

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

The word

Say my name, say my name

Lk 19:1-10

Today's gospel story of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus gives us a wonderful, consoling insight into Jesus' attitude to sinners.

Zacchaeus is one of the chief tax collectors in Jericho for the hated Roman occupying force. His occupation has made him rich but it has also made him a social outcast, someone who is regarded on the same level as thieves and prostitutes. His own people despise him. To them, he is a traitor and public sinner.

Zacchaeus has heard that Jesus is to pass through the town on his way to Jerusalem, and is anxious to see him. But being small of stature, he can't get a good view of Jesus, so he climbs a sycamore tree.

Zacchaeus nearly dies of shock when Jesus stops right under his tree and asks to spend the night in his house. The crowd is shocked and outraged too. "He's gone to a sinner's house as a guest," they murmur. But Jesus ignores them. He extends the hand of friendship and mercy to Zacchaeus, and Zacchaeus is thrilled. Being accepted by Jesus makes him a changed man. He is able to repent of his wrongdoing and to respond generously as well.

The focus of this beautiful story is on the utter generosity of God's mercy and forgiveness. The sequence of events is crucial. Notice that when Jesus meets Zacchaeus, he does not demand repentance before offering friendship. His love precedes repentance. He totally overlooks Zacchaeus' sins in the hope that he will repent. And Zacchaeus, feeling loved and accepted by a fellow Jew for the first time in years, responds.

God loves each one of us too - warts and all. He overlooks our sins and reaches out to us, as he did to Zacchaeus, in total acceptance. Knowing that God accepts us unconditionally should lead us to respond generously too.

Reflect

Some people are good with names. They are introduced to someone and have an ability to remember that person's name even after a gap of months or years. It's a wonderful gift.

Others are hopeless at names. They are introduced to someone and then forget their name almost as soon as they are told what it is. It can be very embarrassing for both parties.

We like it when people remember our names, especially if they have met us only fleetingly before or don't know us very well. It shows that we made an impression on them, that we matter to them, that we count. On the other hand, if it's obvious that they can't say our name, we can feel annoyed and put out.

Our name is very important to us.

In today's Gospel, Jesus calls Zacchaeus by name. He doesn't just summon this man down from his perch on the tree, he addresses him by his name. Imagine the impact that made on Zacchaeus. He realizes that this great preacher actually knows his name, and calls him by name out of love.

As a tax-collector for the hated Romans, Zacchaeus was despised by his own people. They probably called him a lot of things, but they never addressed him by name out of love as Jesus did.

No wonder Zacchaeus became a changed man.

God has called each of us by name too. On the day of our baptism, our name was spoken, and then the priest said, "I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." God has called each of us by name, and he never forgets our name. We are precious in his sight.

Pray

The Lord is merciful to all, no matter who they are or what they have done. Ask the Lord to help you to be more generous and forgiving.

Do

Zacchaeus was a social outcast, yet Jesus reached out to him in love. Who in your parish or community is regarded as a social outcast or outsider? Do something loving for them this week.

Learn

* God's love and forgiveness is a free gift open to everybody

- * God does not make distinctions between people
- * God loves and forgives us first
- * God calls each of us by name
- * The Christian is called to look on others with God's eyes

Say

"Lord, give me your heart that I might reach out to others in love."

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The Word

Hope in the Resurrection Lk 20:27-38

The Sadducees are out to trap Jesus. They don't believe in the resurrection and want to ridicule Jesus as someone who does.

According to the Jewish Law, if a man died and left no son, the man's brother had an obligation to father a son for his dead brother's widow. So the Sadducees create an absurd case. Seven brothers marry the same woman, and each dies leaving her childless. So, whose wife will she be in heaven?

Jesus' answer shows up their insincerity. He says that in the next life, after the resurrection, all people will be in relationship with God. There will be no need to propagate the human species, nor will legal arrangements be of importance.

Jesus goes on to give his own teaching about the resurrection. God is faithful to all people, even when they die. God makes a promise forever, and no force - not even death - can destroy this promise.

Every Sunday we celebrate the wonderful story of Easter. In doing so, we give thanks to the God whose faithful love is stronger than death.

Reflect

It looked bad for the old man. He had collapsed and had been rushed into intensive care. The doctors were not optimistic. The 90-year-old had internal bleeding and operating on him would be difficult. There didn't seem to be much hope.

Though his body was failing, the old man's mind was clear. He was perfectly aware of the situation he was in. A friend came to be with him and to offer him support. And to his friend's surprise, the old man spoke slowly but clearly about the future.

"I believe it's not looking very good for me," he said. "They might be able to stop the bleeding or they might not. But I'm at peace. I've entrusted everything to the Lord; I've put it all in his hands, and he can do with me what he will. And if I die, I look forward to meeting him."

It was an extraordinary statement of faith by an old man on his deathbed. He believed in the resurrection; he was certain of it – and this was the basis of the hope and of the peace that he found in that most difficult time for him.

As Christians, the resurrection of the dead is the basis of our hope too. We know that our God is a God of the living – not the dead. We know that our death is not the end but rather the beginning of a new transformed, glorified life with Christ in God forever.

Say

"In you, Lord, we live forever. I thank you for your promise to me of eternal life."

Do

Visit someone you know who is recently bereaved, or write to them expressing your sympathy.

Pray

Write down the name of each person you have loved and lost, and pray for each one with gratitude to God for their lives.

Learn

- * By his cross and resurrection, Jesus has destroyed death
- * Belief in the afterlife is central to the Christian faith
- * In baptism we are linked to the death of Christ, so we are linked too with his new life
- * The resurrection of Jesus gives us hope even in the bleakest situations

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

THE WORD

A faithful God Lk 21:5-19

In today's Gospel reading we hear part of the last public sermon given by Jesus. He's in the great Temple of Jerusalem and is teaching the people and his disciples. It's not a comforting message. He talks about the destruction of the Temple and the end of the world. He prepares his disciples for persecution and temptations.

His audience is impressed by the Temple. It's a wonderful building. But, for Jesus, it offers only false security. He goes on to say that there will be those who will pretend to be the Messiah. They too will offer false security, because they and their message will be false.

Jesus talks about a future great destruction. This is a favourite Jewish way of talking about God's future punishment of sinners.

Jesus says that before the end of time, there will be a great persecution of his followers. It will also be a time when they will bear testimony to their faith. They will face betrayal at the hands of their own families, and may even face death. Yet God will remain faithful.

Jesus' prediction came to pass very quickly. The Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD, about 40 years later. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, 97,000 people were taken prisoner and more than one million were killed. Following the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, the Christian Church in Palestine experienced terrible persecution. Yet the Church did not fail. God remained faithful. The message for us today is that no matter what trials, tribulations, and disasters come our way, God is always there, and will always be faithful to us.

Reflect

In today's Gospel Jesus speaks of tough times ahead for his followers. He speaks of a time to come when the Christian community will be torn by terrible persecution. But he tells them that when this happens, and they are called to bear witness to him, they are not to worry about what to say. They are not to prepare a defense, because Jesus himself will be with them, and he will give them an eloquence and a wisdom that none of their opponents will be able to contradict.

These are not easy times for the followers of Jesus either. We live in a time where a militant form of secularism is on the rise. Our faith is often ridiculed. We may not face physical persecution but can find our beliefs and our behaviour under attack. We know, however, that Jesus is with us too. And so long as we stand resolutely by our convictions, he will give us all the wisdom and courage and eloquence we need to witness faithfully to him.

Say

"Lord, I thank you for the gift of faith. Help me to live the faith I profess."

Do

Speak to someone this week about your faith and why it is important to you.

Pray

In the increasingly secular Western world in which we live, witnessing publicly to the Gospel is not always easy. Pray for yourself and for your parish community for the strength to be faithful followers of Jesus.

Learn

- * The Christian witnesses to the faith at all times and in all places
- * God is always faithful to his people
- * The Christian is happy to suffer for the sake of the Kingdom of God

Our Lord Jesus Christ, Universal King

THE WORD

King of the world! Luke 23:35-43

In times past, kings and queens were people of prestige who commanded respect, fear and obedience. They fought battles and lorded it over their subjects. They ruled by decree and destroyed anyone who opposed them. Their wealth and position allowed them the kind of luxury and lifestyle their subjects could only dream of.

Thankfully, that is not the case any more, so it may be hard for us to understand why we celebrate a feast that names Christ as King. The Christ of the gospels does not seem to fit our image of a king.

But if we understand the nature of Christ's teaching, we should not be put off by this notion, because Christ's idea of kingship is not one of power and authority but of service to the least of our brothers and sisters. He turns our idea of kingship upside down. He is one who treats everyone equally, who serves rather than is served, who is interested not in possessions or money or status but in people and compassion and justice.

Today's feast reminds us that the Kingdom that Christ came to announce is different from any earthly kingdom, and its values are different. We are called not only to worship Jesus Christ as our king but also to imitate his way of living.

Reflect

Beneath the picture of a macho-looking Christ runs this message: "Jesus, also known as Christ, wanted on charges of sedition, criminal anarchy, vagrancy, and conspiring to overthrow the established government. Dresses poorly. Uses carpentry as a cover. Has visionary ideas. Associates with common working people, unemployed and winos. Has a variety of aliases: Prince of Peace, Son of Man, Light of the World, etc. Full beard and scars on hands and feet, the result of injuries inflicted by angry mob led by respectable citizens and local authorities."

This is Jesus, our King, whom we are called to follow. Would you accept Jesus if he travelled our earth today? Would you accept this kind of king?

Do

Take some time to think about your values. What are the values you live by? How closely do they reflect the values of the kingdom?

Pray

Pray for our leaders – of church and state – that what they do and how they live will reflect kingdom values of service, humility and love.

Say

"Lord, Jesus Christ, you are my Master and my King. Help me to follow you to the best of my ability. Amen."

Learn

* Jesus came to establish a new kind of kingdom, a kingdom based not on power, wealth and military might but on justice, peace and love

* The followers of Jesus live by the values of his Kingdom

* When we reach out in love and compassion to the lost and forsaken, to those in prison, the sick, the homeless and the lost, we are living by the values of the Kingdom

First Sunday of Advent

The word

Be prepared!

Mt 24:37-44

Remember the story of Noah and the Ark? The Old Testament tells it in the Book of Genesis. It's the story of how God punished humanity for its sinfulness. In today's gospel we hear Jesus making comparisons. He compares the people of his day with those of Noah's. The people of Jesus' time are not particularly wicked. But they are heedless and unthinking. They get on with life. They eat, they drink, they get married. That's all very fine. But the problem is they don't think about their relationships with God or with one another. Because of their ignorance, they will not be ready for God's coming judgement.

Jesus tells a parable about a householder and a thief. It is not the householder's immoral life which causes his downfall. It's his carelessness. God's judgement comes like a thief for those who are not prepared for it.

Be on the lookout! That's the message for us on this First Sunday of Advent. Things are changing. Property, possessions, power will all pass away. Even health and life do not last forever. Only our relationships with God and one another are eternal.

Reflect

It's amazing how easy it is to get stuck in a rut. We fall into a regular routine: we get up at the same time, eat the same breakfast, do household tasks according to a particular schedule; watch the same soaps; observe the same bedtime rituals. Sometimes it's almost like we are functioning on automatic pilot.

The busy-ness of life today is one reason for this. There is so much to do, we have so many commitments and obligations, that we don't have the time to do new things, or to do things differently, or even think of doing things differently. We have so many things we need to do each day, and we do them.

The season of Advent offers us an opportunity to stand back from the regular routine of life to reflect on our relationship with God and with each other. In this season we look forward to the coming of Christ at Christmas. But Christ comes among us every day. He is present in those we meet and in the events of our life. Often, though, we can be too busy to notice. Use this season of Advent as a time to be more conscious of Christ's presence, so that when he does come he will find us ready and waiting.

Learn

* Advent marks the beginning of the Church's new year

* The season of Advent is a time of preparation for the Lord's coming at Christmas. It also prepares us for the second coming of Christ at the end of time

* The Christian is always prepared for the coming of the Lord

Do

Make some extra time for prayer each day during the season of Advent.

Talk to your children or grandchildren (or a young relative) about the meaning of Advent

Make an Advent wreath

Pray

A wonderful prayer for Advent and throughout the year is the phrase, "Come, Lord Jesus." Simply say this phrase to yourself over and over again during the time you have set aside for prayer. Say it gently and calmly, without any strain. Relax into the words. If you find your mind wandering, or if you find you are getting bored, simply return to the words, "Come, Lord Jesus...Come, Lord Jesus."

Say

"Lord, help me to live in such a way that I will be always ready for your coming."

Second Sunday of Advent

The word

Telling it like it is John Mt 3:1-12

John the Baptist doesn't come across as the sweetest person you could ever meet. There is something severe, even unpleasant, about him. He dresses in clothes made of camel-hair and lives on locusts. He has the look of a wild man, and he has a sharp tongue.

John is not afraid to tell it like he sees it. It doesn't matter who is at the receiving end. He warns those who come to listen to him that they must reform their lives, repent, get their act together. He has especially harsh and uncompromising words for the Pharisees and Sadducees. "You brood of vipers," he calls them. It was because of these religious leaders that the people of Israel were unprepared for the coming of the Messiah. And John lets them have it in no uncertain terms. We can imagine how angry and outraged they must have felt as this uneducated, wild man dares to chastise them in public. It doesn't matter to John who they are or how powerful they might be. He tells them the truth without fear or favour.

Eventually John's honesty and directness would cost him his freedom and his life. Herod has him arrested and thrown into jail after John had the temerity to condemn Herod for living with his brother's wife; while in prison he would be beheaded.

His honesty and bluntness cost John the Baptist everything. But it is the price he is willing to pay out of love of God and service to the truth.

Reflect

There is something refreshingly honest about someone who speaks directly and bluntly and is not afraid to call a spade a spade. We admire their frankness and straightforwardness. We may not always agree with what they say but we know where we stand with them.

But sometimes such a person can leave us feeling a little unsettled. Somebody who forcefully makes their point, who doesn't care who they offend or how unpopular their opinion might be can come across as loud or arrogant or boorish and unpleasant. Usually we prefer people and conversations that are pleasant and diplomatic and inoffensive, even if it means that things are rather dull and no sparks fly.

Sometimes, though, it's necessary to be direct, and even confrontational if necessary. In today's gospel John the Baptist said what he felt needed to be said. He wanted to alert people to their sinfulness and shortcomings and to the imminent coming of the Messiah. It was for him a most urgent task. He didn't pull his punches. Speaking the truth ultimately cost him his life.

Speaking the truth cost Jesus his life too. He, like John, knew the dangers of speaking his mind. But it did not stop him.

There is a lesson here for us. As Christians we must not compromise on the truth. We must not be afraid to stand up for Christian values, to condemn wrongdoing, to promote justice, to oppose violence and discrimination and hypocrisy whenever and wherever we find them. We must have the confidence to witness to what we believe, whatever the cost.

Learn

- * The Christian is someone who speaks the truth
- * The Christian is always aware of the importance of repentance
- * The Christian turns towards God every day

Do

Read today's gospel slowly. Picture the scene. Imagine you are there. How would you have responded to the words of John? How do you respond today?

Say

"Lord, help me to witness to you. Strengthen me to serve you every day of my life. Amen."

Pray

Pray for your local parish community and for Christians everywhere, that they will have the courage to speak the truth with confidence.

Third Sunday of Advent

The word

Actions speak louder than words Mt 11:2-11

John the Baptist had given testimony to Jesus at the river Jordan. He had declared that Christ was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Now, from prison, John sends his disciples to ask: "Are you the one who is to come, or do we have to wait for someone else?" The Baptist seems less certain at this stage concerning Jesus. Why the apparent hesitancy?

Different reasons have been suggested. One is that John asked the question, not for his own sake, but for the sake of his disciples. Or it could have been that John was really puzzled, because his own early message had been one of impending judgement: the axe was already laid to the root of the tree, the chaff was being separated from the wheat, the divine fire of cleansing judgement had already begun to burn – and this heavy emphasis on judgement was not coming through in the teaching of Jesus.

In his reply to the Baptist's disciples, Jesus said, in so many words: Don't report to John what I am saying; tell him what I am doing. The actions of Jesus (his restoring sight to the blind, life to the dead, his preaching the good news to the poor) declared that he was indeed the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One of God.

The message would have made sense to John the Baptist because John had come in the spirit of the prophet Isaiah to prepare a way for the Lord. The reply Jesus gave to the Baptist was Isaiah's own description of what would happen when the Messiah came: the blind would see, the lame would walk, lepers would be cleansed, the dead would be raised to life, and the good news would be proclaimed to the poor.

Reflect

Talk is cheap. It's easy to make promises we can't keep, to say that we will do something and never do it. We are all well aware that actions speak louder than words.

Jesus knew that too, and when John the Baptist sent some of his followers to ask him if he really were the Messiah or not, Jesus tells them to report back what they see happening on the ground. "The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear and the dead are raised to life." Jesus didn't just claim to be the Messiah, his actions proved it. The Kingdom is unfolding before your very eyes, Jesus was telling John, and it is a kingdom of love and compassion.

As Christians, what the Lord asks of us is that our actions reflect what we believe. During this season of Advent, as the birthday of Christ approaches, we should be moved to become more active and committed in spreading the Good News. We must help those who are blind and dead to God's love and God's word. We must raise the dead. All around us are people who are spiritually dead. Evil can seem so attractive that their will to resist it can disappear. They can become blind to goodness, deaf to the cries of those they defraud or rape or inflict violence on. We must tell sinners of the power of Christ's Spirit to give new life, to lift them out of the dark desert they have created around themselves. There is full life and far greater happiness when we walk with Christ.

Do

As you go about your Christmas shopping this week, be aware of those who are homeless or forced to beg. Extend the hand of friendship to them.

Pray

To say we are people of faith is one thing; to show it is another. Ask the Lord for the strength to live every day the faith you profess.

Say

Say slowly and prayerfully the response to today's psalm:

"Come, Lord, and save us."

Learn

* The Christian is one who follows the example of Jesus Christ

* Today is known as Gaudete Sunday, meaning 'rejoice' from the first word of the entrance antiphon. We rejoice because our salvation is close at hand

Fourth Sunday of Advent

The word

Joseph's honourable role Mt 1:18-24

In Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus, Joseph takes the leading role. It might be a good idea to put aside the familiar picture of Joseph as a white-bearded old man leaning on a stick if we are to capture the human drama of his story.

Marriage was arranged at the time in a leisurely fashion, often over several years. It began while the couple were still quite young with informal contacts between the families. It entered a more serious stage with haggling and eventual agreement about the dowry. A formal marriage contract would then be drawn up, and when both young people were ready, the bride would be led to the house of her new husband, and a week-long wedding feast would take place. Once the formal agreement was made, the couple were, to all intents and purposes, husband and wife in the eyes of the community. If the girl had sexual relations with another man, she was considered an adulteress. If either family decided to call off the wedding, it was tantamount to a divorce.

It is likely that Joseph was a young man in his late teens or early twenties. His apprenticeship as a carpenter would have just finished, and he would have been looking forward to setting up home with a girl from his native village. Mary would have been a few years younger. The unmistakable signs that she is pregnant must have struck death into his soul. But the Gospel points out something distinctive about Joseph - he is a man of honour. Formally breaking the marriage contract would expose Mary to shame. This he refuses to do, even if she seems to have broken his heart.

His dilemma is solved by a revelation in a dream. The child Mary is carrying is the one promised by the prophet Isaiah who will save God's people from their sins. Joseph's role is to act as protector of the mother's honour, to give the child a name, and to provide a home in which God can be Emmanuel, 'God with us.'

Reflect

Advent is running out of time. Tomorrow night Christmas will be on us. Lest we forget, the readings today are tripping over each other to remind us what Christmas is all about. The first reading reminds us of Isaiah's prophecy made many centuries earlier: The maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a son whom she will call Emmanuel, a name which means 'God-is-with-us.'

St Paul, in the second reading, reminds us of Christ's origin: In the body he was a human descendent of King David, and in the order of the Spirit he was Son of God. The gospel tells us how Jesus was miraculously conceived in the womb of Mary and given the name of Jesus, meaning Saviour. The prophecy had been fulfilled.

So now the scene is set. Are you ready? Can you share in Mary's astonishment when Gabriel told her she was to become the mother of the Messiah? Are you as excited as the shepherds were when the angels announced to them tidings of great joy: "Today a saviour has been born for you: he is Christ the Lord"? Can you feel the excitement of knowing that the God of the universe had put on our human nature? Are you thrilled by the knowledge that he who humbled himself to share in our humanity has offered us a share in his divinity?

In the two days that are left, can you step aside for a while from the hustle and bustle of Christmas presents and Christmas dinners and let yourself be caught up in the intense joy of that night in Bethlehem? With Mary, can you find time to treasure all these wonderful events in your heart?

Do

We can be so busy in the run up to Christmas that we lose sight of what it is all about. Take some time today and tomorrow to reflect on what it is we are celebrating on the feast of Christmas.

Pray

Joseph and Mary were people of extraordinary faith. Despite the confusion and pain they must have experienced after the discovery that Mary was pregnant, they trusted in God and in his plan for them. Pray that you too may have the radical faith of Joseph and Mary.

Say

"Lord, I look forward to your coming. Help me to be always aware of your presence."

Learn

- * Like Joseph, we Christians are called to listen attentively to what God asks of us
- * Jesus is the fulfilment of God's promise to humanity

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Christmas Day

The word

God's crazy love!

God is beauty; God is mystery; God is love. From all eternity God existed and created everything. Yet in the incarnation God enters into our imperfect lives. This wonderful and mysterious God loves us so much that he decides to become one of us. He becomes a vulnerable, tiny baby, born not in a palace but into ordinariness – out of love.

Human life can never be the same again. God has blessed us and our lives are sacred. He has entered even into our messiness and brokenness – our ups and downs, our successes and disappointments. He is here with us to strengthen us, sustain us, and, most of all, to love us.

Reflect

A couple of years ago the American singer Beyonce Knowles released a single called Crazy in love. It describes the feelings and actions of someone who is crazy, madly, head over heels in love.

When we are in love with someone, we do crazy things. We behave in unexpected ways, do things that we never did before. We will drive through the night, or spend a fortune in phone calls, or fly across the globe in order to be close to the person we love. We will happily give up our job, go against the wishes of family members and our closest friends, change our whole way of living for the sake of someone we love. We will even be prepared to offer our life for the person we love.

Christmas is the feast of God's crazy love. God is madly in love with his people. God loves us so much that he sent his Son Jesus into the messiness of our world. God loves us so much that he wanted to be as close to us as possible, to share in and experience all that we experience.

Today we celebrate the fact that our God loves us with a love no words can describe.

Now that is something to sing about!

Do

Jesus is Emmanuel, 'God-with-us.' Make a conscious effort to be aware of God's presence in our world today and every day.

Say

"Thank you, Lord, for loving me with such a crazy love; help me to love you more deeply. Amen."

Pray

For some people Christmas is a difficult and lonely time. Remember them in a special way in your prayers today.

Thank God for all the good things that you have received, especially the gift of family and friendship.

Learn

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him may not be lost, but have eternal life. (Jn 3:16)

Holy Family of Jesus, Mary & Joseph

The word

Meet the (holy) family Mt 2:12-15.19-23

Today we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family. The feast itself is relatively new. It was instituted as recently as 1921, though devotion to the Holy Family had been growing among Christians for centuries. It has been celebrated on the first Sunday after Christmas since 1969.

Little is known about the early years of Jesus. The gospels and the liturgy are more concerned with his public life and ministry. Today's feast is an exception. It is a celebration, not only of the holy family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, but of the ideal of the Christian family itself, on which the Church has always placed great emphasis.

Reflect

A holy family they may have been, but they were also a troubled family. It got off to a "bad" start. Mary was claiming to be pregnant through a miracle of God. Who was going to believe that in a very closed village community? Joseph himself needed to be reassured by an angel before he took it on board. Then, as we saw last week, it was all very fine the angel telling Mary that her son would be the Saviour of the world, but that didn't help her find a decent place to give birth to him. And what about that character when they took their baby up to the temple - this strange old man, Simeon, hinting that her child would stir things up and be rejected by many; that he would break her heart like a sword going through it? It cannot have caused much joy to Mary and Joseph when Herod slaughtered half the children of Bethlehem because of their child.

What panic and distress Jesus caused when he ran away and his parents spent three sleepless days searching for him! When they found him, there he was - for all they knew - making a nuisance of himself among all the scholars in the Temple. After that, though, he seems to have settled down, learned his father's trade and behaved like a dutiful son, until the day, that is, when he upped and left home and took to the roads with a motley group of uneducated men which included a terrorist, a tax-collector, and a known cut-throat who would later betray him. It was not easy for Mary having to live in Nazareth where her neighbours made jokes about her son and even tried to toss him over a cliff on one occasion. In the end, of course, the authorities arrested him. They accused him of blasphemy and subversion. They tortured him and executed him as a common criminal while his group of brave friends scattered and fled for their lives. Despite the shame, the sneers and the mockery all round her, Mary stood by her dying son and was faithful to the end.

There is not a family without problems. That means we can identify with it. We can learn from this family of Nazareth how to stand by each other, how to love, and how to support each other.

Do

Write a letter to a loved one – a parent, spouse, child, partner. Tell them what they mean to you and how much you love them.

Say

"Lord, bless my family. Watch over and protect it always. Amen."

Pray

Pray for your family and for families everywhere that they may grow more united in love and peace.

Learn

- * Jesus Christ was fully human as well as divine: he experienced the ups and downs of family life
- * The family is the domestic church. It is where we are introduced to and nurtured in the faith
- * Good communication is at the heart of healthy family life

Epiphany of the Lord

The word

Gifts fit for a king Mt 2:1-12

In today's Gospel we hear the well-known story of the wise men following a star, bearing rich gifts, finding Jesus in a cave and changing their direction as a result.

It is a story integral to any nativity play. Children long to be one of the 'kings' and we could be forgiven for thinking of it as just another element of the fairy tale, part of the glitter and tinsel of Christmas.

In the aftermath of an exhausting 12 days of Christmas, the rich message of this story can be lost in the discarded wrapping paper of gifts already received.

Coming from a rich oriental background, the wise men set out on their journey bearing gifts fit for a king. What a shock it must have been for them, then, to discover not a luxury palace and servants in waiting, but a mountain cave and a baby lying in a bed of straw!

What would we have done if we were in their shoes? Laughed, cried, lost our temper, stormed out? Or would we have seen the light as the wise visitors did? They saw and they believed that this child was the hoped-for Messiah. They saw with believers' eyes, unlike Herod who could not believe. They could see because they had open hearts and open minds to the presence of God - and it changed their lives.

Through the story of the wise men, Matthew reveals God's desire to be known to all people - north, south, east and west. Epiphany means 'made manifest,' 'to show forth.' God is made manifest in Christ for those throughout the world who can open their hearts, their minds and their eyes to see and to believe.

Reflect

The wise men came bringing three gifts - but these were no ordinary offerings. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were rich gifts laden with deep meaning. Gold was brought in recognition that this baby was a king, someone with authority. Frankincense expressed the divinity of Christ. When we use incense to pray, it symbolises the raising of our hearts and minds to God. Myrrh was presented as a sign of the ointments that would be used to anoint Christ's body after his suffering and death.

Christmas is a time of giving and receiving gifts in abundance, but what of our gift to Christ? Unlike the Magi, we may not be able to bring expensive gifts but we can bring something far richer: the gift of ourselves, our willingness to become the light of Christ in our world in 2008. We will want our gift to be one that brings light to those who have nothing but darkness.

Do

Visit the crib in your church. Reflect on the story of the Magi. Explain to your little ones what the story means.

Pray

So many people look for truth and happiness where they cannot be found. They search but they do not find what they are looking for. Pray that people everywhere will discover Christ as their Lord and saviour.

Say

"Lord, help me to seek you always. Keep my eyes ever focused on you. Amen."

Learn

- * The feast of the Epiphany celebrates how God's Son was revealed to the world
- * Christ is the star we are called to follow
- * The Good News of Christ Jesus is for all of humanity
- * To be wise is to recognise Christ as saviour of the world

Baptism of the Lord

The word

Baptism's implications

Matthew 3:13-17

Today we celebrate the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Irrespective of who we are, there is probably one thing we all (certainly, the vast majority of us) share in common: the fact that we were baptised as infants. We were only days or weeks old when we became members of the Church, part of the Body of Christ. We did not know we were being baptised. We did not choose it. We were not aware of the promises that were made on our behalf that day.

And, arguably, that is one of the problems with infant baptism. Because we did not consciously choose it, we may not fully appreciate the meaning of our baptism or the implications it has for the kind of lives we lead every day.

For some families today too, the baptism of a child is more a social event, a 'naming' party, than a religious celebration, a statement of faith.

Today's feast of the Baptism of the Lord is a good time to think about our baptism and what it means to us. It is a good time, too, to think seriously about why we choose to baptise infant members of our family. It should be a decision we make only out of a strong faith commitment.

Reflect

Some years ago a juvenile court judge in California observed that a large number of the teenagers appearing before him had tattoos - tattoos on the hands, fingers, and faces. The tattoos, he learned, identified the bearer as a member of some particular gang, and frequently as a user of a particular drug. Many of these tattoos were self-inflicted by youths who were desperate to "belong." The judge also discovered that teenagers with visible tattoos were virtually excommunicated from the jobs market, since potential employers equated the tattoos with crimes and incompetency, and refused to hire the youth. The judge asked the Los Angeles County Medical Association if there might be, among its members, a plastic surgeon who, at no charge, would remove the tattoos from juvenile delinquents. Dr Karl Stein, a well-known Los Angeles plastic surgeon, was the first to volunteer. In the years that followed Dr Stein turned around the lives of hundreds of his young patients through surgically removing the tattoos by excision, abrasion, laser, and virtually every other known method.

Our baptism is our personal tattoo. It is indelibly imprinted on us, and marks us out as disciples of Christ. Nothing can remove it or wash it away. But how obvious is that mark of baptism on us? How strong does it stand out in our daily lives? Is it absolutely evident from the kind of people we are and the kind of lives we lead that we are baptised members of Christ's church, part of his body?

Do

Talk to your children or young family members about the day of their baptism. Remind them of what happened, of who was there, and why they were baptised.

Pray

Visit the baptismal font in your church or the one where you were baptised. Pray for yourself and for all those who have been baptised there.

Say

"Lord, help me to live out my baptismal promises as best I can."

Learn

Through our baptism, we are united with Christ as his brothers and sisters, and with God as our Father in heaven. Baptism makes us one family. It is the one instance when water is thicker than blood.

2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

The word

Witness for the defence

John 1:29-34

In today's gospel, John the Baptist is presented as a 'witness for the defence' - someone who speaks up for Jesus in his battle to win the hearts and minds of people. John is giving his testimony in the presence of his own disciples, and he paints a very significant pen-picture of Jesus. There are five important aspects of John's testimony in today's Gospel.

1. Jesus is the Lamb of God. This does not mean that he is meek and mild. It means rather that he corresponds to the ideal Servant of God described in the first reading of today's Mass, who was strong enough to take on himself the sins of the whole people of Israel and bring them peace and healing. Another poem about the Servant describes how he would be unflinchingly courageous in his mission, even if it meant that he would be 'led like a lamb to the slaughter' or have to endure in silence like a sheep before its shearers (Isaiah 53:7).
2. John belonged to a culture which valued age and experience. Although John was probably a little older than Jesus as human beings calculate it, as far as John himself is concerned, Jesus' place in God's plan means that he is as old as God's wisdom which has existed for all ages. It is therefore possible to speak of Jesus as someone who has been there from 'the beginning,' the very words with which this Gospel opens.
3. John testifies that Jesus is the one on whom God's Spirit has come to rest. He is like one of the great Spirit-filled characters of Israel's past.
4. Jesus has not simply been richly endowed with the Spirit to enable him to carry out his mission as God's servant, he will share it with others and quite literally plunge human beings into the very depths of God.
5. Jesus is God's Chosen One. This is another reference to the Servant poem in the first reading. In this poem, God speaks directly to his servant and tells him of the mission which lies before him. The heart of the gospel message is not that God speaks to us by an angel or a prophet or a human hero, no matter how self-giving. He speaks to us through his Son who loves us to the point of laying down his life for us.

Reflect

Most of us love a gripping courtroom drama. We love books, films and TV series that centre round legal battles between the defence and prosecution lawyers as they seek to convict or acquit a person or persons in the dock. Some high-profile real life murder trials have kept the country enthralled as we followed the evidence every day and speculated on the outcome.

In today's gospel, John the Baptist adopts the role of witness on behalf of Jesus. He literally points towards Jesus and offers powerful evidence why he is convinced Jesus is the Messiah. He wants to persuade anyone who will listen that Jesus is indeed the one they have been waiting for, that he is the one they should follow.

As Christians we also are called to point to Jesus, to offer evidence on his behalf. We point to Christ not only by what we say but also by the kind of people we are. Ultimately, the extent to which we are Christlike is the extent to which we will offer effective evidence of his behalf.

Say

"Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us."

Do

Imagine that you are on trial for being a follower of Jesus. Is there enough evidence to convict you? Be a witness for Christ this week. Speak to someone about what your faith means to you.

Pray

This is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Traditionally, it runs from 18 - 25 January. Give thanks to God for the many beliefs Christians from the mainstream churches hold in common. Pray for a deeper unity and togetherness between all Christians.

Learn

In today's Gospel, John the Baptist describes Jesus as the Chosen One of God. Each one of us also is a chosen one of God. God has created us in his own image and likeness; he has shaped us after himself. We are special in his eyes.

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Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

The word

Jesus' extraordinary charisma

Matthew 4:12-23

The arrest of John signalled Jesus out as a marked man. He left the Jordan valley and returned to his home country of Galilee. But not quite. He did not go back to home and family in Nazareth, to familiar job and surroundings. He went instead to a town called Capernaum. Today, Capernaum is a few acres of ruins on the shores of the lake of Galilee while Nazareth is a bustling town of many thousands of inhabitants. In the days of Jesus it was different. Nazareth was an isolated mountain hamlet, Capernaum a busy port set on an international trading route, which Matthew and the prophet Isaiah long before him knew as 'The Way of the Sea.'

The extended Jewish family provided a total care system. It gave a comforting familiarity to life, but there was a price to pay. No doubt there were family pressures on Jesus to be like everyone else - to settle down, build up the family carpentry business, pick a nice local girl, and get married. If he conformed, his place in the system was assured.

Jesus, on the other hand, needs to get away. His sense of mission will not allow him to settle down like all the rest. Capernaum was only twenty or thirty miles away; but in terms of family, it might as well have been at the ends of the earth.

In Capernaum Jesus sets about forming a new group around himself. There must have been something magnetic about his personality to make people leave what they knew to come and follow him. Matthew tells us in the last lines of today's Gospel why Jesus needs the space and the freedom. It is so that the Good News of the Kingdom and its healing can be proclaimed.

Reflect

Some people have extraordinary charisma. They go into a room and immediately become the centre of attention. They open their mouths and others stop to listen. They start a campaign, or run for office, or found a movement, and people naturally follow.

In terms of looks or appearance or rhetorical skill, they may be no great shakes, but there is something about them, an aura, a force that has the power to attract others, that almost compels people to follow. Jesus had such a personality. In today's gospel, at the start of his ministry, as he walks by the Sea of Galilee, he encounters some fishermen working on their nets and he invites them to follow him - and they follow him. They literally drop what they are doing and follow him; they leave everything - families, homes, livelihoods, friends - and follow him. They abandon all to become his followers - not knowing where it will lead, not knowing what the future holds in store. Still, they follow him. Their loved ones must have thought they were mad.

Of course, Simon Peter and the other apostles mentioned in today's Gospel were not the only ones to give up everything to follow Jesus; countless others down through the centuries have done so too. They also were so attracted by the personality and message of Jesus, and felt the power of his love so strongly, that they were willing to give up everything to be his disciples. In many cases, that meant not only giving up house and home and family, like those in today's Gospel, but giving up their lives as well.

As baptised Christians, Jesus asks us to follow him. It may not mean literally giving up everything, as the apostles did. It may not mean risking our lives or abandoning our family, but it does mean imitating Jesus and modelling our lives and our values on his. It means making his way of living our way of living.

Do

Reflect on what it means to you to be a follower of Jesus. How closely do you follow him? How much would you be prepared to give up in order to follow him?

Say

"Lord, thank you for inviting me to follow you. Help me to follow you every day of my life."

Pray

Pray for Christians who are being persecuted for their faith.

Learn

- * A disciple is one who follows
- * The Christian is called to follow Jesus whatever the cost
- * Jesus shows us the way to fullness of life

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