chose two different forms to be always and truly present in us and with us, the assembly of the faithful, his Church. One of the two forms is the Eucharist, which has been the frequent subject of my homilies in recent weeks before and after Christmas.

The second form is one that only few Catholics are aware of, although it is no less true and real than the presence of Christ under the species of bread and wine in the Eucharist. It is the presence of Christ in his Word, which is at the centre of the first half of every Holy Mass, and whose special feast day we celebrate today.

What I have just said may seem extraordinary or strange to many of you, my dear Brothers and Sisters, but it has been the teaching of the Church since the beginning. Christ is truly present, effective and alive in the words of the Gospel. Liturgically, this is reflected in how we treat (or are supposed to treat) the Gospel Book during Holy Mass, even though it is rarely done so in the Irish tradition, namely that it be treated similarly to a monstrance at the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament: the deacon or priest would carry it with reverence in the entrance procession and place it on the altar at the beginning of Mass. And this is exactly at the same spot where the monstrance with the blessed sacrament would be, in the middle of the altar, right on the corporal. For it is the same Christ, present in the words of Sacred Scripture and in the most Holy Sacrament of the Altar.

The same veneration would be given to the Gospel book before and during the proclamation of the Gospel at its proper time. The lectionary would be carried in solemn procession to the ambo (or lectern), accompanied by candlelight and honoured with incense. And naturally we stand during the Gospel reading, for one stands when the King speaks, Christ our King through the words of the Gospel.

How close the connection is between the proclamation of the Gospel and the celebration of the Eucharist is shown in a quotation by St Jerome, a Church Father from the early days of Christianity. He speaks about how we should approach the Word of God and the Eucharist:

“For me, the Gospel is the Body of Christ; [...] Christ’s body and blood are really the word of Scripture, God’s teaching. When we approach the [Eucharistic] Mystery, if a crumb falls to the ground we are troubled. Yet when we are listening to the word of God, and God’s Word and Christ’s flesh and blood are being poured into our ears yet we pay no heed, what great peril should we not feel?”<sup>27</sup>

Just as Christ is truly present under the species of bread and wine, so is he in the words of the Gospel. When the Gospel is proclaimed by an ordained minister of the Church, the spoken words form his body that is coming down to us from heaven. Christ Jesus, crucified and risen, enters us through the Gospel reading, touches our hearts, transforms our spirits from within and makes us more and more like him, if we only let him. Consequently, the Holy Gospel has a truly sacramental effect on its recipients. And if we pay little or no attention to the words of the Gospel, wander off with our thoughts and do not listen, it is, according to the teaching of St Jerome, as if we were dropping the Eucharist to the ground.

In view of this teaching and practice of the Church it is worth to think about how we as a parish approach and celebrate the liturgy of the word, and how much value we give to the proclamation and interpretation of the Gospel at each of our liturgical gatherings. It is not just since the days of the Second Vatican Council that we as the Church consider the first and the second part of our Holy Mass equally sacred, equally important. We find evidence of this already in the earliest days of the Church.

When I look at the development worldwide, but also here in Ireland, especially when I talk to young Catholics, I see an increased interest in the Scriptures, in biblical theology. I take that as a sign of hope. If we do not know the Scriptures, especially the four gospels, we do not know Christ.

Perhaps this renewed awareness is a fruit of the ecumenical dialogue of the past forty years. And just as we Catholic Christians are increasingly growing in love for the Word of God, so I wish for many of our Protestant brothers and sisters, particularly in the Low Church and the numerous Evangelical movements, that they will rediscover and learn to love Christ’s true and effective presence in the Lord’s Supper. Perhaps this too will one day be a fruit of our ongoing ecumenical dialogue.

Now that we have truly received Christ in his Word, let us respond to his call, his love and his goodness in the profession of our faith.

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in: Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, N° 56, *The Sacramentality of the Word*.  
[https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20100930\\_verbum-domini.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini.html)

## The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Today we celebrate with great joy the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. With this doctrine, the Church expresses her belief that Mary has remained pure from every stain of sin from the very first moment of her existence, the moment of her conception.

Many people today, even clerics, have difficulties with this dogma, which they find hard to understand, or just cannot perceive as relevant for our here and now. For a long time, that included me; this doctrine has only slowly and rather late become accessible to me as a necessary theological truth and therefore an important article of our faith.

Many of you know that I have written a manuscript with rosary meditations.<sup>28</sup> It was a few of these meditations that eventually opened up this dogma to me personally. Let me give you a few examples:

“Mary was his Holy Tabernacle for nine months.”

In Sacred Scripture, particularly in the Old Testament, God is absolutely pure and holy, and his holiness is like a blazing fire that burns away every impurity, every sin.<sup>29</sup> When humanity first sinned and through this gave up its friendship with God, God had to withdraw his immediate presence from the fallen creation for its own safety. When he eventually decided to dwell among Israel, his people, he could only do so within the protective layers of the Holy Tabernacle or, later, the Temple of Jerusalem. So, anyone who is chosen to receive God himself in her womb better be in an immaculate state.

Also the following meditation made me think about the role of Our Lady in God’s plan for our redemption:

“From her Jesus received his sacred Body and precious Blood.”

If God chooses to receive a human body from an earthly woman, obviously she must be most pure in the light of his divine honour and glory. However, there is much more to being a mother than just giving birth to a child, as we all know. That, of course, was also true of the Virgin Mary and her significant role in salvation history:

“Under her loving guidance, Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.”

As a result of original sin we have lost our original trust in God as our loving Father. However, every child, every human being needs this original trust to accept God’s love unconditionally.

Whenever parents act in ways that harm their children, whether emotionally or physically, this can wound a child’s developing sense of trust. Pastoral psychology shows that our early

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<sup>28</sup> *Meditating on the Mysteries of Salvation: A Guide to Praying the Rosary With Joy and Dedication*, Veritas Publications, Dublin, Ireland, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> This theological truth is explained very well and in an easy to understand way in the following two YouTube videos by the BibleProject: *Holiness*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9vn5UvsHvM>, and: *The Book of Leviticus*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmvyrLXoQio>.

experiences often shape the way we imagine God and relate to him later in life. These wounds, however, arise from the effects of sin in our human condition.

In Jesus we see something different. Although he is fully and truly human, his humanity is united to the divine Person of the Son. Because of this, his human nature was completely free from the wounds that come from sin. He grew and developed as every child does, as Scripture tells us, yet without inner disorder or distortion. His knowledge of the Father and his trust in the Father's will flowed from who he is as the eternal Son who took on our human nature.

Mary's role in this mystery is unique. God prepared her in advance, preserving her from original sin, so that she could be the Mother who gives to Christ a true and unstained human nature. Her immaculate conception is therefore a grace rooted in the dignity of the One she was called to bear. Through her free cooperation and maternal love, she provided the earthly home in which the humanity of Jesus grew in grace and in stature, in perfect openness to the Father whose will he accepted even to the Cross.

Last, but not least there is the following sentence from my Rosary book:

“Jesus resembled his mother and she resembled him.”

According to the Book of Genesis, God created Adam, the first man, and from a piece taken from Adam's side God created Eve, the first woman (Gen 2:22-23). When God decided to initiate his new creation in the fullness of time, he gave life to the new Adam out of the new Eve, mirroring the story in Genesis. Surely Jesus must have looked a lot like his mother, so that, as the Gospel of Mark reports, the people of Nazareth said at his sight, “Isn't this Mary's son?” (Mk 6:3). But this resemblance between the new Adam and the new Eve goes far beyond a mere physical one. Both overcame sin and guilt to live in God's presence and friendship in the new world.

Now, the question still remains: What does the Immaculate Conception mean for us today? I believe the key to this lies in our baptismal rite. After baptism, the newly baptised is clothed in a white garment, and the presiding bishop, priest or deacon speaks the following words:

“You have become a new creation, and have clothed yourself in Christ. See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity. With your family and friends to help you by word and example, bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven.”

The white garment symbolises our purity from Adam's sin and testifies to our restored friendship with God as baptised Christians. In baptism, God lets us share in the saving grace that has also worked in Mary, the new Eve. She followed her Son up into heaven and thus preceded us all together with him as the first born of the new creation.

We, too, receive Christ in our bodies whenever we gather to celebrate the sacred mystery of our salvation and receive the Most Blessed Sacrament of the altar. This sacrament is meant to strengthen us on our own journey towards heaven and helps us to keep the saving grace of baptism alive in us. With this in mind, let us now celebrate the Holy Eucharist.

## Saint Joseph, Husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary

In our Gospel reading (Mt 1:16, 18-21, 24) today we heard about Mary and Joseph at the early stage of their relationship. Our reading told us that Mary was betrothed to Joseph, and further that she was found to be with child before they came to live together. But something is very strange in the text:

“Joseph, being a man of honour, wanted to spare her publicity, so he decided to divorce her informally.”

What is strange about this verse is not that Joseph wanted to spare Mary public scandal and even execution by stoning for adultery. The strange thing is that St Joseph is described as a *man of honour* in our lectionary. But that is not what St Matthew is writing and saying in his Gospel. If you look into the original text, Joseph is actually described as a “righteous” man, “dikaios” in Greek.

You might now ask yourselves, man of honour, righteous man, where is the difference? Well, there is actually quite a difference, because righteous, in Hebrew “tsaddik”, is a term with a special connotation. It describes someone who loves God very much, from the depth of his heart. So much that he does not only fulfil God’s life-giving commandments in everything, but over-fulfils them, not out of literalism or legalism, but because the law of God is engraved deep into the heart of a righteous person: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And love your neighbour as you love yourself.

Someone who is righteous feels for the poor widow and the orphan, the stranger in the country, he feels for the dispossessed or disadvantaged in the society. The people of Israel were once enslaved, exploited and oppressed by a foreign nation in a foreign land. God had compassion on the people he chose for his own, because they had no one else to look after them, and so he led them out of bondage into freedom and prosperity. The whole of God’s people must therefore feel obliged to be kind and just to everyone, because the experience of hardship, once overcome, urges them to act in solidarity with those who are in need. And the righteousness of a person can be recognised by the fact that he or she conscientiously follows the example God has set for us to follow.

Joseph was such a righteous man. No needy person would have ever passed Joseph’s house without receiving a piece of bread, a cup of water or a spare cloak of Joseph’s against wind and weather. And Joseph was anything but a rich man himself. However, what he owned and could spare he would have given willingly to a poor person, and without even expecting a thank you for it. Why would he not want a thank you for his generosity? Because there is no reward for duty...

Joseph found his wife pregnant, and he had infallible knowledge that he was not the father. That must have been a very difficult, even unsettling, discovery for him. Had he accused Mary publicly of adultery, which would have been expected of a man of honour, she would have been stoned by their fellow villagers. But Joseph was a righteous man. He had a heart for that young woman who apparently had made a terrible mistake and was in trouble now, so he decided to let her go without causing any scandal. This is very mature for a young man of his age (a teenager of about sixteen years, very likely<sup>30</sup>), if one thinks how someone *could* have reacted

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<sup>30</sup> I follow here the reasoning of Francis L Filas in his work: *Joseph: The Man Closest to Jesus: The Complete Life, Theology and Devotional History of St. Joseph*, St. Paul Editions, Boston (MA), United States, 1962, p. 71 f.

in his time and culture, someone who was constrained by a certain type of masculinity and who felt his honour had been violated. But Joseph was not a man of honour. He was a righteous man.

Shortly after this unsettling discovery of Mary's pregnancy, he had a dream in which an angel of the Lord brought him a message. The God-loving man he was, he acted immediately on this call from above, and took his wife into his house. Half the village must have thought he has no honour for taking an adulteress into his home. The other half will have laughed at them, thinking there's a young couple that just could not wait. But Joseph did not care about his reputation. He only cared how he was seen by God. He was not a man of honour. He was a righteous man.

Then the angel appeared to Joseph again in a dream, urging him to flee to Egypt and take his wife and the new-born baby into safety. Joseph reacted again immediately. He left behind his business, his workshop, his customers, all his income as a respected craftsman, and brought his little family to safety at God's command. Again, he was indifferent to his material security or prestige among his fellow citizens. He was not a man of honour, he was a righteous man.

It seems to be only a little word in the translation that is poorly chosen, but it is enough to give us a very different impression of Joseph's character from the one he actually owned. But even more, looking at the different connotations of the word righteous in the Bible, we learn so much about Joseph and the kind of father he was to his child, the Son of God made man.

I imagine Joseph as a loving and responsible father, who taught the boy Jesus not only an honest trade, but also how to pray, how to love God and his neighbour truly, which means by action. Together with his mother Mary, Jesus had the best home imaginable. Not as a privilege, but as a necessity for him who was truly human to grow "in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man" (Lk 2:52). Through their love, care and devotion to their only child, his parents prepared Jesus for his long walk to Calvary. There he took willingly upon himself the consequences of our lack of righteousness in the eyes of God and atoned for them, so that we might live and not suffer eternal death and damnation.

Joseph and Mary have given us a perfect example of how we should love Christ, our Lord and Saviour. And this does not only mean the glorified Son of Man on the royal throne of his ancestor David, but also Christ who encounters us in the poor, the homeless, the displaced and the beggar who knocks at our door seeking help.

As we now approach the Most Holy Sacrament of the altar, let us pray for the righteousness and purity of heart that it takes to follow the example set by the Holy Family, as much as our feeble human abilities allow, but not less. And may the foster father of Christ support us always with his powerful intercession. So let us say, St Joseph, loving Father of the Church, pray for us. Amen.

## **Saint Patrick, Bishop, Principal Patron of Ireland**

Today we celebrate the feast day of Ireland's national saint, St Patrick. For many overseas Irish, today's feast day is a welcome opportunity to remember and joyfully celebrate their ancestry. This is now the second time the celebrations have been cancelled due to the pandemic. But we all remember green-coloured rivers, pints of green dyed beer, elongated parades through the cities, etc. People of Irish descent celebrate themselves and their Irish identity, and with them their many friends all over the world.

It's nice to celebrate one's national character and that way preserve one's heritage, especially in immigrant countries like Australia and the USA, where cultural identities are in danger of getting blurred or even disappearing in huge melting pots. But I also see certain developments with a little sadness, because I fear that the great national saint St Patrick has been turned into a mere mascot and his liturgical day of commemoration has become just another excuse for drink. Yet it was St Patrick who brought the Good News to this country, showing us the way to salvation. And from Ireland, once known as the Island of Saints and Scholars, the Gospel was brought to other countries, including my own homeland, through the Irish itinerant monks such as St Killian, for example.

In general, I see many developments of recent years here in the country with great astonishment, because the Ireland in which I live today has little to do with the Ireland that I learned about in school many years ago. And whenever I hear the German media talking about Ireland being "conservative Catholic", I have to smile because I always wonder which period in history they are talking about. It's certainly not the current one...

The same sense of astonishment might be felt by many of our older parishioners, who have grown up in a country that once was considered the "most Catholic" in the world, but that is now very different. Ireland has become more modern, more cosmopolitan, but also more worldly in many respects. Many moral teachings of the Church are seen as old-fashioned and undesirable. Also the scandals that have rocked this country and many others worldwide are often cited as a reason for the decline in church attendance. But I am sceptical about that. I rather believe that the scandals have only accelerated developments that have already been underway. And we can observe these developments in almost all countries of the Western world.

Historically, the Catholic faith together with the Irish language, has helped for many centuries to preserve an Irish identity against occupation and oppression by a foreign power. This was especially true in the 200 years following Oliver Cromwell's violent conquest of Ireland, to which we owe many picturesque ruins throughout the country. But after the attainment of national independence and the arrival of prosperity with and after the Tiger Years, the identity-forming significance of the Catholic faith has declined considerably, and with it the sense of the Irish of belonging to the Catholic Church.

It is, however, not the task of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church to preserve a national identity. The same is true for countries like Poland, Belgium and the areas of French-speaking Canada. Instead, our task as the Church, the assembly of the faithful, is to love God and our neighbour and to live our lives faithfully in the light of the Gospel. This our earthly life has only a limited time span given to it so that we may become and live as citizens in the Kingdom of God. And to my knowledge, there are no different nationalities or ethnicities in the Kingdom of Heaven, but we are all *one in Christ* (cf. Gal 3:28).

Furthermore, to make a statement at this point, I too am very much appalled and shocked about the abuse scandals caused by members of the hierarchical Church. But I myself cannot take that as a reason to turn my back on the Church, which is my home and my family in Christ. On the contrary, for me the scandals are reason enough to fight for a more credible Church that takes the Gospel seriously, for a Church in which preaching and actions are consistent with one another. And I know that many of you feel the same way about the Church, the mystical body of Christ that we all inseparably belong to through baptism. Otherwise you would not be here tonight, even via webcam, celebrating this Mass together with me and listening to my words.

As Christians we are called to become more and more Christ-like. This means that we no longer live only for ourselves, but for and as part of the whole human family that was so loved by our Lord and Saviour that it caused him a lot of pain. That is why we are all called to go out into the world and share our faith. Today this no longer means the countries of Africa or Asia, but our own neighbourhood or workplace. Ireland today is once again a missionary country, and by virtue of our baptism we are all missionaries and heralds of the Gospel.

This does not mean that we should now aggressively convert everyone who crosses our path. Christians have always been most convincing when they have put into practice what they believe. A testimony given through one's way of life can also be an act of preaching the Gospel, and sometimes even a more convincing one than a homily consisting of many beautiful words, but with no basis in reality. A truly lived testimony to the Gospel is attractive to others and will make them ask questions. That's how the words and saving deeds of Christ can be sowed into their hearts.

The words we heard in our second reading from the Letter to the Romans are and remain highly topical:

“If your lips confess that Jesus is Lord and if you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, then you will be saved.”

The Apostle Paul makes it very clear in his writings that the Gospel must be proclaimed always and everywhere. For people cannot believe and be saved if they never hear the Good News. But they will never hear the Gospel if there is no proclamation of Christ crucified and risen to them. And there will be no proclamation to anyone if Christians do not go out into the world to share their faith with others. This is the example St Patrick set for us, and as his true sons and daughters, and obedient to the Lord's great commission which we have heard in our Gospel reading today, we should remain faithful to this example at all times.

Having received the Word of God in the Holy Gospel, let us now respond to it by the profession of our faith.

## The Exaltation of the Holy Cross – The first anniversary of my priestly ordination

Today's solemnity, the feast day of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, also marks the first anniversary of my priestly ordination. It is a day that brings back many memories from the past year. But it is also a day of deep and heartfelt gratitude. Because, even if the past twelve months have not always been easy due to the circumstances, I am very happy about the grace of my ordination, because I enjoy being a priest very much. – Perhaps I enjoy it a bit too much, considering the sign of the cross under which I received my ordination.

The 14<sup>th</sup> of September also marks the day on which it was announced that I would be going to Blanchardstown Parish in order to serve as a curate here and to gather my first experience as a newly ordained priest. The good Archbishop, Diarmuid Martin, had hoped to send the flock of St Brigid's a good shepherd. Unfortunately, however, all he had to offer was a German shepherd...<sup>31</sup>

Our feast day today points to Good Friday, which for us Christians of course is a day of great sadness. Nevertheless, the sign of the cross is also to be celebrated, for through his holy cross the Lord redeemed the world. That is why the Church in her wisdom created the feast day of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

One of the mysteries of the cross is its contradictory character in our Christian spirituality, for it means for us grief *and* jubilation, both at the same time. The holy cross is a constant reminder to us of our sins and the price the Lord was willing to pay for them. But it also represents the Tree of Life for us, whose fruit, the body and blood of Christ, brings us Eternal Life whenever we receive it in Holy Communion.

These thoughts bring back to my mind the liturgy of my priestly ordination last year. A special moment for me was when, immediately after the completion of my ordination and the anointing of my hands with holy chrism, the gifts of God's people were solemnly handed to me by the bishop, which are bread and wine for the celebration of the Eucharist. Archbishop Martin spoke at that rite the following words to me:

“Receive the oblation of the holy people, to be offered to God. Understand what you do, imitate what you celebrate, and conform your life to the mystery of the Lord's Cross.”

These words have a special depth, and they have been with me since the day of my ordination. These words remind the priest that he has to offer sacrifice to God. Only this makes him a priest in the first place, the act of sacrificial offering. However, the sacrifice he brings before the eyes of God is more than Christ's self-sacrifice for our salvation. It is also the sacrifice of his own priestly life in the service of and to the Church, the assembly of the faithful. Furthermore, in bread and wine the priest offers the faithful themselves as a sacrifice to God, hoping that it will be acceptable and pleasing to him. For that is what the offertory procession actually means, in which the faithful bring their gifts to the Lord's table. In fact, in the gifts of bread and wine they bring themselves to the altar, and the priest offers this sacrifice of complete dedication to God in the offertory prayers. Just as the gifts of bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ, we ask that the faithful and worthy reception of Christ's body and blood may also transform us into his likeness. This desire is expressed in the prayer at the chalice rite, the co-mingling of water and wine:

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<sup>31</sup> I am playing with a pun here that circulated in Italy in the year 2005, when the former head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, was elected Pope Benedict XVI: *il pastore tedesco*.

“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.”

When a little bit of water touches the wine, it does not change the nature of the wine. Through the touch of the wine, however, the water is transformed, namely into wine. The Eucharist, the faithful reception of Christ’s body and blood in us, has the same transforming effect on our human nature. The reception of the eucharistic gifts is an earthly foretaste of that which awaits us in the life after death: an eternal communion with the Triune God in which we become more and more like Christ in his heavenly glory. That is why it is more than just a prayerful wish that we, the Church, will always and under all circumstances be able to gather around the Lord’s Table, because receiving Christ in the Eucharist is indeed a necessity for our Eternal Salvation. For this reason, the following words also apply to all of you, the assembly of the faithful, whenever you gather in order to receive the Lord in his Sacred Word and in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar:

“Understand what you do, imitate what you celebrate, and conform your life to the mystery of the Lord’s Cross.”

Amen.

## Sundays in Ordinary Time

### On the Wedding Feast at Cana

In our Gospel reading (Jn 2:1-11) this Sunday morning, we witnessed Jesus' first public miracle, the turning of water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana. It must have been a big wedding feast with a rich family because they could afford a servant (or slave) to oversee the banquet. He is called chief steward in the text. The family was also in possession of six large and rather expensive stone vessels to hold water for ritual cleansing and household use. Such quantities would not have been necessary in a small household and with a small number of residents and guests. And now, at the height of the celebration, the family was in danger of immense embarrassment: the wine had run out, which would have led to an early end to the feast and much gossip in the surrounding area. Mary, with her natural attention to human concerns and her profound motherly love to every human being, recognised the groom's predicament and, full of compassion, pleaded with her son to do something about the impending disaster.

If we look closely into the text, we first notice two things. At the end of the passage it says:

“Jesus did this, the first of his signs [...] and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”

We learn that the disciples believed *after* they saw, that is, after they witnessed the first miracle of their new Master, whom they had just recently joined on his mission. With Mary, however, it was different: she *already* believed in the divine power of her Son, even before she saw his first miracles. This makes her the first disciple of Christ and a perfect example for the Church of all times. For blessed are we if we believe without seeing, as the Risen Lord said to Thomas later in the same gospel (cf. John 20:29). Mary appeared as a powerful intercessor for people in need right at the beginning of her Son's public ministry, and her appeal to the servants also applies to us here and now: “Do whatever he tells you”.

The fact that Jesus' first sign of his messiahship is the transformation of water into wine is no coincidence, but rather carries in it a multitude of meanings and allusions to the scriptures. This is already evident in the Lord's more than unusual address to his mother, whom he simply calls “woman”. Some interpreters see this as a critical distance between Jesus and his mother, whom he seemingly rebukes in a harsh manner, especially for a son. But nothing could be further from the truth, and we can confidently assume that Jesus would never transgress any of the Ten Commandments, including the fourth commandment that one should honour one's father and mother. No, the address “woman”, which was repeated when Mary stood under the cross together with the beloved disciple (cf. Jn 19:26), refers to the so-called proto-evangelium (i.e. “first gospel”) in the Book of Genesis, when God spoke to the serpent after the Fall:

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers.”  
(Gen 3:15)

And this offspring of the first woman, who is to crush the head of the serpent for the salvation of humanity, has now arrived in the person of Jesus Christ, and with him a period of grace. The dawn of this new period is evident in the nature of the miracle at Cana, which in a way reverses the first public miracle of Moses. While Moses turns the waters of the Nile into blood so that the Egyptians may thirst as punishment for their hardened hearts (cf. Ex 7:14-24), Jesus turns water into wine so that the wedding guests may not run out of this highly symbolic beverage, which in the Bible represents joy (cf. Psalm 104:15), and go thirsty. With the coming of Jesus

into this world the messianic age has indeed begun, and his very first miracle, a miracle of provision and bounty, points to the wedding banquet in heaven of which Jesus often spoke during his earthly ministry, and in which he himself is the bridegroom of redeemed humanity.

This rich and meaningful symbol, the miraculous transformation of water into wine, of course points to the Eucharist, which is a powerful sign in itself and also offers a foretaste of the heavenly wedding banquet in God's kingdom. With this miracle, Jesus proved that he was able to perform what his words indicated when he handed bread and wine to his disciples, saying: "This is my body", and, "This is my blood". If the Lord was able to transform water into wine, then of course he was also able to change ordinary wine into his precious blood. For it is through his blood that Jesus redeemed the world, and wanted his Church to participate in his divine life for all eternity. Furthermore, it is also through his body and blood that he chose to be with us always, until the end of this age.

With all this in mind, it is not a luxury for the Church that we gather as often as we can to celebrate the Eucharist, but a necessity for our salvation. This is the reason why Christians of earlier times (and in some parts of the world even today) would rather accept martyrdom than give up the fellowship with Christ and with one another at the Lord's table. This very fact should be a constant reminder and lesson to us all.

There is another thing we can learn from Christ's first miracle. We know from the gospels that Jesus enjoyed eating and feasting often and even with sinners, to the point that his opponents accused him of being a glutton and drunkard (cf. Mt 11:19). Table fellowship among those who follow Christ has always been at the centre of Christian life, even outside our liturgies. We are Church not only when we gather for Holy Mass, but at every moment of our lives. And therefore, shared mealtimes and feasts are also part of our Christian spirituality.

Over the course of his earthly ministry, the Lord sanctified many basic human actions of everyday life and turned them into sacraments, such as holding meals together, washing and anointing one another, sharing in married life, etc. Through Christ's actions, water and wine, love and marriage, become parables of a higher, heavenly reality. That which is perishable points to that which is imperishable. All these real symbols<sup>32</sup> are meant to awaken and keep alive in us the longing for that which lasts, and to direct us to the way that leads to eternal life in communion with Christ the Bridegroom.

It is in this spirit that here today we celebrate the Eucharist together as a memorial of Christ's saving deeds. And in this spirit, let us now respond to the Gospel message with the profession of our faith.

**“The Christian of the future will be a mystic” – On encountering Christ in the words of the Holy Gospel**

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<sup>32</sup> Real symbols, or sacramental symbols, effect what they indicate: Baptism cleanses from original sin and imparts a share in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. The anointing of the sick strengthens those who are infirm, the Eucharist establishes true communion with Christ and his Church, the sacrament of priestly ordination confers the grace to work in the person of Christ, the High Priest and Good Shepherd. Sacramental symbols are therefore more than mere signs. For further details on this topic, I recommend the following book by my former professor of liturgical theology: Klemens Richter, *The Meaning of the Sacramental Symbols: Answers to Today's Questions*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville (MN), United States, 1990.

In our first reading at Mass this Sunday, taken from the Old Testament book of Wisdom (Wis 7:7-11), we heard about the Spirit of *Wisdom*, a central topic of that book, as the title indicates. The author told us how precious he deems wisdom to be, more precious even than “sceptre and throne”, not to be outweighed with “priceless gems” or all the “gold and silver” of this world.

As Christians, we have learned that wisdom is one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. But how is wisdom different from prudence or knowledge? An old joke states that, “Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit, wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad”.

Wisdom is defined as *knowledge* rooted in or enriched with *experience*. But what does this mean in a spiritual context? For us wisdom means, having scriptural and doctrinal, or in other words, *catechetical knowledge*, combined with true and therefore life-changing *experience of God*.

The German Jesuit and Münster Theologian, Karl Rahner, once famously said, “The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all.”

Now, what does he mean by that?

A *mystic* in his understanding is someone who has experienced God in his life. It is obviously not enough to just have catechetical knowledge, that means to have learned a number of sentences or even whole passages from the catechism by heart. In Ireland we have come to learn this truth from bitter experience in recent years: “Irish Catholic young people are among the most catechised and least evangelised in Europe,” as the former Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, once said in a speech. But how can we experience God in a way that turns us into mystics, and consequently into a Church, a community of believers with a future not only here in Ireland, but in all of our Western societies?

Now, let us have a look at our second reading this Sunday. It is taken from the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 4:12-13). The author told us that the Word of God is “living and effective”, “penetrating” into our deepest inner core, “between soul and spirit, joints and marrow”. Nothing is “concealed from him”, it is able to “discern reflections and thoughts of the heart”.

When I read this piece of scripture in preparation of this homily, I immediately thought of a particular term which I came across some time ago in a document of the Church, and which I found spiritually and theologically very profound, namely, the “*Sacrament of the Word*”<sup>33</sup>.

What does that mean, “Sacrament of the Word”? And how does it help us to answer the question from above, of how to experience God in a way that provides us with light and life, truth and spiritual nourishment, in order to survive in a highly secularised world that turns more and more hostile towards us?

We know, of course, the seven sacraments that have been entrusted to the Church for the sanctification of God’s people. These include Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Confession and Reconciliation, and so on. In these rituals, God’s loving mercy and his saving actions are made visible through various symbols in combination with performative speech. In the biblical sense, however, the word sacrament has a different, much deeper meaning. In its original sense, the term sacrament (or *mysterion* in the Greek original, cf. Eph 1:9-14 and 1 Tim 3:16), refers to the mystery of Christ’s incarnation, redemptive suffering and glorious resurrection for the

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Twelfth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2008, *Instrumentum Laboris*, Chapter 1, with reference to *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic constitution of the Second Vatican Council on Divine Revelation.

salvation of the world. Jesus himself is God's love for us made visible in the flesh, and in this broader sense, a sacrament is nothing other than a healing and saving encounter with Christ crucified and risen. And only with this in mind does the analogous term "sacrament of the word" begin to make sense: In Sacred Scripture, particularly in the four gospels, we can have true and genuine encounters with Christ our Saviour, who is the *Word of God incarnate*.

Through listening to the gospel accounts with open hearts and minds during Mass, this *Word of God* can enter us, change us, transform our whole being into the likeness of Christ in the Holy Spirit to the Glory of God the Father, in a similar and yet different way as the Eucharist does.

The American Scripture scholar and spiritual writer, Sandra M. Schneiders, describes Holy Scripture in one of her books<sup>34</sup> as a "privileged locus of the transforming" and "revelatory encounter" between "God and the believer". A "place" in which God speaks to us, as he used to do in the "meeting tent" of the Old Testament, where he conversed with his prophets in the days of Moses and Samuel. In our contemporary times we do not have that meeting tent anymore, but we have a "meeting text" instead.

We can indeed become true mystics by seeking God in the places of encounter he gave us. And we can receive the sacrament of the Word by meeting Christ in the Gospel stories, as we have heard today in the episode of a rich man who comes to Jesus for advice (Mk 10:17-30).

Outside the Mass, we could even intensify the sacramental effect of the Gospel by placing ourselves as bystanders (or even participants) into the biblical scenes. St Ignatius of Loyola called this method of mystical prayer "contemplation", or in simpler terms, praying with scripture using one's imagination, and using one's five senses, too. This allows for close observation of the scene, or even active participation in it.

As we enter the scenery, can we smell the air and feel the sun on our skin? Can we taste the dust that is blown up from the streets? Are there any noises? Can we hear the disciples talking? Having an argument again about who of them is the greatest? If we look at them, what do they look like?

What does Jesus look like? Is there anything special about him, anything that strikes as different? The way he looks or he talks? What does he wear? What do his hands look like? Are they the hands of a carpenter? Does he look serious? Or humorous at the folly of his disciples, trying to outrank one another all the time?

Now we see the man running up, kneeling before Jesus. What does he look like? Young, old? Does the Gospel say anything about his age? How can we tell that he must be rich?

When Jesus looks with eyes of love on that man, how does it make me feel? If I bring myself into the role of that man, how do I feel then? Can I feel the struggle, a dilemma, a dissatisfaction, an indignation...? Or would I feel the will and strength to give a different response?

"Come, follow me." May these words give us the strength and courage we need to live our lives in a world hostile to the truth of the Gospel. May these words penetrate – and open up – our hearts and our minds, and transform us into the likeness of Christ crucified and risen. Amen.

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text, Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, Second Edition 1999, Collegeville, Minnesota/USA; pp. XIX; 2; 4 f.; 39 f. (Also with reference to Dei Verbum).

## **God's Word - Like a seed planted in our souls**

In our Gospel reading (Mk 4:1-20) today, we witness Jesus' first public sermon in Mark's account. The whole scene is very impressive to the observer. Word of Jesus' signs and wonders has spread among the people, and so by now he is drawing large crowds to himself who want to see and hear him. The amount of people is now so great and pushes the Lord so hard that he has to sit down in a boat in order to be able to speak to them. The same episode also appears in Luke's Gospel. According to Luke, the boat from which Jesus speaks to the people belongs to St Peter. And the crowds have come together to listen to the Word of God being brought to them through Jesus. The Word of God, which was the great theme of last Sunday, is now also the subject of Jesus' teaching.

Furthermore, what is striking in our reading today is the method Jesus uses in his preaching and teaching, which turns out to be typical for him, namely, his speaking in parables. His disciples wonder about this in a later conversation they have and they ask him about the meaning of his parables. Jesus gives them as an answer that through their discipleship and proximity to Jesus they are already living within the Kingdom of God. The mysteries of God's Kingdom are revealed to them through Jesus' life and ministry. But to the many people in the Holy Land who have not yet heard and accepted the Gospel, it must be brought to them gently, carefully and in images. And indeed, over the course of his earthly ministry it becomes evident time and again that Jesus is right in his caution, for not everyone in Israel is well-disposed towards him and his teachings. His opponents among the Scribes and the Pharisees suspect him of being a false prophet and deceiver of the people, or even worse, of being possessed by the devil.

In the parable we hear from Jesus today, God is a sower who scatters his word generously and in all directions. He makes no distinction between the people, just as he "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Mt 5:45). God loves all people equally, and all shall have the same opportunity to receive his word scattered like a seed, and to let it be effective in them. It therefore depends on the person how he or she responds to God's call, to God's generosity.

The Word of the Gospel is like a seed planted in our souls. And the Holy Spirit is the water that makes the seed sprout and grow. In the light of this reflection on the effects of God's grace through the sacramental power of the Word through the work of the Holy Spirit, it is not by accident that we use consecrated oil in the sacrament of Confirmation, for it is an excellent means of illustrating the reception and action of the Holy Spirit within us. Just as oil enters the skin and cannot be removed from there, so the Holy Spirit imbues our souls and cannot be taken away from there, creating a fertile ground for the reception and growth of God's Word.

The Spirit is God's lasting gift to us and to our Christian lives inspired and gradually transformed by the Gospel. But the Spirit does not work automatically or magically, he only works in cooperation with us. We must be willing to actively accept his grace and let it be effective. In the same way we must actively accept, or rather embrace the Word of God and let it work in us, like a seed that falls on fertile ground. Therein lies the sacramental power of the Word of God, which does not work by force but graciously in us.

Let us ask for the grace that the Word of God may continue to be active and effective in our hearts and take ever deeper root in it, so that we may receive a share in the mystery of Christ. And even more, let us all who are baptised and confirmed be generously taken into the service of God as his co-workers and sowers of the Gospel, so that the Word of God may spread further and further in the world. According to the words of the prophet Isaiah, who writes:

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it sprout and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:10-11)

Amen.

## **On the parable of the mustard seed and contrasting images of Church**

In our Gospel reading (Mk 4:26-34) this Sunday, Jesus is speaking to a large crowd of people. At the beginning of the chapter we learn that the people have gathered in great numbers to see and hear Jesus. There are so many that they are pressing Jesus, so that he has to get out into a boat on the lake shore to speak to them. Now, from Peter's boat, as we know from the other gospels, Jesus draws their attention to the surrounding fields and speaks to them in parables.

It is noticeable that Jesus speaks to the people in a language and in images that they understand. They come from the countryside like he himself, live to a large extent from farming, and are very familiar with the processes in nature and in agriculture. And Jesus draws on this knowledge when he speaks of the Kingdom of God and compares it to a farmer who sows and, after a while of growth and maturity, gathers the harvest. The meaning of this parable strikes them immediately, as does the parable of the small mustard seed that grows into a large plant. Wild mustard is a dreaded weed that grows and spreads rapidly, sows itself everywhere and is very hard to contain once it has taken root in a field. Jesus knows the human mind and how it works. After all, he himself created it as the Creator Word of God made flesh. And so he finds always the right words to sow his teachings among his contemporaries. Like seeds, his words are to spread, germinate, grow and mature in the world. And so the Gospel, and with it the Kingdom of God, have been growing steadily in the world for 2000 years now, spreading everywhere. Just as the wild mustard does, which even the Romans with all their strength and abilities could not contain.

The growth of the Kingdom of God in the world, however, is only one aspect of these two parables. Before it can spread like wild mustard in the world, it must first be sown in people's hearts, grow and take deep root. Only when it has grown inside human beings can it spread out into the world. Those individuals who take up the word of the Lord and follow it in their lives, that is the harvest of which Jesus speaks in his first parable of the sower. God is the sower and we are the harvest, if we follow Christ's commands and example. That is why the Son of Man at his Second Coming has a sharp sickle in his hand instead of a sceptre, as it says in the Book of Revelation (14:14). On the Last Day, Jesus will come again to reap the harvest, which means, to gather the righteous in the world and lead them into his kingdom in the New Creation. But, who are the righteous in the eyes of God? Jesus gives us an explanation of this too, in the parable of the goats and the sheep. The Son of Man says to the ones who are being saved on the Last Day:

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” (Cf. Mt 25:31-46)

It is not good enough to say “Lord, Lord” to Jesus and think that is enough to enter heaven (cf. Mt 7:21). God's grace is generous, yes, but not cheap. It is a common thread throughout the four gospels that true, living faith responds to God's election with good works of charity. It is true that we become Christians through Baptism and Confirmation, and we are strengthened in our daily lives and struggles through the Eucharist. But this only sows the seed in our souls. To let this seed grow and germinate is something we have to work on with God's help throughout our whole lifetime here on earth. And for this purpose we are granted a time of grace in which we are currently living. It is the period between the Ascension and the Second Coming of Christ. And on the day of the Last Judgement we will be measured not so much by how much we have

believed, but by how much we have loved. Through the transforming power of love we become like Christ, and this likeness opens the way to heaven, to communion with God who is pure love, and in whose all-consuming presence love alone endures.

During the pontificate of the German Pope, there has often been talk of the Mustard Seed Church, small but credible. In the current pontificate, on the other hand, the Church is seen as a field hospital, large enough to offer shelter and healing to the many who are weak and wounded. I have long been thinking about these two images of Church, and which of the two I tend to lean towards. But then I realised that these two images are not mutually exclusive. Even a field hospital can be a place where God's mustard seeds can be scattered into the world. We must then leave it to him to let these tiny grains grow and flourish. Very early on, the Church spoke out against all salvation elitism. Christ shed his blood for the many, not for the few, as we hear at every Mass during the words of institution. In his earthly work, Christ has welcomed every human being into his presence, even the greatest sinners. However, he did not let them leave unchanged after their encounter. This reveals the true meaning of the image of a field hospital, not as a place of infirmity for hardened sinners, but as a place of healing for those who seek their salvation in the conversion of heart that love alone can initiate. And as Church, we too are measured by how little or how much we have loved. The time of grace is a time of love. And in that spirit, let us now encounter Christ's transforming love in the Eucharist. But before that, let us profess our faith and then bring our prayers and petitions before the Lord.

## **“Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” – The Calming of the Storm**

In our Gospel reading (Mk 4:35-41) this Sunday, we hear one of Jesus’ well-known miracles in Mark’s Gospel, namely the calming of the storm on the lake. This episode follows the various public speeches in which Jesus taught the people in the form of parables and with great authority. At this point it has already become clear to his contemporaries that Jesus is not just anyone, and not just one of the great prophets either, like John the Baptist was. No, in the teachings of Jesus there was a power and personal wisdom present that could have its origin in God alone.

Just a short time before today’s episode, Jesus was teaching a large crowd of people from a boat by the shore, because the crowd was so overwhelming that there was no more space left for him on land. And now in the evening, after Jesus finished teaching and preaching to a large crowd, he invites his disciples to join him in the boat and cross over to the other shore of the lake. Again, and this is the motif of this story, Jesus chooses to teach from the boat he was in, but this time it is the disciples he wants to teach. He wants to tell them as gently as humanly possible and yet convincingly who he really is. And for this purpose he uses specific signs and wonders over the course of his earthly journey, because words are cheap and can be spoken by anyone. Any lunatic can make a claim to be God. But certain mighty signs and deeds can only be performed by God himself, for he is the author of life and Lord over all creation. And in our reading today we have witnessed one of these signs.

As we have heard, a violent storm arose, stirring up the waters and frightening the disciples nearly to death. In their distress, they called out to Jesus, who was calmly sleeping in the back of the boat, exhausted from teaching the large crowd earlier that day. At the disciples’ plea for help, Jesus threatened the wind and commanded the water of the sea, and the storm calmed down just as suddenly as it had appeared. At that miracle, great fear seized the disciples, but it is a different fear from the one they had experienced in the storm just moments ago. Now it was the same sort of fear that befalls mortal human beings whenever they encounter the Holy One. The sacred is terrifying to mortals, which is why the first words of God or of an angel at an apparition are usually, Do not be afraid. And in this episode, too, it dawns on the disciples that this Jesus of Nazareth is not just any ordinary man in their presence, as they ask themselves, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

As devout Jews, the disciples of course knew their Sacred Scriptures, and they were also familiar with the Psalms, just as Christians today are familiar with the various hymns of the Church. And from the Psalms, they of course knew the following verses taken from Psalm 107:

“Some went out on the sea in ships;  
they were merchants on the mighty waters.  
They saw the works of the LORD,  
his wonderful deeds in the deep.

For he spoke and stirred up a tempest  
that lifted high the waves.  
They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths;  
in their peril their courage melted away.  
They reeled and staggered like drunkards;  
they were at their wits’ end.

Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble,  
and he brought them out of their distress.  
He stilled the storm to a whisper;  
the waves of the sea were hushed.”

(Psalm 107:23-29)

The disciples knew that it is God alone who commands the storm by the sound of his voice, and the powers of nature cannot but obey their Creator. But how could that be that a carpenter from Nazareth spoke with the voice of God?

That God became man and dwelt among us was still inconceivable to the disciples at that time. Too outlandish was the thought that the almighty and eternal God who made heaven and earth could humble himself to take on human nature, mortal flesh. But a process of ongoing reflection within and among the disciples had now been initiated through Jesus' first miracles. And the Lord will keep performing signs and wonders on his journey to Calvary in order to reveal himself to his followers, to reveal himself as fully human and fully divine. Not with words alone as for example with his I AM sayings, but with acts of divine power and authority.

In his earthly ministry, Jesus healed the sick, cast out demons and raised the dead from their sleep. He cared for his people through acts of provision and exercised power over nature. All these works taken together could not be accomplished by just any ordinary human being, not even by a mighty prophet. These deeds were the works of God Almighty himself, who is Lord over life and death and Master over the whole creation. But apart from that, Jesus' miracles were much more than just proofs of his divine authority and omnipotence; they were indeed messages of revelation addressed to his beloved and chosen people. Jesus' signs and wonders tell his people, tell us his followers at all times, that the Triune God is not indifferent to our fate here on earth, but that he feels for us and cares for us.

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Jesus Christ is very different from all the pagan gods with all their whims and quirks. The God of the Bible is a God of mercy and compassion, slow to anger, abounding in love. And when the disciples finally had all the pieces of the puzzle together and, as the ultimate proof, encountered the crucified and risen Christ in his fully restored divine glory, they were eventually ready to take their faith together with the message of the Gospel out into the world.

However, the mighty works of Jesus, such as the feeding of the multitudes, the raising of Lazarus, the casting out of the demonic legion, the calming of the storm or the walking on water were not the greatest miracles of Jesus. The Lord's greatest miracle was reserved for the very end of his earthly ministry, shortly before he freely and willingly went up on a cross to lay down his life for us and our salvation: he changed bread and wine into his true body and blood through the creative power of his word.

The institution of the Blessed Sacrament at the Last Supper is indeed the greatest miracle of Christ's earthly life, and yet it is so subtle that it can only be seen through the eyes of faith. And in this form, in the gifts of the Holy Eucharist, Jesus is really and truly with us until the end of time. He is with us to comfort us, to strengthen and to uplift us in times of need and oppression, helping us to live our lives in a world that is hostile to the Gospel, hostile to the bride of Christ, his Church here on earth.

We are now in the midst of a violent storm that is shaking the barque of St Peter. But it will not sink, because he is on board with us, the risen Lord himself. And if the Lord wills it, the storm will calm down eventually and we will move through calmer waters again, towards our final goal which the Lord himself has pointed out to us. It is communion with him in his everlasting kingdom. And now, in response to the Holy Gospel, let us profess our faith, which the heavenly Father has given us through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

**“Don’t be afraid; just believe.” – Christ’s power to heal and restore**

Our Gospel reading this morning (Mk 5:21-43) is in line with last week’s episode. Last Sunday we heard about the calming of the storm on the lake and how Jesus revealed his divinity through the mere power of his word. In this Saturday’s Gospel at morning Mass, the reading focused on the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law. Jesus took the seriously ill woman by the hand and helped her up, and immediately she was restored to good health. It did not even take a word from the Lord, the mere touch was enough to heal the old woman. And the events we have witnessed in today’s Gospel are closely connected to these accounts. They tell us about Christ’s true nature.

As we have heard, Jesus was on his way to a young girl who was about to die. On the way there, Jesus was surrounded by a large crowd. A woman who had been suffering from internal bleeding for a long time took the opportunity to approach Jesus discreetly in order to touch the hem of his garment in faithful trust. According to the Law of Moses, the woman had been in a state of ritual impurity for a long time, caused by her bleeding. She had to stay away from other people, because her mere touch would make them unclean and consequently unfit for worship in the Temple. And yet, after all that the woman had heard about Jesus, her faith was greater than her fear or despair. But how could she dare to approach this holy man and beg him for help, she, the humble woman in a long-lasting state of impurity? When she eventually took heart and touched the Lord secretly, the unexpected happened though: it was not her impurity that was transferred to the Lord. No, a spark of Jesus’ holiness jumped to the woman and cleansed her from her illness and ritual impurity.

After this miraculous event, when Jesus eventually arrived at the girl’s house, the participants in the scene all knew that the girl had just died. This explains their reaction when Jesus told them that the girl was only asleep. The neighbours, who according to Jewish custom had gathered to comfort the girl’s parents and to begin the lamentation for the dead, reacted with ridicule and mockery to the apparent denial of the obvious. Jesus, however, threw everyone out of the room except the girl’s parents, and his favourite apostles, Peter, James and John. This small group of people was chosen to be witnesses of Christ’s divine nature and power, hidden to the eyes within the human body of the true man Jesus of Nazareth.

According to the Law of Moses, a dead body is unclean, and anyone who touches a corpse also becomes ritually unclean for a certain period of time. He or she is not allowed to take part in the Temple service and must keep away from other people so that the ritual impurity would not be passed on to others. And again, the miraculous happens: the physical contact with death, with the corpse of the young girl, does not make Jesus unclean, but rather the infinite holiness of Christ revives the girl and brings her back from the realm of the dead.

These two episodes make it once again clear to the attentive observer that Jesus is not just any man, although he is obviously fully human. The Son of David is at the same time God the Son, made flesh in Jesus Christ. God, however, is the Holy One, and nothing could ever diminish or defile his sanctity in any way. Not the touch of hideous and death-bringing disease such as leprosy, and not even the touch of death can violate God’s purity and holiness. On the contrary, it was Jesus’ full immersion in death that put an end to it from within, after Jesus’ crucifixion and by the power of his glorious resurrection.

All this reminds me of something I heard and read during my studies in Rome, namely, how the followers of satanic cults time and again take possession of consecrated hosts, for example, by stealing them from churches or putting them in their pockets at the distribution of Communion. They do so with the intention to desecrate them later during their diabolic rituals.

Occasionally, smeared and crushed hosts can be found at places of satanic worship in the woods or in abandoned houses. I pity these people and their great ignorance about the meaning of God's inviolable holiness. These poor and deluded people just do not know that they cannot desecrate the body of the Lord, no matter how hard they try. How should that ever be possible? Yes, one can with sacrilegious intention smear the hosts and make them unsuitable for human consumption. But to take away God's holiness, how could that be achieved? No, nothing could ever make Jesus unholy; in his humanity, and even under the outer appearance of bread and wine in the most Holy Eucharist, he is still and wholly God, God with us.

I know that there is a certain reluctance among some of the faithful to touch the body of Christ with their hands when receiving Holy Communion. Especially the older ones among our parishioners were taught in their youth that ordinary people should never touch the body of Christ with their hands. But in the light of the various miracles of healing and revival, the reservations are well intended but unfounded. If even a cadaver cannot defile the body of Christ, neither can the hands of a poor sinner. Rather, it is the body of Christ that makes us clean when we receive it in humility and with a contrite heart. And so we profess to the Lord at every Mass:

“Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.”

And if the Lord wills it, we will be healed. Amen.

### **“Take nothing with you” – On radical discipleship for the sake of the Kingdom**

In our Gospel reading today (Mk 6:7-13) we became witnesses of the sending out of the twelve disciples through Jesus in order to assist him spreading the Good News. And we have heard how he gave them specific instructions for their missionary work in the villages of Galilee. The disciples are not to burden themselves with earthly concerns or possessions, for they are to live and work in complete trust and reliance on the Holy Spirit. The Lord cares for his own and he will bless their work as it is done in his name.

If we look into the whole context of Jesus' missionary activity, we can understand why the Lord imposes such strict conditions on his disciples regarding their appearance on the streets and in the villages: it makes visible to everyone they encounter their personal needlessness as they travel around. Jesus knows that the messenger himself is an important part of the message. Only where life and preaching correspond in a credible way, the words and testimonies of the disciples will be heard and followed. However, if the messenger appears to be personally untrustworthy, the seed of their preaching cannot and will not fall on fertile ground.

With all that said, it becomes obvious that the disciples are more than just envoys of Christ; they are indeed representatives of the Lord himself, being commissioned to make Jesus visible in their outer appearance and demeanour. Through this, they turn into living and effective witnesses to the truth of the Gospel.

The rules that Jesus gave his disciples were strictly followed by the Church in the first centuries of her existence. They were considered the missionary rule of the Church, inspiring faithful Christians through the ages. In the rules we have heard about today we encounter something of Christ himself, his radical self-emptying and total dedication to his earthly ministry to the glory of God the Father and for the salvation of humanity. Following these precepts, St Patrick won the island of Ireland for the Gospel in the fifth century. And from here, the Emerald Isle, St Killian successfully carried the Gospel to southern Germany, resembling Christ, the poor itinerant preacher in his outer appearance.

It was the words of today's Gospel reading that inspired men like Francis of Assisi to follow Jesus in a radical way. And Francis became the inspiration for many in his time and over the centuries to live the Gospel to the letter with great determination. When the first Franciscans urged their unwilling founder to give them a rule for their new religious order, St Francis initially refused. He told his companions that they already had a rule, namely, the Gospel. Eventually they persuaded him to give them a rule after all, but in it he gave great personal poverty a major role in the life of the Franciscans. And although the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, having become wealthy and complacent by that time, looked upon the early Franciscans with suspicion, they nevertheless granted St Francis and his followers the privilege of radical poverty. To deny it to them, would have meant that the Gospel could not be lived in this world...

And yet it is not possible for all Christians to live the radical life of a Paul of Tarsus or a Francis of Assisi. By far the majority of Christians live secular lives and work in secular professions, have a family to support, a car to maintain and a house to pay off. And neither is it necessary for all Christians to live like monks and nuns in order to be true and credible followers of Jesus. There are different charisms in the Church, and many different vocations. Only to a few is it given to resemble Jesus outwardly in perfection, that means, in complete detachment from all worldly things.

Moreover, poverty in the spirit of the Gospel must not be misunderstood, which can easily happen if one takes a merely superficial approach to the words of Christ. Poverty in itself has no value, no beauty. It is not an end in itself, but is merely a means to an end. Poverty in the sense of Christian ethics means not attaching one's heart to perishable and material things, and thereby attaining a certain degree of freedom and independence in order to follow Jesus. Moreover, poverty in the Christian sense means that we should not love things more than the people around us, or even God himself. How quickly career, prestige, wealth and influence can take the place of God and become an idol, a false God that makes us his slave.

It is all right to have a good income and even to live in a certain material prosperity. This is true as long as we do not forget the poor, nor the concerns of the Church. And it has always been the ordinary Christians with worldly professions who, with their generosity, have made it possible for a small group of Jesus' disciples to devote themselves entirely to spreading the Gospel and building the Kingdom of God.

As for myself: of course we can return to a point where priests live again from the work of their own hands. In Germany, priests are already being told that in a few decades they might have to live off a civilian bread and butter job, once the German church tax no longer exists and the Catholic Church becomes an absolute minority in a secularised society. But that would not be a bad thing in itself, because honest work is not shameful, it is honourable. And Jesus himself worked as a carpenter, after all, and St Paul worked as a tentmaker. I myself know what hard physical work is. I earned my time as a student in Germany by working day and night shifts as a healthcare assistant in homes for the elderly, something many people do not know about me. However, we would in this case have to live with the fact that being a priest becomes a second job. We would have to accept that those who preside at the Eucharist spend eight hours a day making a living and will no longer have time for pastoral care, visiting the elderly, the lonely and the sick. Priesthood will then be reduced to the celebration of the sacraments in the evenings and at weekends. Or, perhaps, one day there will no longer be a diocesan priesthood, but pastoral care for the faithful will come from the monasteries and religious houses, as was partly the case in the turmoil during the fall of the Roman Empire and during the migrations of the peoples. We shall see. The next thirty or forty years will be very interesting in the Western world.

However, regardless of what the future will bring, the words of the Lord remain that we should not be afraid. As long as we remain faithful to him and to the Gospel, the Church will prevail. Christ will always be in our midst, and the Holy Spirit will guide us at the right time through the turmoil of the ages. And as long as I have some basic material freedom, I am a shepherd of the small flock that belongs to the Lord, with joy and with all my heart. In this spirit, let us celebrate the Eucharist together this Sunday as we do every Sunday in memory of Christ's saving passion, death and resurrection.

In the name of Christ crucified and risen. Amen.

## Christ the Good Shepherd – On my vocation story

Of all the chapters of Mark's Gospel, I particularly like the sixth one, which we have heard as our Gospel reading today (Mk 6:30-34), because it has to do with my own life and vocation history in various ways.<sup>35</sup>

I always wanted to serve God and his Church, even as a little boy. When people asked me at pre-school what I wanted to become, I always answered, "A Pastor!" But when I look back today, I think I did not always want to do it for the right reasons.

I am an "all or nothing" person. It was clear to me in my teenage years that I wanted to dedicate my life entirely to God. That I wanted to be a *better* Christian than anyone else in my home parish in Germany. And I thought that in the priesthood, perhaps also in religious life, there was an opportunity to do so.

Apparently, I believed, very naively, that priests and bishops, monks and nuns were the better human beings, the better Christians. So I wanted to be "*one of them*". I was a little snobby about Catholic clergy and the Church. I sometimes call this my early "clero-snobism".

In 1997 I entered seminary in Germany and started studying theology. The disenchantment came fast and quite hard. I quickly learned that clerics are *not* in all cases the better people. Not even the better Christians, I have found. They were just ordinary people, with all kinds of faults and quirks... What a disappointment!

I left the seminary three years later and distanced myself from the institutionalised Church. I was not sure of my vocation anymore, my will and power to stay faithful to my call, and I also did not want to be "*one of them*". Somehow, I felt that the three years in seminary have not done me much good and even that I probably was a better person *before* I entered seminary...

Later, as a lay student, I pursued my theological studies and continued to work in a parish where a good friend of mine from seminary was the parish priest. Then, in 2004 I had a key experience in this parish, which influenced me very much for my faith journey.

On the night of Holy Thursday, the Blessed Sacrament was, as every year, removed from the tabernacle and placed in a small side chapel of that church. My friend came to me that day and asked me if I could keep watch during the night from 3 to 4 o'clock in the morning. In the parish church there was a register for parishioners to keep watch. Many had registered for different times during the following night, but this one hour remained unfilled. And because the parish church was not in a good neighbourhood, the parish priest did not want the church to be left alone during the night.

I was a bit cranky, because I was expected to interrupt my sleep for this. But I wanted to do my friend a favour, so I agreed. I set my alarm-clock and stomped grumpily and half asleep to the church with my breviary under my arm to sit there alone for a long hour in the middle of the night. However, when I entered the church and went to the side chapel, I saw something that struck and deeply touched me. The parish church was built in the 1960s with modern architecture. Small pebbles were set into the concrete in front of the side altar. And right there, on the stony ground knelt five devout members of the parish keeping watch with the Lord! They

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<sup>35</sup> This homily was first published in a slightly shortened form in the newsletter of the St. Joseph's Young Priest Society, *The Sheaf*, in the spring edition of 2022, p. 3.

<https://stjosephsyoungpriestssociety.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Sheaf-Spring-2022.pdf>

had not entered their names on the list but came very naturally to stay with the Lord and look after him in adoration.

This very moment put me to shame and healed me once and for all from my clero-snobism. I had never seen such piety in my brother seminarians or the priests who trained me. Nor even, which I have to admit, in *myself*...

I learned that night that you do not have to be a priest or a monk to be a good and faithful Christian. And I began to admire the ability in many people to live normal, “ordinary” lives as fathers or mothers, working hard in their respective professions to feed their families. I admired their strength and courage to face all the challenges that comes with that, and yet being devout Christians who are dedicating their lives to Christ in their own way, which means accepting and living their own, personal vocations as living members of the one body of Christ, which is the Church. How easy my life as a celibate man suddenly looked in comparison...

Well, I still had doubts afterwards whether I wanted to be “one of *them*”, a cleric. The scandals came in Germany, Ireland and many other countries in the world. And what I heard did not encourage me to pursue a priestly vocation.

The day came where I had to make a decision about my priestly vocation in 2009. I could not say yes to it at that time, so I graduated from university and started working in the private sector. My career led me to Ireland after a while, where I found a new home in Dublin.

Nevertheless, I stayed in touch with that parish in Germany for the next couple of years, and every year during Holy Week I returned there to celebrate the holy days of the Lord’s suffering, death and resurrection together with that parish. Over many years, some of the parishioners became good friends and companions on my faith journey, who were always happy to see me again.

Then, in 2014, the old senior parish priest retired, and my priest friend had long since moved to another parish. As everywhere, vocations were scarce in the diocese, and the congregation did not know whether a new parish priest would ever be appointed there. In this Holy Week, the people of the congregation looked at me in a certain way. Nobody said anything, but I could hear their silent question. “Frank, why didn’t you become a priest, *our* priest?”

I knew they had never understood my doubts and difficulties about my priestly calling, my questions of whether I’d be strong, talented and resilient enough for the many challenges of the priesthood. In their eyes, I would probably have been a good priest.

During that Holy Week, I looked at them and I had compassion for them. I felt pity for them, for “*they were like sheep without a shepherd.*” The exact words we have heard in today’s Gospel reading.

I felt a kind of responsibility for these people. I felt that I had somehow left them alone because I had too little confidence. Confidence in God, in his Church, in myself. And I realised that the priestly ministry is not about being “one of them”. It’s not about being the centre of attention or feeling important. It is not about being a better Christian. No. It’s about being there for those who belong to Christ. To share their joy as well as their grief in the ups and downs of earthly life. To encourage them and strengthen their faith when the wolves approach to tear them apart. And there are many wolves in our days...

I realised that I had a purpose in my life. Namely to be a shepherd after the heart of Christ. A shepherd who is not afraid to be with the flock, waiting for the one who is the true shepherd. The Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

Pope Francis once said that a good shepherd knows “the smell of his sheep”. And when I look back on my life, I now realise that I got to know this smell for many years in my working life.

I am a priest now, and as a newly ordained curate I am still learning from many good and holy priests in our diocese and in our country. And I would be honoured and delighted if people would see me as “one of them” one day in the future, as a good and holy priest. I am also still learning from the many faithful in our parishes who dedicate their entire lives to Christ as mothers and fathers, as devout and faithful Christians.

At the end of my homily, I would like to encourage you to be what you already are, good and faithful Christians. Preach the Gospel with your life, with your love for and devotion to Christ. Remember the words that are attributed to St Francis of Assisi: “Preach the Gospel at all times. And if necessary, use words.” Your personal testimony is important to the world and it may help one day a naïve, young man who is struggling with his priestly vocation.

## Who is Christ for *me*?

Our Gospel passage (Mk 8:27-35) this Sunday confronts us with the question, who is this Jesus of Nazareth actually for me? A craftsman from Nazareth, an itinerant preacher, a dreamer, a prophet? Different people will give different answers to this question.

Jesus is a real challenge, for us, but also for his contemporaries, the people in the Holy Land who tried to make sense of this man from Nazareth, his public speeches, his powerful signs and deeds. And the people of Galilee and Judea used the categories of his time to put Jesus in a certain box. We could hear that from the disciples' response to Jesus' question as to what people said about him, who people thought he was: "Some say, John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

This has not changed much until our day. Even today, people try to give Jesus a meaning that fits into their categories, into their personal worldview. Some try to explain Jesus as a peaceful revolutionary who wanted to free his people from Roman oppression, but ended tragically on the cross. They see him as some kind of a Gandhi, who sadly failed with his peaceful approach. Others see him as a guru, a great teacher of humanity, like Buddha and Confucius were. Still others see him as the first feminist in world history, who stood up for women's rights and whose revolutionary ideas were later suppressed by a male-dominated Church. One could think that people see in Jesus just what they want to see in him...

In a sense, this also applies to Simon Peter, of whom we heard in today's Gospel. Peter gives in principle the right answer: "You are the Messiah!" And Peter is quite right about that. Nevertheless, he, too, puts the Lord in a box, and it turned out to be the wrong box. Because what Peter understands by the title Messiah, the title of Christ, is very different from what Jesus understands by it. He rejects any claim to earthly power and dominion. Jesus does not want to be seen as a political ruler, or as a mighty warlord who conquers his enemies by brute force and rules his people in the manner of a tyrant. And for this very reason, Jesus instructs his disciples not to tell anyone about it, that in Jesus the long awaited Messiah has finally arrived.

Jesus did indeed come to redeem his people, and with it the entire world, and to defeat the powers of evil, but he did so in his own way. And what that looked like we have heard about in our first reading today, taken from the Prophet Isaiah. Jesus came as the humble servant of God, humble by heart and ready to be humiliated even further for the salvation of the world. Jesus came as someone who endured all evil, all violence, he allowed it to happen to him. He was ready to bear it, to carry it on his shoulders, literally. For Jesus knew in his divine wisdom that evil cannot be met with evil. Violence always leads to more violence, or resentment by those who were subdued. And so Jesus conquered evil in a way that only he was able to do. He overcame it by non-resistance, and thereby broke its power once and for all.

Jesus willingly threw himself into the raging vortex of evil and destruction, allowed himself to be pulled down by it, down to its very bottom. And from down there, he broke its sweeping force by the strength of his infinite love. It is a love that is able to forgive even the worst enemy, as Jesus demonstrated from the cross as he prayed for his executioners. And such love sets free from resentment and the law of retaliation. Jesus' love saves, it saves everyone who find themselves in a vortex of evil, swirled around by its overwhelming power. All we have to do in order to be saved from it is take Jesus' hand. And no matter how low we have sunk in our lives, Jesus will save us and pull us up, up into the warming light of his loving presence.

The message of the Gospel is full of beauty and power. And yet, it is for many hard to believe, and for many people also hard to bear. That is why they prefer to put Jesus into boxes, and even

into the wrong ones. For the secret of our salvation, and this cannot be denied, is in the mystery of the cross. That is why our Gospel reading today ends with the following words:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

This Sunday, just two days ahead of the Feast Day of the Holy Cross, let us be challenged by the Gospel, and let us ask ourselves who Jesus *really* is for us. And let us also ask ourselves whether we are truly willing to bear the cost of his discipleship, of which we are reminded today. For the path to salvation inevitably leads through the cross, whether we like it or not. The Good News, however, is that the cross is not the end but the pathway to salvation, or in other words, it is our stairway to heaven. Amen.

## Christ, the Servant King and the striking ignorance of the disciples

In today's Gospel reading (Mk 9:30-37), we encounter a recurring motif in Mark's Gospel: the disciples follow Jesus on his wanderings through Galilee and all the way up to Jerusalem. And they know, they follow the Messiah, their future king. And yet, Jesus' followers seem to be downright ignorant about his true nature and his mission here on earth.

Again and again Jesus tells his disciples that he, the Son of Man, must suffer and die for us and for our salvation, but that he will rise again on the third day according to the Scriptures. The disciples, however, do not understand what he is saying. The Messiah they have in their mind is very different from

the Christ Jesus, the *servant king*. They expect a powerful military commander and political ruler, and their wandering towards Jerusalem is nothing more than the beginning of a march on the capital city, in order to capture and conquer it from within. And at this point it becomes obvious why they are constantly debating among themselves who of them will be the greatest: their debates are all about the future assignments of posts in God's Kingdom. Who of them will be the future prime minister, who will be general of the army, who will be chief adviser next to the throne, or the guardian of the treasury, etc. And it is at this point that Jesus puts the little child before them to teach the twelve a lesson by his example.

The Lord shows them through the child what true greatness is all about. Namely, it is not about gaining political power, wealth, prestige and domination over others, with oppression and the use of violence if necessary. True greatness rather consists in being on the side of the little ones, making oneself small, and serving them with kindness and humility. This is the example the Lord has given them, particularly when he washes their feet on Holy Thursday, and this is the example they are to follow in their later ministry, when Jesus entrusted the care of his Church to them.

Jesus' disciples, as later apostles, were to found his Church and to carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth. This was the ultimate goal, the real purpose for which Jesus wanted to prepare his disciples during their three-year journey together through the Holy Land. But before that, they had to learn that Christ's Kingdom will not grow and advance by military and political force, the means of this world, but rather out of a spirit of service.

Authority in the kingdom of heaven does not arise from the law of the strongest, from the oppression of the weak and lowly, but from a spirit of service. For this reason he gave his disciples the sign of the washing of the feet as one of his last acts on earth before his suffering and death. Authority in the Church of Jesus Christ grows out of love, which urges us to humbly serve our neighbour. And this love, this service, makes no distinction between good and bad, just and unjust people. As I said in one of my homilies last week, the Church is open to all, and it is not for us to discriminate between good and bad Christians. The Church like a field hospital for the wounded, as Pope Francis likes to say, and in the end Christ, not us, will be the judge of all. Jesus himself exemplified this attitude by tolerating even someone like Judas in the midst of his disciples, and by even washing his feet before the Last Supper, together with the other disciples. For salvation is offered to all people, and through God's generosity everyone can humbly accept it, even until the last moment of their lives, their last breath.

Let us pray that we, too, may always remain faithful to the spirit of mutual service and not fall into despair of our neighbour, just as Jesus did not fall into despair of humanity. In all his actions towards the different people he encountered on his earthly journey, the Lord has given us an example to imitate, an example of perfect love. This example is the key to joy and salvation in

the Kingdom of God. And now, my brothers and sisters, let us stand and respond to the words of the Gospel with the profession of our Christian faith.

## Blind Faith in Christ – Bartimaeus

When we reflect on our Gospel passage (Mk 10:46-52) this Sunday, the expression “blind faith” takes on a very special meaning. We hear of a blind man called Bartimaeus, for whom faith clearly precedes seeing.

With the twelve disciples it was usually not that way; they first had to be convinced with a sign or a miracle that Jesus was the Messiah, if we think for example of the plentiful catch of fish in Luke’s Gospel, or of the wine miracle at Cana in the Gospel according to John. Yet, the disciples have eyes to see, but do not see. And they have ears to hear, but do not hear. In Mark’s Gospel they appear most of the time to be downright ignorant about Jesus’ true nature and his mission here on earth. Here we encounter a recurring motif, as I have already pointed out in some of my previous homilies.

As we can witness in the gospels, Jesus told his disciples again and again that he must suffer and die for us and for our salvation, but will rise again on the third day according to the Scriptures. The disciples, however, did not understand what he was saying. In their mind and expectation, the Messiah was something very different from Jesus Christ, the *servant king*. They rather expected a military leader and political ruler. And when the twelve constantly debated among themselves who of them was the greatest, it was actually about the assignment of posts in God’s Kingdom. Who will be prime minister, who will be general of the army, who will be chief adviser, finance minister, and so on.

Only in the Emmaus story do Jesus’ disciples come to real faith and true recognition of the Christ, and yet again through seeing. Their eyes opened when Jesus broke the bread, and only then they recognised him in his true nature, fully human and fully divine, crucified and risen for the salvation of the world.

Bartimaeus, the blind man, with his unshakable faith in Jesus as the promised Messiah, or the “Son of David” as he says, serves as an example for us all who follow Jesus. As the Lord says to doubting Thomas: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (Jn 20:29)

Let us ask ourselves: Do we always recognise Christ for who he really is, for us and for the world? Would we really recognise him if Jesus were standing right in front of us, lowly, meek and humble? I have to confess, I ask myself the same each time I come across a beggar in the streets, particularly when I am walking by without giving him (or her) anything. Have I just ignored Christ, asking for help?

I often use as an excuse and to ease my conscience that if I gave only one Euro to each and every beggar I encounter in the streets of Dublin, I would be soon a beggar myself. But then a quotation by Mother Teresa comes to my mind: “If you cannot feed a hundred people, then feed just one”. As you can see, it is hard to get away with a cheap excuse in the realm of the saints...

Let us ask ourselves, who is Christ for us? Are we able to recognise Christ in the stranger, in the needy, in the displaced person, even if he does not look like Jesus at all as we know him from our colourful prayer cards? And let us ask ourselves further, do we always make it easy for our neighbours, for our fellow human beings, to recognise Christ in us? When was the last time we made Christ visible and tangible for someone?

Let us pray for the strength and wisdom to recognise Jesus always and everywhere in our neighbours, especially in the poor and needy of our big city. Particularly where we least expect to find Jesus, or even look for him. And let us also pray for the grace to make Christ visible to others through our lives and actions, a little more every day. Amen.

## **The Calling of Samuel – The challenges of a prophet in a land forgetful of God**

In our first reading (1 Sam 3:3-10) this Sunday morning we encounter an outstanding character of the Old Testament. It is the prophet Samuel. He was conceived and born to Hannah, a woman who until then had been considered barren. In thanksgiving for God having heard her prayers, she gave her little boy as a living sacrifice and life-long servant to God's dwelling place among his people, the sanctuary at Shilo, which at that time was still a provisional one, since the temple of Jerusalem had not yet been built.

Samuel, the first prophet of God in the Holy Land, is often compared to John the Baptist, the last prophet of the Old Covenant. Both were conceived and born through divine intervention by mothers who were considered barren. Both prophets acted as powerful and articulate critics of the rulers of their time, faithful to the divine messages and instructions they received. And both prepared the way for God's anointed one, namely, King David and his descendant Jesus of Nazareth, the promised Messiah.

In our reading today we heard the vocation story of Samuel. At the time of its occurrence, revelations were rare in the Land of Israel and the chosen people lived their lives just as they willed instead of following God's commandments, as we learn from the description in the First Book of Samuel. Although Samuel lived and served as a consecrated child-servant in the holy tabernacle by day and by night, and even slept in the proximity of the Ark of the Covenant to mind the sanctuary light which indicates the presence of God, he was not yet familiar with the Lord, since the Almighty One had not yet revealed himself to the boy.

The very fact that Samuel did not know the Lord yet and was therefore unable to recognise his voice despite his continuous service in the Most Holy Place, can only be a reflection of the forgetfulness of God that came over the people of Israel. Indifference towards God and negligence of his commandments were obviously that much advanced already in the Promised Land that no one really bothered to explain to Samuel whom he actually serves in the meeting tent.

The calling of Samuel took place when the light of the golden lampstand before the holy of holies had not yet gone out, which means in the early morning hours. The Lord called Samuel three times, and three times the boy woke up from his sleep, rose up from his bed and went to his guardian Eli, the high priest at that time, thinking that it was he who had called Samuel's name. It was not until the third time that Eli realised that it must have been the voice of God calling the boy. And so Eli instructed Samuel what to respond the next time God called him, which is, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."

It is an interesting answer that Samuel was asked to give, for Eli knew that a call from God is usually a commission, a call to action. Therefore, the actual meaning of the response Samuel was asked to give is the following, "Tell me, Lord, what you want me to do and I will do it willingly, for I am your servant".

As it turns out, God's message is a very difficult one for a young boy to deliver, for God tells him to go to Eli, Samuel's guardian and a father figure to him, to deliver God's judgement to him. Eli, the high priest, is to be punished for not bringing up his sons properly, who acted ungodly and sacrilegiously in the sanctuary instead of faithfully carrying out their priestly duties according to God's instructions in the Law. The transgressions of Eli's sons are so grave that they cannot even be atoned for by an expiatory sacrifice. And so God has decided to cut off this

branch of Aaron's descendants from his service and replace them with a group of faithful and virtuous priests.

Though Samuel was given a very difficult task, he carried it out as commissioned, reluctantly out of respect to his foster father and mentor, and yet faithfully and conscientiously. And Eli humbly accepts God's verdict, for he knows God's judgements are true and just.

When Samuel's predictions came to pass, it was confirmed in front of everybody that he was a true and reliable prophet, faithfully transmitting God's word and decisions to the people.

Reflecting on what I have just spoken about so far, there's a number of things we can learn from Samuel's vocation story. We learn that a message from God can be quite inconvenient and is not always welcome to its recipients, especially when addressed to the ruling class and the priesthood in the country. We also hear about the faults and transgressions of the people of Israel that was freed from bondage and oppression only a few decades ago at the time of our story, but already started to forget about God and ceased to listen to his life-giving words. As we can see, hard-won freedom from slavery does not guarantee a good and righteous life, and neither does a call into God's service in his holy place.

As Church, that means as a community of followers of Christ, we would do well to take Eli as our example. Although far from being perfect due to his human weakness, he still teaches a young boy in his care to recognise God's voice and to be obedient to his instructions. We now live in a society that is very quickly forgetting about God, his life-giving word and his saving actions in the sacraments. Regretfully there are many young people around us now in our Western societies who are unfamiliar with the Word of God, to the extent that they do not even recognise it when it speaks to them directly.

From the prophet Samuel, on the other hand, we can learn to have the courage needed to share inconvenient truths with the world, truths that are rooted in the Word of God and that inevitably point to the Lord's cross. Persevering in proclaiming the Gospel might require a high amount of dedication and even sacrifice in our time and culture. By the way, the Greek word for witness is not by chance martyr, and a certain degree of martyrdom is essential to the life of a Christian.

As we now are about to encounter Christ Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar, let us humbly ask him for the strength we need to be faithful witnesses and prophets of the Good News. In the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **The demand to use one's talents well**

The parable we have heard in today's Gospel reading (Mt 25:14-30) is in line with the parables we have heard in the past number of days. They all have in common that they tell us in powerful imagery of the end of times and the Last Judgment. Remember the wise and the foolish virgins, the sheep and the goats, the Son of Man who will return suddenly and unexpectedly, like a thief in the night.

These readings prepare us for the "little Lent" that is looming these days, Advent, as I have mentioned before in my recent weekday homilies. And the message of the Advent season is that this temporal world will not go on like this forever and ever. Which in times of a global pandemic has something strangely comforting about it...

Today we have heard the parable of the talents, about whose wise and profitable use the servants are called to account. Interestingly, the talents do not appear here as "gifts", as we would commonly understand that word today, but as a loan, - something borrowed and something we will be held accountable for.

When we speak of a talent today, we are usually talking about a certain capacity or skill of which there are many and very different ones. We think, for example, of talents such as skilful drawing, singing, writing, public speaking, acting, swimming, running, sailing, math, networking, accounting... Some have received only one talent, some have received multiple talents, just as we heard in our Gospel reading today. Each received according to his abilities.

Normally we consider a talent a gift that is freely given to us, a gift that we have received without any special merit. And gifts are distributed quite differently and not always in a way that we would perceive as just. Here we must be aware of the dangers of envy. Do not covet your neighbour's talents...

Gifts or talents are also valued and respected differently. The ability to wiggle one's ears is rated differently than the ability to master a triathlon or to fill Carnegie Hall with our music.

We may have received a certain basic talent freely and undeservedly, and I am sure we all have our special talents. But we must cultivate it nevertheless and make it "profitable" for ourselves and for others. That, however, very often takes hundreds, even thousands of hours of continuous practice to bring a talent to true mastery. And, you have guessed it, that is why playing the piano at the concert level is more prestigious than wiggling one's ears.

Incidentally, from a Christian perspective, an individual should not be conceited about any talent he or she has received, no matter how rare and prestigious it may be. Firstly, it was given to us as a free gift of grace, or a charisma in a spiritual sense. And secondly, we have received it for a purpose, and that is not only for our own personal benefit, but to use it for the good of everyone around us.

No one can do everything, or everything on his own. We are dependent on each other. And our gifts are also our duty to God and to our neighbour, to build up the Kingdom of God (cf. 1 Cor 14:12). Just as the apostle Peter admonishes us in his first letter:

"Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received." (1 Peter 4:10)

This classical interpretation of today's parable, which I have followed so far in this homily, is familiar to us and was especially promoted and spread during the time of the Reformation, in accordance with Protestant work ethics. There, talents were reinterpreted as personal gifts that we should make profitable in a literal sense. And only professional, literally "profitable" talents deserved a high prestige within the Christian community.

But when I did some more research in preparation for this homily, I came across quite a different interpretation. One that is much more in line with the other teachings of Christ, in line with his Holy Gospel as he preached and lived it.

Particularly interesting and thought provoking is the following passage:

“For to everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich;  
but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”

Does this verse correspond to our mandate for the poor, or our general understanding of divine justice? Not really. But then, what does Jesus mean by this, by the entire parable of the talents? The key to this is to be found in the following verses from the Gospel of Matthew, in which Christ explains to his disciples the purpose of his parables:

“To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”  
(Mt 13:11-12)

Jesus is indeed talking of a gift when he speaks about the talents (which as a matter of fact is just different amounts of one and the same good, in the parable it is silver). But he is pointing to a gift of the Holy Spirit, and that gift is faith. And this interpretation of the talents as different levels of the same faith, interestingly enough, can only be understood the right way from a perspective of faith. Otherwise we end up with what economists and sociologists call the Matthew effect: The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. But even if the parable sounds like that in the first moment, this is not what Jesus is talking about.

Remember the wording I just quoted a moment ago: for to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. And now, bring to mind the many good people in our Church who believe in the Gospel, believe in Christ, practise their faith through exercises of piety and devotion. The more they have of it, the more they will receive. And in the end heavenly glory awaits all the truly faithful.

However, if one has only a bit of it, faith, and does not care about it or for it, but bury it, one will lose it very quickly. And without the light of faith, one will lose everything in the end. Everything will be taken away and we are left in darkness.

It is faith that leads to eternal salvation, and therefore it is a talent more valuable than anything else in this world.

“For what does it benefit a person if he gains the whole world but forfeits his life? Or what can a person give in exchange for his life?” (Mt 16:26)

That's what Jesus tried to teach us by being born naked in a manger and dying naked on the cross. Christ, the King and Maker of the universe...

Profit is not everything. A career, money, wealth, all this is nothing in the eyes of God. And nothing of that will buy us salvation. It is faith in Christ, faith in the Gospel, the imitation of his example that will give us life, life in abundance.

There are many buried talents in this country. We are now seeing the first generation on the Emerald Isle in a long time growing up without religious talent, although it is offered to them in abundance.

Let us pray that God will not stop giving us the most valuable talents generously. And may he help us to uncover the many hidden talents for the salvation of the world. Perhaps one day we will once again be known and seen as the Island of Saints and Scholars. Amen.

## Did Jesus ever laugh?

In our Gospel reading (Lk 6:39-45) this morning, Jesus uses some interesting expressions and figures of speech when talking to his followers. He speaks of a blind man presuming to lead another. The Lord speaks of someone with a plank in his eye wanting to pull out splinters from the eye of another man. Jesus speaks of not being able to pick figs from thorn bushes or grapes from brambles. Apparently, the Lord likes to use absurd similes in his speeches to get his messages across to his listeners. And most likely he does so because he is a good teacher. Jesus knows that people will remember unusual things, strange comparisons, exaggerations, irony, playful or even provocative statements much, much better than a long and boring academic lecture. This is actually quite an interesting observation, the way he uses figurative speech. Can it really be that Jesus Christ uses *humour* to appeal to his audience and make them understand?

Yes, I think so. In fact, I imagine Jesus as being a very humorous person, as someone who liked to tell jokes and make others laugh during his time with us here on earth. Or to have a good laugh himself. And I do not believe that all the dead-serious depictions of Our Lord on countless icons, mosaics or paintings do justice to the real Jesus as he walked here on earth as a true human being among human beings. Why do we never portray him as smiling or even laughing? Would this not correspond much more to the Jesus of the gospels?

Think for example of the tax collector Zacchaeus, who was so short that he had to climb a tree to get a glimpse of Jesus. When Jesus saw the little man up there sitting in the tree, how could he not have chuckled at the sight? Also, think of how he treated his disciples with all their quirks and follies, namely, with loving and even teasing humour at times. John and James, the two zealous and hot-tempered sons of Zebedee, Jesus called them the “sons of thunder” (Mk 3:17). And the passionate, even impetuous Simon Peter he called slightly ironically, but no less prophetically, the “rock” (Mt 16:18). Witty nicknames are clearly a sign of good humour.

Also Jesus’ sense of humour came to light when the venerable and learned Pharisee Nicodemus asked him somewhat naïve questions on the subject of rebirth through Baptism. The Lord responded to him with barely concealed irony, “*You are Israel’s teacher and do you not understand these things?*” (cf. Jn 3:1-21).

Then, of course, there are the many witty remarks in Jesus’ speeches, for example about people who make an effort straining out gnats and are swallowing whole camels (cf. Mt 23:24). And let us not forget his remark about how it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God (Mt 19:24). Yes, Jesus undoubtedly had a strong sense of humour, of irony and of absurd figures of speech.

Thinking about all I have just said, perhaps it is about time that we start seeing Jesus as the person he really is, namely, as clever, witty, humorous, even provocative at times. For far too long we have regarded the Lord as someone deadpan, only expressing emotion in form of anger at or sadness about humanity. What an unjoyful image of Christ! We easily forget that humour is an expression of God’s very nature, of the deep joy inherent in the Trinity, which is also expressed in the created world, including the animal kingdom. How can one look at a flamingo, a platypus, a kiwi bird or a blobfish and honestly think that their maker is without humour?

I am strongly convinced that those threatening or dread inspiring images of Christ we all grew up with have gradually emptied our churches over the past sixty years. How can we expect people to love what they fear? In these times of change, let us therefore reform our images of Christ and conform them back to the Jesus of the gospels. And by this, I do not only mean many

of the images of Jesus transported through artwork and decorations in our church buildings. I also mean the image of Christ in our hearts and minds whenever we think about him or pray to him.

Yes, let us be encouraged to smile towards Jesus whenever we speak to him in our thoughts and prayers, and I have no doubt that he will smile back. Through his incarnation, through his humanity he has become our loving brother and friend. Therefore, let us look forward to his second coming as we look forward to the arrival of a friend. For that is what he called us, friends, not slaves (cf. Jn 15:15).

Come, Lord Jesus, and build up your kingdom of peace, joy and love in our days. Amen.

## **Death ends a life, but not a relationship**

In the last few weeks we have entered what is commonly known as the “dark season“ of the year. During this time of the year, the mood can easily turn a bit gloomy, especially in the long evening hours. Perhaps this is the reason why we commemorate our departed loved ones in the month of November. During these weeks in mid-autumn, we experience even more than usual, that our deceased family members and friends are no longer with us so that they can cheer us up, or to just pay us company in which we find human warmth and consolation. In other words, we feel the loss of our loved ones a little bit more these days.

Yet, by bringing the memory of our deceased family members and friends back to our mind, we still feel that they are with us in a certain sense. And with this perception of their lasting presence in our lives comes an intuition that this, our short earthly existence, is not everything. No, we strongly feel there is something (or better, someone) waiting for us beyond the boundaries of this earthly life and death. We have a strong sense that death might end a human life, yes, but not a human relationship. We know deep in our heart that our various relationships continue in a different way, a way that is hard to describe and yet is very real.

Having said all that, I would like to point out that there is another, more important reason why we remember our departed brothers and sisters particularly in these very days, that is, near the end of our liturgical calendar. And this second reason I am thinking of has little to do with the dim light and grey sky outside, or the cold rain that forces us to stay inside our homes, sometimes alone. This second reason is actually a much better one, well, at least theologically. It has to do with the now very fast approaching Advent season, beginning at the end of this month.

Advent means “arrival”, and we await a very special arrival, namely, the second coming of Christ, which is an important article of faith that we profess every Sunday in our creed. Christ will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, as it says. Our Gospel reading this Sunday bears witness to this firm belief of the Christian Church, and our first and second reading, too, testify the ancient hope that death has not the final say, but that we will all be called back into life one day.

In our readings these days and in the coming weeks, we hear repeatedly of the great biblical theme of the Last Judgment. And we know, it will of course be a day of great justice, but at the same time also a day of great mercy. It will be a day of immeasurable mercy because we are fortunate: our Judge is also our Maker. And no one knows us and our weaknesses the way he does, Christ the Lord, who took on our frail human nature and shared our life, our sorrows, our hope to the full.

Often the specific readings which warn us about the End of Times have been used to terrify people, to make them docile or even scare them into submission with fire and brimstone sermons. And very often this was done through clergymen who, to be fair and honest, themselves did not know any better. Also in our four gospels we sometimes find images that have the potential to frighten us. Jesus, however, did not intend to scare us into submission with his teachings and admonitions. Rather he wanted to exhort us and awaken our awareness by using the language and imagery of his time and culture, namely, that this earthly life is short and needs to be taken seriously.

Indeed, we do need to use our lifetime well, because the period from Jesus’ ascension into heaven until his second coming is a time of grace and a time of probation in the Christian life

and faith. In the same four gospels that warn us of the end of times in powerful images, we also find helpful guidance on how to live a good and fruitful Christian life. And the Lord Jesus also sends us time and again great saints, who serve as wonderful examples of how a Christian can resemble Christ beautifully even in this our life and world. Some of whom we commemorate these days, such as St Martin of Tours or our diocesan patron saint, Laurence O'Toole.

Looking at Christ's love for us and his saving grace poured out over his Church, even purgatory loses its terror. We only need to learn and understand that it is not for our well-deserved punishment, or some kind of retaliation for our sins, but rather a process of inner purification in God's blazing light and love, so that we can enter the great wedding hall in heaven suitably prepared.

Reflecting on all that I have just said, is it not a reason for great joy that death does not separate us in a strict and total sense, but that we can still support one another even beyond the barriers of death with our mutual intercession? Therefore, let us pray for our dearly departed in purgatory especially during this month of November, as the Church invites us to do. And let us also entrust ourselves to the intercession of all those who have already entered the marvellous wedding hall of the Lamb in all its vastness and beauty, that we too may participate in the heavenly banquet to which all are invited.

At the end of this homily and in this Vigil Mass after dark, let us now turn to Christ as we say the prayer of hope, which reads as follows:

“Stay with us, Lord Jesus, as evening falls,  
and be our companion on our way.  
In your mercy, inflame our hearts and raise our hope,  
so that, in union with our brothers and sisters,  
we may recognise you in the scriptures  
and in the breaking of bread.  
Who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.”

## Weekday Homilies in Ordinary Time

### On the Christian understanding of genuine obedience and of “speaking the truth”

In our Gospel reading (Mk 1:21-28) today, we meet Jesus at the very beginning of his public ministry. Only recently we celebrated the Solemnity of the Baptism of Christ, and now we meet the Lord shortly after his baptism as he preaches to the people, moving them deeply in their hearts. For his preaching is different from that of the other preachers and teachers who interpret the Scriptures and the Law for the people. Christ preaches with authority, with an authority that was previously unknown to the people in the Holy Land. After the revelation of Jesus' divinity through God's voice from heaven at his baptism, he now reveals himself through his teaching and through his actions. Christ does not present himself as acting in the name of God, as his emissary or prophet, but as God's Word incarnate, who himself gave the commandments to his chosen people at Mount Sinai and who now presents himself as the divine lawgiver in person.

There was a man present in the synagogue where Christ preached, a man who was possessed by an evil spirit. When this man saw Jesus, he saw him not just with the eyes of a human being, but with an angelic gaze. A demon is still an angel after all, and an angel sees the reality differently than a human being. He sees the full truth behind mere, outward appearances. And in our Gospel reading today the demon cries out the truth he sees. That means, he reveals Jesus as the one he is, the Holy One of God. But Jesus does not accept the demon's announcement of his nature as true God and true man, his two natures in one person, actually. What the evil spirit proclaims might be the truth, but a truth that comes from a demon is always a poisoned. It does not lead to true faith, but to misunderstanding and error.

Jesus casts out the demon, and he does so with divine authority. Unlike an exorcist, the Lord does not call upon God the Father in prayer to cast the demon out of the possessed man, but he commands the fallen angel through his own divine, omnipotent power. God the Son, even in the self-emptying and humble form of a poor itinerant preacher is still God and Lord of the angels. Christ is Lord even over the fallen angels who still have to obey him. And the fallen angel does indeed obey, with a great spectacle he leaves the demoniac.

Humility is alien to a demon, he needs the spectacle and the attention, the appearance of power. He is only a vain braggart, who has forfeited his eternal salvation through vanity and obstinacy. Therefore, though it seems so, the evil spirit in our Gospel passage today is not truly obedient, he only does as he is commanded.

True obedience leads back to the light, back to God. The demon, however, flees God, out into the darkness. His vanity does not allow him to repent, even though he has higher knowledge of which we as human beings can only dream. And that is why there is no salvation for the devil and his demons. They are incapable of asking for redeeming forgiveness or accepting it if offered.

At the beginning of this year, let us ask ourselves, how do we relate to the truth? Are we willing to speak and accept it? And when we speak the truth, in what way do we do it? Is it pure and clear, imbued with charity, soft and loving? Or is it obnoxious and filled with self-righteousness and arrogance? A godly truth heals and guides, and always leads to the light. A poisoned truth, however, is like a weapon: it attacks and it hurts, it damages, exposes or tries to submit, it comes from darkness and leads into darkness.

And how do we relate to obedience? Do we simply do as we are told, by authorities, by Sacred Scripture? Or are we ready to truly listen and understand, to open the ear of our heart? Does obedience lead us to repentance and doing good, “doing the truth” as Jesus says in John’s Gospel? True godly obedience always leads us to the light that comes from God, that guides us towards him.

In this year, let us intensify our attempts at doing the truth with faith, hope and charity. Truth is not only about facts, but about changing this valley of tears into the garden of God.<sup>36</sup> Amen.

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<sup>36</sup> I owe this formulation to a beautiful homily given by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger the day before his election as Pope, which has left a lasting impression on me and my thinking ever since. In that homily he said towards the end:

“We must be enlivened by a holy restlessness: a restlessness to bring to everyone the gift of faith, of friendship with Christ. Truly, the love and friendship of God was given to us so that it might also be shared with others. We have received the faith to give it to others - we are priests in order to serve others. And we must bear fruit that will endure.

All people desire to leave a lasting mark. But what endures? Money does not. Even buildings do not, nor books. After a certain time, longer or shorter, all these things disappear. The only thing that lasts for ever is the human soul, the human person created by God for eternity.

The fruit that endures is therefore all that we have sown in human souls: love, knowledge, a gesture capable of touching hearts, words that open the soul to joy in the Lord. So let us go and pray to the Lord to help us bear fruit that endures. Only in this way will the earth be changed from a valley of tears to a garden of God.”

## **Christ shows his unconditional, loving forgiveness**

In our Gospel reading (Mk 2:1-12) today we witness a strong faith, an unshakeable trust in Christ and his saving power. Four friends bring a paralytic on a stretcher to Jesus so that he may heal him. But because of the crowd surrounding Jesus, they cannot get through to him. So they choose to take the “shortest way” and simply break through the roof to lower the paralytic down to Jesus, to his healing and saving presence. What is particularly touching in this Gospel passage is not only the strong faith of these men in Jesus, but also the intense friendship they have for the paralysed man that gives them strength and courage to get through to the Lord. Happy the man or woman who has such friends!

Jesus was surely moved by such faith and solidarity among that group of friends. And as a man of humour he might have even responded with a chuckle to the scene. Most importantly, their trust and hope were not in vain. Jesus indeed spoke the healing and saving words. However, they were not quite the words the paralytic and his companions might have expected: Jesus, using his divine authority, assured the paralytic of the forgiveness of his sins.

Jesus saw the man’s infirmity, just like everyone else with his human eyes, but with his divine vision he also looked straight into the man’s heart. And greater healing was obviously needed where the human gaze does not reach.

Every sin knowingly and willingly committed inflicts a wound, an injury, on the human soul. And under the weight of his sins, the man could no longer stand up, no longer walk. Our gospel passage seems to make such a connection between sins committed in the past and the man’s paralysis, a view that was not uncommon at that time: a man’s welfare and suffering correspond to his deeds.

Jesus saw the burden of sin weighing heavily on that man, and the wounds it inflicted on his soul. And so Jesus spoke something to him the man needed to hear; the Lord assured him of something that has always been there and just needed to be embraced, and that was God’s forgiveness. Jesus did not say, I forgive you your sins, but he said, your sins are forgiven. That is quite remarkable.

In order to obtain forgiveness of sins, all the paralysed man had to do was to turn to Jesus in sincere trust and faith. In doing so, the man resembled to some extent the Prodigal Son, for whom forgiveness was already awaiting at his father’s house. He just had to return home and accept the love of the father, who received him unconditionally and joyfully with his arms wide open. The fact that Jesus looked at the paralytic with the same eyes, the eyes of a loving parent, can be seen in the form of address he chooses: my child.

In this sense, the paralysed man had a truly sacramental encounter with Christ, as he found with him the forgiveness of his sins. Which is actually the greater of the two miracles we witnessed in our Gospel reading, for it is a miracle of divine power, of divine action: it is Jesus Christ, God-made-man, who exercised his divine prerogative by restoring a broken man to grace. In this light, the physical healing thereafter can be seen as the lesser miracle and a mere proof of Christ’s divine authority and power to his followers and to the shame of the doubters.

Christ’s claim and action were very well understood by his opponents who did not accept him in faith, and could therefore not be convinced by any miracle. They just considered him an impostor or false prophet, and a seducer of the people. How difficult it is for the stubborn and hard-hearted to grasp the true nature of God, even when it shows itself before their eyes.

We find this motif of unconditional, loving forgiveness again and again in the teachings and actions of Christ: the Lord in his infinite generosity and grace accepts a plea for pardon and mercy that he actually never received.<sup>37</sup> Christ forgave the paralytic oppressed by sin, the remorseful woman who washed his feet with her tears, the adulteress who was nearly stoned to death, the good thief on the cross, and lastly Simon Peter, whom the Risen Lord reinstated to his supreme pastoral ministry after his shameful denial and fall. None of the named characters in the four gospels ever asked for forgiveness, at least formally, and yet received it because they turned completely and trustfully to the Lord.

Christ Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. If we come to him with humble spirit and contrite heart, we will not be turned away but taken by the hand and led to the Father by Christ.

From the Lord's generous, loving generosity that we encounter again and again in the Gospel, we can draw hope, even in times like these when the sacraments, particularly the Sacrament of Penance, are not easily available. Let us hold on to the Lord with the same trust and faith we have witnessed in the five friends today, hold fast to Christ's hand. Then we will never go astray but we will be saved. In this spirit, let us now celebrate the Eucharist.

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<sup>37</sup> For a collection of examples from the four gospels, see the Merciful Mysteries in my book of rosary reflections: *Meditating on the Mysteries of Salvation: A Guide to Praying the Rosary With Joy and Dedication*, Veritas Publications, Dublin, Ireland, 2021, p. 59-63.

## **The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath**

In today's Gospel reading (Mk 3:1-6) we witness one of the many disputes the Lord has with the Pharisees about the interpretation of the Sabbath commandments. After a short discussion about how far the Sabbath commandments may or may not restrict an individual, especially when it comes to basic human needs, the Lord gives his own judgement and interpretation of the Sabbath rules: the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

The Lord does not reject the Sabbath as such, as a holy day of rest and recreation. On the contrary, he himself keeps the commandments to the letter. This is why the reproach from the Pharisees is usually directed only at the behaviour of the disciples, but not at the Lord's which remains blameless (cf. Mt 12:1-2; 15:1-2).

Christ knows, the Sabbath was given from God as a generous gift to the people of Israel after he freed them from bondage in Egypt. There they had to labour heavily every day, were treated badly and were not permitted to regain strength during a weekly day off. It was a miserable life that certainly ended in an early death from exhaustion. In this respect, the Sabbath is indeed a blessing, because it invites people to rest, to recharge their physical and mental batteries, to contemplate the beauty of creation and to enjoy life on a day "off duty", so to say.

However, the Lord criticises the Pharisees and their self-assumed right to control and regulate the lives of others. And he criticises their rigid and legalistic interpretation of the law, which no longer leaves room even for human needs such as satisfying sudden hunger during a hike with friends.

Mercy and compassion are at the centre of the Christian faith. This is an ethos that was already formed in the Old Testament, especially in the writings of the prophets, and which is to be counted as an integral part of our Jewish heritage. And yet, these very qualities which spring directly from the nature of God, mercy and compassion, seem to be lacking in the Pharisees' interpretation and application of the law. Jesus firmly opposes inhumane excesses in their teachings and holds up the humanity of God against them.

The challenge for us is the right measure. Jesus does not want us to slavishly submit to the law, nor does he want us to be careless or frivolous with God's commandments. Christ invites us to use our freedom responsibly. This requires an informed conscience, but also a familiarity with Christ's example and his teachings, which are presented to us in our daily Gospel readings.

I admit, I myself sometimes struggle with the right measure. When I buy milk at the corner shop for my afternoon coffee, or order a meal for delivery on a Sunday, I know that people have to work on the holy day of rest because of it. But I also know that I am preserving employment in difficult times.

There is probably a difference whether someone buys a bottle of perfume or a new tie in the shopping centre on a Sunday afternoon, or whether they just quickly buy some tea and cake in a shop nearby because they have a surprise visitor, but nothing to offer in the house.

Doctors, nurses, policemen, firefighters and other essential professions are excluded from this reasoning, because healing and helping others on a sacred holiday are not only allowed, but are a holy obligation in the light of the Gospel. Instead of the Sunday, however, another day of rest should be chosen and observed, on which members of these professions can be fully human and enjoy life and the beauty of creation.

Let us ask the Holy Spirit for the gifts of love, wisdom and discernment, that we may know and keep God's commandments in the proper way. Not as slaves of the law, but as free and beloved children of our heavenly Father. In the name of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

**“The Church must always be reformed.”**

In our Gospel reading (Mk 6:7-13) today we learn something significant about the nature of the Church, namely, that it is a missionary Church from its very beginning, since its foundation through Christ. Jesus gathered his twelve disciples from among the children of Israel, not in order to create a new religious school or some kind of monastic community. No, he called them to go out into the world and to proclaim the Good News. This is why the disciples are later, after Christ’s death and resurrection, are called “apostles”, which is the Greek term for “messenger”. Jesus’ followers are gathered and appointed for the one purpose, namely of reaching out and bringing the Good News to everyone, every people and nation in the world.

In this sense, the three years in the Lord’s discipleship were nothing other than an intense time of preparation of the apostles for their later mission. During these three years they were allowed to get to know the Lord very closely, to become familiar with the Good News in and through Christ Jesus, our Saviour. In the light of these facts it becomes clear that true discipleship includes an imitation of Christ, of his humble lifestyle and loving actions, focused on and dedicated to God the Father in everything.

All this is strongly reflected in the instructions we have heard in our Gospel reading this morning. The messengers of the Lord are asked to resemble the Lord not only inwardly, but also outwardly. In being sent out through the Lord, they become part of the message, which means they are commissioned to make the Lord visible and tangible to the recipients of the Good News in every aspect.

For this reason, the Lord endows them with certain powers that he shares with them generously out of his own divine wealth, namely, the power to expel evil spirits in his name and to heal all kinds of diseases. All this is part of the message: with Christ, salvation comes into the world; illness, suffering and death, the consequences of sin and evil, come to an end in the now dawning Kingdom of God, until one day they will all have completely disappeared in the new creation.

The missionary success of the Early Church is largely owed to the resemblance of the first missionaries to Jesus Christ in their life and in their death. In the ministry of the disciples, the one who sent them, Christ himself, becomes visible and tangible. Simplicity in lifestyle, freedom from fear of man and from worldly desires such as wealth and fame, complete dedication to the entrusted mission and unshakable faith in the power of the Gospel, this is the formula for the success of the missionary Church in the first centuries.

If we have a crisis of the Christian faith and mission in the Western world today, one of the major reasons for this is that we as the Church have a credibility issue. And by that I explicitly include a good number of the ordained ministers of past and present times who have failed miserably to make the love of Christ visible in the world, contrary to their calling and mandate through the Lord himself. I cannot and will not go into the symptoms and reasons for this here in my homily. But the message that we have heard again and again in our Gospel readings over the past weeks remains valid and needs to be taken seriously, “Repent, and believe in the Gospel”.

“The Church must always be reformed”, St Augustine of Hippo already knew 1600 years ago. And by reform he meant nothing other than a continuous conformation of the visible Church with Christ, whose mystical body she is. Christ calls us to imitate him, and he means it. He calls us for a change of heart, for this is what repentance in the sense of the Gospel truly means.

Thankfully I know that the young generation of Christians that I have met in recent years, including the new generation of priests, religious and lay theologians, is willing and prepared to be touched by Christ in the gospels and to follow him prayerfully and with great dedication, reflected in their personal lifestyles. Here we have a strong sign of hope that the Church will not disappear from our Western countries, but will continue to live and spread the Gospel of Christ Jesus.

Let us pray that the renewal of the Church will never wane, but that all of us, the assembly of the faithful, through the virtue and grace of our baptism and confirmation, will become more and more like Christ. Then the Gospel will once again fully unfold its power of attraction to our fellow human beings in our Western civilisation who are searching for God, knowingly or unknowingly. Amen.

### **“Create in me a clean heart, O God”**

In our Gospel reading (Mk 7:1-13) this morning, Jesus receives visitors from Jerusalem. They are Pharisees and Scribes, the religious elite of that time. They laid down many religious rules that could not be found explicitly (or even implicitly) in the Holy Scriptures. For example, they imposed on all Jews that they should cleanse their hands and vessels ritually before touching the good gifts of God with their fingers, just as the priests did in the Temple of Jerusalem. Why was that? Because God commanded in the Book of Exodus that the children of Israel should be to him “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6).

In principle, Jesus has nothing against this Jewish custom as an expression of a certain spirituality that sees all members of the covenant people as priests, commissioned to offer sacrifices of love and mercy, of praise and devotion to God. Furthermore, Jesus himself is not accused of not having ritually washed his hands before eating, which he therefore will have done. The resentment of the Pharisees hits the disciples who are with their master. And it is this behaviour that provokes Jesus’ anger to the point that he accuses the Pharisees of hypocrisy. But why is Jesus so angry, although he himself has no problem with a symbolic priestly purity of the faithful who wish to follow that custom?

It is because the Pharisees take their clean fingers and point them at others. Christ is upset that the self-declared religious elite publicly expose the common members of the Jewish people, the humble labourers and fishermen he called into his discipleship. Furthermore, by doing so the Pharisees complain to Jesus about the non-observance of commandments that are not found in the Holy Scriptures, but originate merely from human invention. For nowhere is it written that the rules of cultic purity of the priests in the Temple must be observed by all members of the chosen people.

Once again, the Pharisees and Scribes make life difficult for ordinary, hard-working people by imposing on them complicated instructions, when the commandments of God are basically quite simple: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

The hands of the Pharisees may be clean, but their hearts are not, for they lack reverence and love for their neighbours, who after all are the living image of God, endowed with a unique and inalienable dignity that is not dependent on a state of ritual purity. There is a disturbing lack of kindness, leniency, humility, the basic virtues that grow from an awareness of one’s own sinfulness. The Pharisees consider themselves to be pure, and yet they are pure only on the outside. Out of them, from their hearts, speaks an arrogance that says: “I thank you, God, that I am not like other people - cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I’m certainly not like that tax collector [over there]!”, when their words should be, “God be merciful to me a sinner” (Lk 18:11,13).

The Pharisees and Scribes, particularly the ones from Jerusalem, may be clever and learned, but they have neither recognised nor internalised the essence of the Law. It is precisely this very deficit of the religious teachers and Scripture scholars that Christ refers to when he exclaims, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.” (Mt 11:25)

From today’s Gospel comes an admonition for us not to judge and condemn others just because their sins are different from ours. And it also admonishes us not to fall into scruples in our spiritual life, that means not to be overly concerned that something we have thought, said or done is a sin, i.e. a transgression or violation of a religious or moral law, even if this is not the

case, objectively and in the eyes of God. Scruples come from the enemy of human nature and they attack the basic virtues of faith, hope and charity in order to destroy them and to make us fall into despair.

In order to distinguish between real sins and those only imagined, we must constantly inform or reform our conscience in the light of the Gospel and according to the Church's teaching. Fatherly love, as it corresponds to God's love for us, serves as a perfect guideline for our actions. If we are guided by God's love in our thoughts and actions, we cannot go wrong.

Outward purity, however, does not impress the Lord, especially if there is no pure, kind and generous heart dwelling inside us. And for the mere fulfilment of a simple duty, as is the love of God and of our neighbour, we have no reward to expect. We must be content with God's goodness and grace, which preserve us from what we actually deserve. The Lord's grace is sufficient for us, and his power is made perfect in weakness (cf. 2 Cor 12:9).

So, in view of the Word of God that we have received in today's Gospel reading, let us pray to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me (Psalm 51:10). Amen.

## **On what is actually meant by the expression, “a pure heart”**

Our Gospel reading (Mk 7:14-23) today is a continuation of yesterday’s episode. After Jesus was confronted by some Pharisees and Scribes as to why his disciples disregarded the rules of ritual purity at the table by not washing their hands, Jesus sharply criticises them and accuses them of hypocrisy. The Pharisees can be overly scrupulous about things being kosher or not, ritually pure or not, but they fail to examine the urges of their hearts that may result in pride, deviousness, injustice, and eventually in all kinds of moral failings.

In today’s Gospel, Christ explains his teachings more in depth to his disciples. He distances himself with strong terms from a purity thinking that dwells merely on outward matters or appearances. It is not external influences that defile a person in the eyes of God, but what comes from within, from his or her heart, says the Lord. Here the prophetic ethics of the Old Testament resonate in his teachings, doing away with archaic ideas about ritual purity derived from the Book of Leviticus. In particular, the prophet Jeremiah comes to mind in this context, through whom the Lord speaks as follows:

“The heart is more devious than any other thing, and is depraved; who can pierce its secrets? I, the Lord, search the heart, test the motives, to give each person what his conduct deserves.” (Jer 17: 9-10)

It is against this entire background that Jesus speaks in the Gospel of Matthew, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” (Mt 5:8) It is purity of heart that makes a person stand before God, makes him or her enter into God’s heavenly presence where they shall see God face to face. Ritual purity, however, matters very little to God, if it leads not through its symbolism to purity of heart.

The theme of the pure heart appears in various places in the Scriptures, and according to Jesus’ teaching, it is one of the requirements for obtaining eternal salvation through God’s grace and mercy. But what is actually meant by this, a pure heart?

A pure heart is an undivided heart that is completely directed to what is good. It is free of vanity, deceit, bad intentions and evil doing (cf. Psalm 24:3–5). It is humble and contrite, and clings to God alone, the source of all that is good. Such a pure heart shines brightly before people because God takes up his dwelling in it.

Jesus is the perfect model of a person with a pure heart, for his fervour and will, his whole existence are entirely directed to God the Father and his salvific plan for the world. Nothing ungodly ever clings to Jesus’ heart, and this is the case from the very first to the very last moment of his earthly existence. In this truth lies the mystery of the manger and the cross.

It is by this very mystery that all the efforts of the tempter in the wilderness were eventually in vain. Whoever has God lacks nothing; God alone suffices, as Teresa of Avila very aptly put it. Whoever has God has no need of earthly power, wealth, fame, of the attention, admiration or affirmation from other people. To such a person the devil has nothing to offer, such a person is completely free before God, just as Jesus was.

The Pharisees and Scribes were overly concerned about sticky fingers, but neglected the stickiness of their hearts. It is such impure hearts to which all that the Lord has listed adheres: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander,

pride, folly. A heart that is cluttered like that cannot offer God a fitting dwelling place, it has no space for God's presence.

For people living in the world, it is not always easy to maintain a pure heart. I know this from my own experience. Too often we are distracted by what is not of God. This is the consequence of Adam's sin. But the Lord knows about our weakness and does not expect anything superhuman from us. And even when we fall because our intentions become clouded, God remains faithful to us:

“The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion.” (Num 4:18)

In this, too, the mystery of the manger and the cross shines up, giving us hope.

In the light of the Gospel in which the Lord has spoken to us today, let us respond to his love and kindness with a few verses taken from Psalm 51:

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.”

In the name of Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

### **On the long process of getting to know the God of the Bible (as he really is)**

In our Gospel reading (Mt 5:17-19) this morning, we heard another excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount, the constitution of the Kingdom of God. Jesus tells his listeners that he did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. Rather, he came into the world to fulfil them. The phrase “Law and Prophets” stands for the Old Testament, the Jewish Bible. Jesus therefore did not come to abolish what was old, but to fulfil it and fill it with a new meaning. How could the Word of God made flesh ever come to abolish God’s word in the Scripture? It would be a self-contradiction of the strangest kind. That is why the Church has fought off all attacks on the Old Testament over the centuries, especially in the Early Church, when heretical movements wanted to abolish the Holy Scriptures of the Jews and eradicate them from the canon of the Bible.

One often hears the God of the Old Testament defamed as cruel and vengeful. Behind this is a lack of understanding of the Old Testament. We need to understand when looking at some difficult passages in the Bible, that humanity was going through a learning process in the Hebrew Bible. It was also a process of getting to know God, God’s true nature. To take Abraham’s example, he still thought it possible that God could demand a human sacrifice from him, something that would actually not have been uncommon with the gods of his time and culture. The creator God of the Book of Genesis, however, made it very clear to Abraham that he is a different kind of God, different from the false Gods of the pagans. The God of the Bible is in his very nature kind, loving and compassionate to human beings and abhorred humans sacrifice.

In other passages in the Old Testament we hear the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob speaking to the Israelites just as a mother would speak to her children. In a famous passage from the book of Isaiah, for example, we hear:

“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you. See, upon the palms of my hands I have engraved you; your walls are ever before me.” (Is 49:15-16)

Only when humanity had gone through the necessary maturing process, that is “in the fullness of time”, could God the Son eventually take on human form in order to show us the Father *as he really is*. And with the recognition of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit came also a new understanding of the Law. Its purpose was not to oppress humanity, but to free it from evil deeds. The many laws of the Old Testament were meant to help a two-legged mammal called man mature into what it truly is, namely, a human being created in the image of God.

Humans were not created to serve the law, but the law was created to serve humanity, and to give it instructions for a good life. When people at the time of Jesus’ earthly life perceived the multitude of commandments of the Old Testament as a heavy burden, especially in the interpretation of the Pharisees, the Lord summarised all the many commandments in two, namely, the unconditional love for God and for our fellow human being, who is our brother and sister, because we all have the same Father, our Father in heaven.

Christ himself has given us an example of how love can be lived out in a perfect way. Jesus became human for us so that we could do the same, become truly human, or even better, humane. To him let us now turn, so that in the Eucharist we may receive the strength for our inner transformation, towards the likeness of Jesus, the Son of Man.

### **“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”**

Our Gospel reading (Mt 5:43-48) today continues Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. We hear Jesus condemn the demand to hate one’s enemies. However, such a command is found nowhere in the Mosaic Law, on the contrary. In various places the Law of Moses calls for love of one’s neighbour (Lev 19:18.34), and Moses himself practices love of one’s enemies by interceding with God for Pharaoh and the Egyptians during the Ten Plagues (see for example Ex 8:12-13), even though they are the enemies and bloodstained oppressors of the Israelites. And in the Book of Proverbs it is written:

“Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles.” (Proverbs 24:17)

In another place it says:

“If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you.” (Proverbs 25:21-22)

All this raises the question of what makes Jesus claim that the Israelites were told to love their neighbour and hate their enemy, as we heard in our reading this morning? Jesus is referring to the teachings of a movement in Judaism that has separated itself from the rest of the population in order to live in the utmost ritual purity and obedience to the law and to wait in the seclusion of the desert for God’s judgement that will wipe out all the sinners of the world. We know this particular sect by the name of the Essenes. In their writings we find the call to “hate the sons of darkness, each according to his guilt in the vengeance of God” (Community Rule, 1 QS). And it is such attitude that Jesus speaks out against. If people keep walking through the world, constantly asking themselves, Who is my neighbour? Who is my enemy? Who are the sons of darkness?, and if they make it dependent on the answer to this questions whether to treat a person with charity or not, then they have not understood God’s laws.

Jesus calls us to imitate our heavenly Father who sends down cooling, revitalising rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. And it is not for us to decide who is a good person and who is not, who deserves our love and generosity and who does not. God is judge on the Last Day, he alone knows the heart of man. He knows our hearts too. And if we hope for a lenient judgement, then we too must exercise leniency in the world (cf. Matthew 7:1-20).

These explanations reveal the meaning of the last sentence of today’s Gospel reading:

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Does such a request not represent a hopeless overtaxing of every human being? Who is perfect? I am certainly not. However, Jesus does actually not speak of moral perfection, but of perfection in love. Love in the Christian sense is not a sentiment, a feeling, but rather an attitude and a certain way of acting in the world, namely, charitably. I cannot choose for whom I have genuine affection. But I have the power to treat all people with kindness and goodness, no matter who they are and how they treat me. And that is what today’s Gospel calls us to do as followers of Christ.

Let us now seek the strength we need to perfectly follow Christ in love for God and for our neighbour in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar.

## On the “Sense of Faith” among the people of God and the Discernment of Spirits

In our Gospel reading (Mt 7:15-20) this morning, we hear a warning from the Lord that is of continuing relevance through the ages. The Lord warns us against false prophets. And false prophets have always existed in the history of the Church, from the apostolic age to our present days. They present themselves in the guise of sheep, that is, they pretend to be pious and faithful followers of Jesus and his Church, but in reality they are ravening wolves who prey on the followers of Jesus in order to confuse and scatter them, or make them followers of their own false doctrine.

Now, Jesus not only gives us a warning against false prophets, he also gives us criteria to identify them. For it is by their fruits that we can recognise them. Bad prophets produce bad fruits, and these are to be avoided by the faithful. But there are also good prophets, and they too can be recognised by their gifts and their fruits. Now, what are the gifts and the fruits that help us to distinguish the good prophets from the bad ones? As you may have guessed, it is the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit. The older ones among you who have been well catechised will still remember them and their names. The names of the gifts are: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. And the fruits that the good and true prophets bear within themselves and also help to grow and mature in others are: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, longanimity (or long-suffering), gentleness, faith, modesty, self-control, and chastity.

Where bad prophets appear, on the other hand, we find confusion and division, hatred, anger, aggression and open revolt against the Gospel and the teachings of the Church. Unfortunately, there are always times when the false prophets get the upper hand, especially during periods of institutional weakness in the Church. And the fruits the false prophets offer to the masses are like the fruit from the tree of knowledge: it is good for consumption and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom. And it leads to death and damnation, and to a culture of death as St John Paul II called it.

The faithful in the parishes are called to the discernment of fruits, to the discernment of spirits. You can recognise the bad fruits if you make an effort to know the teachings of the Church and if you carry the Spirit of the Gospel in your hearts. For, unfortunately, and I say this as a priest, the hierarchy cannot always and everywhere be relied upon. Even among priests and bishops can false prophets sometimes be found, and you do well not to follow them, even if their teachings may seem plausible and promising at first sight. But if their teachings do not come from the Holy Spirit, then there is no salvation in them. For the purpose of right discernment, the Holy Spirit endows the people of God with a supernatural sense to tell sound doctrine from false doctrine, which in the tradition of the Church is called the *sense of faith* (“*sensus fidelium*”).<sup>38</sup> And this precious gift of the sense of faith has saved the Church from falling into error and division in many a crisis.

A prominent example of this fact is the great crisis of the Church that arose in the fourth century and shook the universal Church for centuries. It is the Arian crisis, in which the divinity of Jesus was denied and the Son of God was declared a mere creature of the Father. In Alexandria in Egypt, the faithful Catholic bishop Athanasius was deposed by state authority, banished and replaced by a heretic bishop who was more agreeable to the emperor than the orthodox

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<sup>38</sup> “The whole body of the faithful. . . cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of faith (*sensus fidei*) on the part of the whole people, when, from the bishops to the last of the faithful, they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals.” CCC, par. 92.

troublemaker Athanasius. The people of Alexandria, however, expelled this false bishop from their diocese and brought Athanasius back to teach them the truth and serve as their patriarch.

Let us pray that in these difficult times of turbulence and struggle for truth in the Church, the sense of faith among followers of Christ in all our parishes and dioceses may be strengthened by the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## **The Twelve Apostles – A poor choice?**

Our reading this morning is taken from the Gospel of Matthew (10:1-7). Matthew was a gifted writer who did not report Jesus' words and deeds in chronological order, but arranged them in a certain structure. The first great speech of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel is the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus presents in a way the programme of his earthly mission, sometimes referred to as the Constitution of the Kingdom of God, whose foundation the Lord laid during his earthly lifetime. Today's reading is taken from Jesus' second great discourse, which is about discipleship and is specifically addressed to the twelve apostles. We have heard a full list of the apostles that also includes Judas, who will later betray the Lord. Jesus gives each of them an opportunity to prove themselves and to reform their lives.

In doing so, the Lord did not choose those who are equipped with special gifts, but he equipped those he has chosen. He does not rely on human strength, gifts or virtue in his choice, but on the work of the Holy Spirit in his disciples. Through the Lord's choices and decisions it has become evident over the centuries that the Church is not the work of human beings, but comes from God. If she had been the work of humans, she would not have survived Jesus' crucifixion, let alone the siege and fall of Jerusalem in the year 70 AD.

If one takes a closer look at the Twelve, their ambition, their foolishness, their failure on Holy Thursday and Good Friday, one might wonder whether the Lord could not have made a better selection for the foundation of his Church. But as can be seen later, after the resurrection of Christ, Jesus chose exactly the right people to carry his work of salvation out into the world, to the very ends of the earth.

There is actually something consoling and also something very sympathetic about the fact that the Lord surrounded himself with weak human beings. It shows us that the Lord does not demand moral perfection from us, but rather love, devotion and faithfulness to the Good News. And they show us what can become of human beings who are truly repentant.

Yes, in the end, the disciples indeed learned from their failures, and almost all of them willingly followed the Lord into death in order to bear witness to the truth of the Gospel with their lives. The Easter experience changed and purified all of the remaining disciples, it perfected them in love. And it is thanks to their tireless, self-sacrificing missionary work that the Good News reached us here in Ireland, at the outer edge of the then known world.

In our time, we too are called to follow the Lord as disciples and to do his work in the world, each of us according to our own means and gifts. It would be a huge mistake to rely only on our own strength and abilities in this. We are dependent on the Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit, and times of weakness and scandals in the Church remind us of this very fact. And we do not have to perform heroic deeds in order to serve the Lord faithfully. The Kingdom of God already unfolds in the small deeds of charity in our everyday life, just like the famous mustard seed.

So let us pray with the words of St Francis of Assisi for the wisdom and strength to be faithful to the Lord even in the little things:

“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life. Amen.”

### **Why be envious because God is generous?**

In our Gospel reading (Mt 20:1-16) this morning, we have heard a well-known parable told by Jesus. It is the parable of the workers in the vineyard who all received the same wages at the end of the day, even if they only joined late and ended up working for only one hour that day.

At first glance, the parable seems a little unfair. Those who started working early in the morning get the same wages as those who joined late and worked fewer hours? Are the day labourers with the sore hands and backs of the first group not rightly outraged?

The parable very quickly takes on a different meaning when it is understood from the perspective of that time. In ancient times, day labourers gathered in a public place to offer their workforce for a day. Potential employers went there and chose the youngest and strongest men for their money. By noon already, only the older and weaker ones were left and had little chance of being picked up for a job. But it was precisely to these men that the landowner went and made them a generous offer. He promised them the same wages for their work as the others. And due to that circumstance, they had to work less hard, according to their reduced physical capacities, in order to still make a living for the day and feed their families. What is expressed here in this parable is a generous heart and a sense of mercy in the landowner. His wealth is great enough that he can afford this kind of generosity, even towards the poor, the aged and the weak.

It is the same with God. Human beings are obviously gifted with different levels of ability, some are naturally stronger than others, stronger in faith, in love and in hope. They are expected to do more, to work harder in the vineyard of the Lord. Others, however, are weaker by their spiritual capacities. They come to faith only later in life, or because of their personal constitution they are not able to live such a holy life as other people in the Church and the world. But God is generous to these people, too, and willingly accepts what they have to offer in terms of personal achievement, as long as they make every effort according to their own gifts or talents.

God's justice is different from human justice, which can often be petty and unmerciful. Here the Gospel admonishes us not to be like the other workers who were chosen early in the morning. In another well-known parable, that of the prodigal son, the elder brother is given to us as a cautionary example. He reckons and measures according to human standards, according to human justice. However, if we want to resemble God in this life and in the next, we will rather take the father of the prodigal son as our example. He rejoices over everyone who repents. And be it on their deathbed, like the good thief who first professed Christ on the cross and was saved "last minute" by God's generosity.

Let us rejoice in God's grace and generosity towards us, and be grateful. And let us beware of acting like envious brothers and sisters who weigh everything down to the tiniest detail and quickly feel disadvantaged when not everyone is treated exactly the same, gets exactly the same for their efforts. The reward promised to us is heaven, not more and not less. What more can we hope for?

In the name of Christ our Saviour. Amen.

## Two commandments that summarise all the Law and the Prophets

Our Gospel reading (Mt 22:34-40) this morning reminds me of a story from the Talmud, a collection of Jewish traditions and commentaries on the Old Testament in many volumes. The Talmud often tells of two famous rabbis who were both early contemporaries of Jesus. Rabbi Hillel died when Jesus was about ten years old, and Rabbi Shammai lived until Jesus was around thirty. Rabbi Shammai was considered a hardliner who held a very harsh, to-the-letter interpretation of the law. Hillel, on the other hand, was considered mild in his interpretations, and in today's Judaism the principle is to follow Hillel rather than Shammai when in doubt.

One story tells how a Gentile came to Shammai and said to him: I am willing to become a Jew if you teach me the entire law while I stand on one leg. Shammai became very angry at this and expelled the Gentile from his house with a stick he was holding in his hand. Thereupon the Gentile went to Hillel and said the same thing to him. The great Rabbi then replied to him by saying, "What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbour: that is the whole Law, the rest is the commentary; and now go and learn it." At this response, the Gentile had himself circumcised and lived a Jewish life from then on. Hillel based his teaching on a commandment that can be found in the middle of the Five Books of Moses at the beginning of the Old Testament. It says: Love your neighbour, for he is like you. (Lev 19:18)

The teachers of the law who put Jesus to the test in our Gospel passage today know these two stories about Hillel and Shammai, who were both important representatives of the Pharisaic movement. From their observations, the Pharisees knew that Jesus did not think much of the Sadducees and their interpretations of the Scriptures, and that he was often at odds with them. So by asking Jesus the question about the most important of all the commandments, they basically want to find out whether the famous Rabbi from Nazareth is one of them. And Jesus does indeed give an answer to their question that they can relate to.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

This answer does not make Jesus a Pharisee, as some biblical scholars have wrongly assumed in the past. But it does show that Jesus was clearly closer to the Pharisees in his interpretation of the Law of Moses than to the other movements in Judaism at that time.

In his answer to the teachers of the law, Jesus quotes from the Jewish creed, which pious Jews pray at least twice a day, namely in the morning and in the evening, and often once more before going to bed: Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD is One. Almost all Jews know these words by heart, just as almost all Christians know the Lord's Prayer by heart, or at least they should know it. And thereby the most important commandment is right in front of their eyes and in their minds, several times a day.

While the commandment to love one's neighbour is in the middle of the Mosaic scriptures, the commandment to love God comes much later, in the Book of Deuteronomy (6:4-9). It reminds the Israelites of the right motivation in the fulfilment of all the commandments. Not fear and pressure should drive them to keep the commandments, but love for God. Without this love, everything they do will remain empty and fruitless. And if we love God, how can we not love our neighbour, too, who is God's creature, and much more than this, he is his beloved child, just as I am God's beloved child? Having one and the same Father in heaven makes us all

brothers and sisters in Christ, and therefore love for God urges us naturally to love our neighbour in the spirit of fraternity.

According to Jesus' teaching, it is precisely in loving our neighbour, in the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, that we express how much we love God and want to become like Christ in this love for the Eternal Father. How this love can be lived out in our lives concretely we can see in the example of Jesus and the great saints.

Let us try do our best to imitate them, and let us ask the Holy Spirit for all the strength and courage we need to do so. Amen.

## **The constant need for transformation and inner renewal**

In our Gospel reading (Mt 23:27-32) this morning, Jesus continues to challenge the Pharisees and Scribes. The leaders of the chosen people have always persecuted and killed the God-sent prophets, because they delivered inconvenient demands and messages. And with Jesus, the prophet of all prophets, it will be no different in the end. Jesus has no illusions about this, and he is not afraid to tell his opponents the truth to their faces, time and again.

I am always amazed at the polemic, at the harshness, but also at the courage with which Jesus tackles his opponents in public, who mostly consist of the powerful and the religious authorities of his time. And I keep thinking that there might be a reason why Jesus died on a cross, and not of old age in his bed, surrounded by his family. And the Gospel readings this week give us plenty of information about that reason:

“Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.”

This makes me think about how the image of Jesus has changed in the West over the past decades. For fifty years, Western theology has been busy sanding off all the rough edges of Jesus. The Western image of Jesus was filed down and polished until there was nothing offensive left in it. And in the same period, our churches have emptied massively. If Jesus no longer makes any demands on his followers, if everyone goes to heaven anyway and the teachings of the Church are merely unpopular but well-meaning recommendations, why bother getting up on Sunday morning to listen to boring homilies?

I think it is time to take Jesus Christ and his teachings and admonitions much more seriously again, even if this view may be unpopular, even among some religious authorities of our time. And by Jesus Christ I mean the Jesus of the gospels, not the meek, slightly naïve caricature of a sandal-wearing guru that has spread among us in the Western world and is rightly made fun of by the secular media. The real Jesus could not be further from such a distortion. But in order to know or recognise this, one must first get to know Jesus closely and properly. And the best way to get to know Jesus is through the study of the Holy Scriptures, especially the four gospels.

I often recommend to people to download the New Testament as an audio book and listen to it during longer walks and to allow the Word of God in this way to enter into them and have an effect on them. The weather is inviting these days, and the four gospels should be listened to rather than being read anyway. They were originally written to be heard in the assembly of the faithful. And you will be surprised at the effect of the spoken word as opposed to the written.

The Word of God in its entirety, but also with its inconvenient claims, has transforming and renewing power. And there is little that the Church needs in our days as much as transformation and inner renewal.

The other main source of strength and renewal for the Church is the Holy Eucharist, which we will now celebrate and in which we will encounter and receive Jesus himself, Christ crucified and risen for us and for our salvation. Amen.

## On the Christian concept of love

From the contents of our readings these days, we can tell that we are moving towards the end of the liturgical year and that Advent is approaching quickly, and with that season also a reminder of the Second Coming of Christ.

We hear Jesus announcing his glorious return as judge and ruler of the world in today's Gospel reading (Lk 17:26-37). And the Last Judgment will come upon us suddenly and unexpectedly. Seemingly arbitrarily, some human beings are chosen for salvation while others are left behind and fall to damnation:

“I tell you, on that night there will be two people in one bed; one will be taken, the other left. And there will be two women grinding meal together; one will be taken, the other left.”

However, if we have listened attentively to the readings at Mass over the past number of days, we realise that God does not choose or act arbitrarily, at all. We just do not always get a grasp of the criteria he applies to us. Actually, it is only *one single* criterion that he applies to us.

Certainly you do remember the parable of the goats and the sheep, which we have heard again just recently on St Martin's Day:

“Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” (Mt 25:34-36)

Therefore, the criterion will always be how much have we loved in our lives. “A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also must love one another”, says the Lord (Jn 13:34).

Now, what is love in the Christian sense? The Christian concept of love has nothing to do with warm or sentimental feelings, or even “romance” as some mockers misrepresent the Lord's commandment. No, Christian love is neither a warm sentiment nor a feeling of affection for someone. It is rather a certain way of how someone acts, of how people conduct themselves towards God and towards their fellow human beings. The word that the Lord uses in the original language of the New Testament to describe the Christian understanding of love (or charity) means actually “to be kind to someone” or “to treat someone with appreciation”.<sup>39</sup> In other words, Christ asks his followers to be kind and charitable to each other, as every human person is created in the image and likeness of God and therefore deserves appreciation and respect. And this is what our first reading today was talking about, giving us a key to understanding our Gospel passage today:

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<sup>39</sup> For the theologians among my readers: “Ἐντολὴν καινὴν δίδωμι ὑμῖν ἵνα ἀγαπᾶτε ἀλλήλους, καθὼς ἠγάπησα ὑμᾶς ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀγαπᾶτε ἀλλήλους.” (Jn 13:34). John's Greek quotation of the Lord's (originally Aramaic) phrase makes use of the word *agápē* in its verb form, which is commonly, but somewhat imprecisely, translated as *love*. In Ancient Greek, *agápē* is contrasted with *érōs* (erotic love) and *philia* (brotherly love; affection). A significant difference between *agápē* and *philia* is that *agápē* is a volitional decision out of appreciation that is due to every human being, whereas *philia* is directed only towards people with whom one wants to be connected in a certain, cordial or warm-hearted way. Therefore, *agápē* can be called for, but *philia* cannot.

“But now I ask you, not as though I were writing a new commandment but the one we have had from the beginning: let us love one another. For this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, as you heard from the beginning, in which you should walk.”<sup>40</sup> (2 Jn 4-6)

Being forced to produce warm feelings for each other would overwhelm our weak human nature with its natural boundaries and limitations. We cannot choose how we feel, cannot “switch on or off” affectionate sentiments like a machine; however, we can choose to a certain degree how we act and if we make an active decision to whether follow evil thoughts or desires, or not.

Treating each other with respect, kindness and appreciation in our daily lives is not too much to ask. And it starts with such simple little things, like a smile and a greeting offered to a stranger we come across in the street, or a kind word to someone next to us in a queue at the supermarket or post office.

Now, think of a nasty person in your neighbourhood, that harsh and overly strict teacher who made your years in school a misery, a smug and condescending civil servant you once had to deal with, a rude and bossy nurse, and so on. Maybe we will never be able to develop genuine affection for such a person. And thank God we do not have to! But we can always choose to be kind to them as an act of will, imitating the Lord in everything that way, who himself prayed even for his enemies from the cross. And he did so not out of fondness for his tormentors, but because he chose to break the cycle of evil even in this situation.

The world could be already a so much better place if we just smiled and greeted each other in the streets in the morning. (Within reason, of course... I would not recommend trying to greet each and every one in the shopping centre on a Saturday afternoon.) By doing so, showing kindness to a random stranger we encounter on our way, we could start a chain of good deeds.

Why am I using this as an example? Because I noticed myself recently how many people would not respond to a kind and friendly, “Good morning”, in the streets of Blanchardstown Village...

Now, even if we are not greeted back, as it obviously happens in our time and location, we should nevertheless try to always be kind to other people. Not because they are nice, but because *we* are, following the Lord’s example and commandment to love one another.

Yes, let them not respond to a greeting if they choose to do so. That’s fine. We may perhaps not start a chain of good deeds with someone who is an obvious grouch, or perhaps just not a morning person. By not letting our good cheer and intentions be spoiled by such rudeness, however, we still might break a chain of bad deeds or temper. And that, too, has the potential to make the world a somewhat better, warmer place for us all. Amen.

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<sup>40</sup> In the Greek original, the author is saying, “ἵνα ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους” (“let us love one another”). So he is also using the verb form of the noun *agápē* in this context, directly referring to the Lord’s commandment in John 13:34.

## Acknowledgements

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In this context, I would like to add a small but not unimportant remark: normally, it is the ordained ministers who are seen as the actual and proper teachers of faith and spiritual life in their parishes, and in a certain sense, of course, we are. What is often overlooked, however, is how much we, the priests, also learn from our faithful. In them we find a spiritual strength, depth and wisdom that can only be acquired through many years of a constant and steadfast practice of faith, hope and charity. For this reason, I wish to dedicate this book to all those who have supported and encouraged me throughout my long and stony journey to the priesthood.

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<https://www.erzabtei-beuron.de/schott/>

<https://www.sacredspace.ie/>

<http://www.perikopen.de/>

<https://sermonwriter.com/>

<https://bibleproject.com/>

I sincerely thank the various operators of these websites, including the German Liturgical Institute and the Irish Jesuits. At this point, I would also like to thank the providers of the following excellent translation software, which helped me more than once to put my often complicated thoughts into comprehensible English:

<https://www.deepl.com/translator>

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consistent with the Catholic faith, but also do not bore my listeners in the pews too much (or even overwhelm them with overly theological language and abstractions).

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