

Newsletter

Parish of the Immaculate Conception
for English Speaking Catholics.

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Lent



Ash Wednesday - a Reflection

Lord of my life,
as I begin
this Lenten
journey,
may I believe
you want me
to accept your
extraordinary
invitation
to dance
with you.
Lead me
through
the steps
of salvation.

**Now is the acceptable time;
see, now is the day of salvation!** 2 Corinthians 6:2

Imagine that God calls out to you, that God brushes by you and says, "It's today, today is the day salvation is going to come to you." Would you hear God? Would you stop and catch your breath and say, "Wow! God is coming into my heart and taking up residence right now, this very minute?"

Sometimes I'm so busy I don't feel God moving in and around me. I've got so much to think about, so much to do, so many people to relate to, that unfortunately I miss the invitation to accept salvation. God is saving me, calling me, but I find it too much to believe. God wants to dance with me, but even if I hear the call, I may be afraid I don't know the steps. Maybe God will notice I'm kind of uncoordinated. I'd like to believe that God offered to teach me the dance, but my timidity doesn't let me.

On Ash Wednesday the church is saying that the call coming from God on any ordinary day of the week is quite extraordinary. On Ash Wednesday the church points out in a bold way that God wants us to join him in the dance of new life, and that right now is as good a time as any to learn the steps.

Are we willing to look silly, are we willing to learn new steps, are we willing to enter the dance, or will we choose to be like the shy wallflower that only watches and dreams yet never risks becoming a participant?

The trails I made led outwards
into the hills and swamps,
but they led inward also.
And from the study of things underfoot,
and from reading and thinking,
came a kind of exploration of myself and the land.
In time the two became one in my mind.

*John Haines
Twenty five Years in the Northern Wilderness*



Hello,

Lent ... Lent is a journey, a journey of forty days that invites us to go to the solitude of the wilderness in search of personal redemption. Life in its totality is a journey through a desert, through 'this valley of tears' with its moments of pain and trials, joys and glory, a journey towards man's restoration to full membership of God's family. The old people of God journeyed for forty years through the wilderness and in the process they were formed and readied to be the people they were called to be ... wanderers in training to be the family of the Saviour of the world, who also starts his journey of salvation in the wilderness ... forty days of trial and testing that would help him somehow to start to understand his identity and mission.

The Israelites in the desert were tested and tempted to relinquish their identity as a people, to abandon their mission as God's salvation bearing family. In like manner was Christ tempted, tempted not to bother, tempted to think of self rather than go through the pains of a life that would likely end in a violent death, tempted to get it done in an instant fix bypassing the right order of things, bypassing God's way of doing things.

In our journey through life we too struggle with temptations of one kind or another. There are moments when we are tempted not to bother, to think only about ourselves, our comfort, our survival, our gain, our space, without any need to commit ourselves to the service of others, abandoning even our duties as parents and members of the family of man ... We too are tempted to refrain from getting involved, from taking a stand, when there is nothing in it for me. We too are tempted to go for the quick fix, the short cut, the means justify the end solution ... why go through the proper channels when a bribe here or there can get me the same results now rather than later?

Temptation ... it always looks so enticing ... like a red juicy shiny apple ... gratification is so instant, so immediate. It makes so much sense ... it appears so appetizingly true ... I can live so comfortably with it ... it seemingly makes life so secure and cosy. Why should I dirty my fingers? Why should I bother doing it otherwise? Why should I share the cake when I can have it all for myself?

But temptation distorts reality, it is just one part of reality, it sugar-coats reality, it is temporary, transient, deceitful in the fruits it offers, fruits that are just skin outside with no substance within.

In our life journey we are constantly surrounded by temptation ... things that appear good at first glance but in the end turn out harmful, damaging, hurtful. Jesus in the desert shows us how to deal with temptation. But we do not have the stamina of Jesus ... we are weak and frail! Yes indeed we are ... but it is not beyond us to resist and overcome temptation as it comes to us in one form or another. It all depends, I suppose, on how careful we have been to build up our immune system. Throughout life we might not have been careful in what we allowed to take up residence in our lives. Little things that weaken our resistance system, unbecoming deeds, thoughts, and musings of the heart that we allowed to linger inside our psyche, and which we now find

difficult to cut ourselves clean from. Little things such as mean and wicked thoughts, sleazy literature and images, slight infidelities, lustful fantasies, tiny misappropriation of other people's belongings, overindulgence in alcohol, minor acts of irresponsibility in the family and at work, the odd harmful deceitful gossip ... you know ... the list goes on and on. These are little punches we inflict on ourselves that weaken us, incapacitate us when we come to face the bigger issues, the larger temptations. They are like junk food that debilitates the body, puts it out of shape, unable to resist the more serious illness when it comes.

Throughout Lent we are urged to go into the solitude of the desert to face these nagging weaknesses we carry and work out a way to rid ourselves of them. We shouldn't allow the weeds to overgrow to such an extent that recovery becomes even more difficult, even more painful, though recovery never comes too late. But then why leave it so late when you can enjoy the fruits of a tidy life immediately? It's like the person who owns a brand new Jaguar and insists on driving his tiny well past sell by date Lada instead. Start enjoying God's intimacy and peace now rather than later. Why leave it for tomorrow when you can have it today?

A word of caution here however. Do not expect miracles, instant fixes. Life does not pan out like that. Overcoming negative attitudes we have grown comfortable with, would take a lot of time and patience and courage and a lot of self discipline and sacrifice. Those who have been brave enough to quit smoking know what it entails. At the same time do not be discouraged by the enormity of the task. I always say that once man has gone to the moon and back everything is possible. Others have done it before me ... so I can do it. Never forget that any journey, long and arduous as it may seem, always starts with the first step.

The problem sometimes is that we never take the first step ... we never seek the wilderness to be alone with our true selves. We bring a thousand and one excuses not to face the desert, the solitude, not to face ourselves, not to be alone with ourselves. We try to keep at a distance from ourselves lest we look at the mirror and we do not like what we see. Because what we see might bring discomfort to our better self. And the struggle starts ... on the one hand we would rather continue to live the illusion and on the other there is this nagging feeling that we ought to do something about our state of being. We know the mirror won't lie and we resist looking at it, lest we have to shed the coat of our complacency and wash clean in the cold waters of change and wholesomeness.



Temptation ... temptation distorts reality. We are lured towards something that appears so good, so right. Like Adam and Eve and like any teenager who wants his/her independence from parents, thinking that at the end of the journey away from the parental

home, there is the gold where the fairy-like rainbow meets the rock solid earth. Temptation sells the instant fix, masks consequences, concentrates on the immediacy of today because tomorrow never comes, and thrives on credit. And like the tiny toddler we drink the shiny red liquid, the adult stuff left within reach, without realizing the consequences of the instant gratification. It looks so nice, so good. I want to be satisfied now ... the consequences ... what consequences? The mother who kills her



baby in her womb, thinks that her immediate problem is solved, only to wake up the next day and the days thereafter to face the sombre music of guilt and yet more guilt.

Decisions like this are not taken by people without a history. They are not made by someone who wakes up in the morning and says let me abort my baby, or let me abuse my wife, or let me drink and go for a joy ride ... There is always a build up to this. And we must avoid this build up, nip it in the bud, be strong enough, responsible enough to avoid taking the first step that can lead you astray in a big way. And if you are already on this road ... think about it ... is it worth it? Do you think it is worth it for an icon of world golf to cheat on his wife? And would you think for a moment that these things happen all of a sudden, overnight? You go to sleep one night the paragon of virtue and you wake up the next morning a cheat. Life is just not like that.

This being said however, two things have to be said about the misbehaviour of 'those' who are relentlessly hounded by the sleazier sections of the world media. First let us never condemn - let's leave judgments to God who knows the whole story. We and our families all live in glass houses. Secondly the responsibility of talent too, is an issue here. World famous sports persons, politicians, the judiciary, the clergy, are role models. People and especially the young and vulnerable look up to them for guidance of sorts. And this holds true of parents within their own family. But again I cannot stop emphasizing that no one this side of time can honestly throw the first stone ... we are all in the same boat ... sinners in search of forgiveness and redemption.

Forty plus days of Lent are ahead of us. let us not squander yet another opportunity to move closer to the centre of the family of God, where the love is greater and warmer. Some of us have lived on the sidelines for far too long. It's about time now to move closer to the Lord who is close by the hearth of the family home. The Lord never excludes you from a place by his side ... you have excluded yourself; you have chosen to live outside or at the fringes of God's household. The Father God is waiting for you to cut loose what's holding you back and move closer to his side.

Fr Charles

THE SUNDAY LITURGY

Sixth Sunday of the Year

14th February

In today's Gospel we see how Jesus, after choosing his apostles on the mountain, comes down with them and stands on a level place. Like Moses, who descended the mountain to deliver God's word to his people, Jesus descends the mountain to announce his word. In the presence of the crowds, he addresses his disciples. He speaks the four beatitudes and the four woes. Each beatitudes is balanced with a warning.

In the sermon Jesus tells the poor and the hungry, the mournful and the reviled, that the kingdom of God is for them. They have the first invitations to enter the kingdom; they are God's preferred people. Jesus later speaks of the kingdom in terms of a magnificent banquet where the guest list is composed of a human panorama of rejects. The banquet in the kingdom is for the forgotten people, the ones most precious in the eyes of God.

In the upside-down kingdom of Jesus, which has more affinity with the world of the fairy tale than the world of conventional wisdom, it is the eldest son, the one who has everything going for him, the one who inherits the earth's bounty, who is rich and highly regarded, who ends up with empty hands, who ends up excluding himself from the banquet. It is the youngest son, the one who is the essence of weakness, the one with the least going for him, who is forced to rely on any help that comes his way, who eventually inherits the kingdom.

In the Gospel and the fairy tale, it is the reject, the forgotten one, the despised one, who eventually finds rest - like poor Lazarus who, after a lifetime of being ignored, ends up in the bosom of Abraham to live happily ever after.

In his sermon Jesus does not give a blanket support to poverty, weeping, hunger and hurt: these are not desirable states to be sought after, and only a masochist would argue otherwise. As Archbishop Helder Camera commented: "Saints may be found in slums, but we cannot retain slums in order to make them the breeding ground of saints." Destitute poverty is not a condition to be sought after, it is a condition to be avoided; it deprives human beings of their basic dignity. That said, it still remains true that Jesus' preference for the poor has a social basis.

The best commentary on Jesus' sermon is Jesus' own life. Jesus did not live his life *as if* he was blessed by God; he lived out his life in the constant awareness that God did indeed bless him. In the course of that

life he experienced poverty, not only the poverty of deprivation, but the poverty of standing alone against the crowds, the poverty of total reliance on his Father. He experienced hunger, not just the hunger that can be answered by bread, but the hunger that can only be satisfied by doing what is right. He had reason to weep and mourn not only at the loss of a dear friend but at the lost opportunities of his own people. He was no stranger to being held up as a clown for the amusement of all; he knew the experience of rejection, betrayal, and abandonment.



All this was experienced by Jesus in the course of his mission; it wasn't adopted as some precious theological posture. It was the *outcome* of a life dedicated to God.

The beatitudes are not prescriptions for becoming poor or hungry or mournful or afflicted. They are addressed to those who are already involved in committing themselves to the kingdom, and they give instances of what happens when the kingdom arrives in this broken world. They speak of a variety of experiences that people go through as a *result* of getting involved in God's way of doing things. So, there is the promise that God can handle the poverty, the hunger, the tears, the rejection.

The promise is that God handles all these things, lifting his people *out of them*. That is the Good News. God is not committed to keeping his people at the level of being hurt and wounded - if that were true the beatitude would read, "Blessed are you who weep, for you shall weep even more." The vision of the God of the beatitudes is the vision of a generous God, one who reverses the tragedy. "Blessed are you who weep" is the tragedy - "for you shall laugh" is the comedy. And it is the comedy, not the tragedy, which is the promise.

First Sunday in Lent

21st February

The first Sunday of Lent offers us the familiar scene of Jesus thrust into the wilderness on a journey of self discovery. At his baptism in the Jordan, he is proclaimed to be the Son of God. Here in the desolate empty desert Jesus is forced to seek clarity about himself and his life purpose, he needs to understand this new found identity. And so he spends forty days in the inhospitable, forbidden yet majestic setting of the wilderness to figure out what all this being son of God means. Oddly enough the devil helps. Throughout his ministry Jesus would

reveal himself best in relation to others, even if among others, Satan is included. Sometimes you need your enemy to help you define who you are, what you stand for and what is the overriding purpose of your life ... the enemy might be the only one who would press you into a decision.

Few of us want the desert to be our permanent address ... but sooner or later we all find ourselves thrown into some sort of wilderness, thrown not by choice but out of necessitated circumstances when our lives are abruptly interrupted by a sudden loss ... a lost love, a broken relationship, a death in the family, loss of job, financial disaster, wrecked marriage, wayward children ... In the wilderness of life we feel alone, unsupported, abandoned ... abandoned by men and God. And in the throes of our agony we ask: why did God allow this to happen to me, what did I do to deserve this ... why does God do this to his friends? Yet in spite of our recriminations, it is in moments such as these, when we lose control of our own lives, that we turn to God.

Jesus does not seem to go into the desert of his own volition ... instead we are told that he is thrust there by the force of the Spirit to face a series of tests and trials. Temptation ... temptation is about something appealing and fascinating, otherwise it would not be tempting. Admitting to being tempted is an admission to the power of something attractive. In the three temptations that Jesus is faced with, he banishes the tempter by quoting the book of Deuteronomy. Now the very core of this book is the *Shema Israel*, the most important prayer of the pious Jew who recites it every day. It is an exhortation to love the one true God with all one's heart, and soul and might. It is the summary of the Law and a challenge to love God with one's whole being and love God above everything else.

In the first temptation Jesus, who is ravenously hungry, is tempted to turn stone into bread, to play God for his own pleasure and comfort. It sounds just the kind of thing a Son of God might do? But that is not the kind of person Jesus is ... he is not in it for himself ... he is not the magician king, going in for the spectacular and easy option. Jesus at

this juncture is pulled into two directions: satisfying an immediate need or remain hungry to be focused on his mission. And he remains faithful against the odds.

Centuries earlier the Israelites had to face the same temptation. The desert experience for them was also a time of trial ... they were tested to see what was in their heart. Faced with hardship they began to waver . Can you keep up following God's will in face of trial and



need? They were pulled between their trust in God and the rumblings of their empty stomachs. The Promised Land was far away, their hunger was there and then. They were told their hunger had a purpose ... to teach them that "man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Later Jesus will urge us to set our heart on the Kingdom of God ... to ensure that our heart is undivided in loyalty. In spite of this, even later on in his life Jesus was pulled between the direction his family wanted him to take (they thought he was mad and were trying to take him away by force) and the direction his mission was leading him to. But the Kingdom must take priority over everything. God asks for an undivided heart focused on the Kingdom. In the second temptation Jesus is offered dominion over all the world, immediate power – the instant fix. Why go through all this trouble of a life with twelve dim witted followers when you can do it painlessly right away? If you choose God's way it will take you ages and with no guarantee of a positive outcome. Trust in me, forget God! Jesus would face this same temptation later on in his ministry after feeding the five thousand. But this Jesus who is revealing himself to us in the desert – because the temptations of Jesus are a revelation about the identity of Jesus – this Jesus is not hungry for power – instead he reveals himself as the servant king. On yet another occasion the temptation resurfaces – this time it is Peter, his own Peter, the newly head of the apostolic college who is the tempter. Jesus calls no one Satan in his whole ministry but Peter who like Satan in the desert tries to derail him from his mission of suffering servant. And all the while Jesus talks about his suffering-service in the course of his mission, his own disciples, concern is about power sharing. And Jesus who is resolutely moving towards his self sacrifice to accomplish man's reconciliation with God, is abandoned by his very own ... he and the twelve might be on the same road but are worlds apart. At the moment when he needs all the help he can get to keep himself on the right track, his core group of followers try to distract him in the same way Satan tried to derail him at the start of his mission. He was alone then, he is alone now. Sounds familiar ... only that we are never alone in our wilderness because he is with us, isn't he?

In the third temptation Satan suggests that it is possible to love God through the spectacular and the theatrical without enduring pain. The question is whether we are prepared to endure pain, whether we are prepared to risk life and limb for the sake of the Gospel. Many in the long history of the Church did ... Stephen, Maximillian, Maria Goretti, Rita ... Or would you avoid the pain of living frail humanity by falling back on your privilege and connections and use your power to shield



you from the trials and tribulations of ordinary living? Can you still love God when you are prostrate in the garden of Gethsemane pleading God to deliver you from evil? Can you remain enamoured to God even as you are screaming out in pain, baffled and confused as to why God has all but abandoned you? The challenge here is not to become self-obsessed even in the midst of pain and hurt, but retain the capacity to look

outwards beyond our own afflictions and tribulations, all the while noticing the giftedness of the whole picture.

Satan will tempt us too ... tempt us to give up ... to give up on God, on community, on togetherness ... He will question our ability to remain faithful to God through suffering and trial, through thick and thin, in good times and in bad.

Christ is one with us because he too felt the allure of the immediate fix, the charm of the instant satisfaction. Because he was tempted we do not think less of him. We too are tempted; we too feel the fascination of things and persons, the reliance on the immediate, of the here and now. Indeed we are not as strong as Christ, we fail ... like Peter we succumb to temptation ... but let this not be the last word. Let the word of God, let the forgiveness of God have the last word.

Like Jesus, during these forty days, we come face to face with the gray areas of our lives, shady areas that have been dogging us throughout our life ... vulnerable areas we need to sort and straighten out. We do not stand powerless to influence our future. The spirit of God can lead us out of our wilderness and give us courage and strength to shape our lives anew.

Second Sunday in Lent

28th February

Transfiguration is a wide theme in the Gospel and it is one of the principal marks in St Luke's gospel. Just recall the scene when John from prison sends his disciples to enquire about Jesus. What do they report back: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. These are all people who in one way or another are disfigured and Jesus transfigures them into something new so that their best selves are freshly revealed. Transfiguration is the focus of Jesus' mission.

Throughout his ministry Jesus transfigures people and one day he is transfigured by his Father who loves him dearly.

Let's play back a little ... we are in Nazareth, Jesus' home town and there on the top of the hill he is violently rejected. Now we pan on to

another hilltop where the townspeople's act of rejection is reversed through the loving acceptance by God. In Nazareth he undergoes an experience of disfigurement, on Tabor an experience of transfiguration. The ugly scenes of Nazareth are juxtaposed with an experience of transfiguration where his name is called with tenderness and love. And this experience radically changes Jesus. While Nazareth says no, Tabor says yes, while Nazareth makes Jesus run away, Tabor fills him with self confidence and courage and motivation to walk resolutely towards Jerusalem and the completion of his mission. As it stands in the geography of things, Tabor looks down on Nazareth ... acceptance dominates over rejection, love outflanks disapproval.

Before the Tabor experience Jesus faces two challenges. First there is mounting violent opposition to his mission. And Jesus has to decide: should I obey the constituted religious authority or the voice within me? The inner voice will lead him to certain death, a violent death which no one in his senses would embrace without due cause. The authorities naturally want to preserve the *status quo*, they don't want to rock the boat. On the other hand Jesus is encouraging people to go to him ... "Come to me all you who ..." he even dismisses the standing authority as oppressive and pastorally useless if not outright corrupt. Naturally he is heading for conflict and opposition. Caiaphas, out of concern for the faithful Jews, decides that Jesus must be eliminated.

The second challenge Jesus faces is a question of identity. He risks asking those around him to give him the result of an opinion poll about him. And the answer Jesus gets might not have excited him much. You are one of the prophets of old, he is told ... one in a long line of holy men who came and failed in their mission given where we are today ... just another one who is having a go at it. And these ambiguous answers must have driven Jesus up the mountain to pray and talk with God, to seek advice and some form of reassurance about his identity and the nature of his mission. You see Jesus is fully human ... as yet it seems he is not sure of his identity as the Son of God. However, given the dangerous path Jesus elected to walk, and the radical choices he made, he must have had a strong sense of his identity and what his mission involved. But, however deeply you understand your own identity and life direction, it is difficult to hold to that sense of yourself, when it is not recognized or shared by others. And for Jesus, validation comes with the transfiguration.

So Jesus goes up the mountain to pray, just to pray. In the course of his prayer he visibly changes, he becomes radiant and aglow. We figure out what was the content of Jesus' prayer when we get to know the answer he receives for his prayer. We also get to know what had

driven him to pray in the first place. And the evangelists tell us about the significance of this prayer in Jesus' life. They mention Moses and Elijah who speak not only to Jesus but also to us. They announce that Jesus' journey to Jerusalem which will lead to his death would be the fulfilment of his mission not its cancellation. The religious authorities thought that by executing Jesus they were cancelling his mission. Instead they were instruments in its accomplishment. Jesus mission and death are not contradictory forces - on the contrary, death is the accomplishment of his mission. Death does not have the final word. His mission will continue through his death. Indeed in the words of the High Priest one man must die so that many are saved.



The voices of Moses and Elijah focus on the direction of Jesus life. The Father's voice focuses on the identity of Jesus. And these two voices indicate the answer to Jesus' prayer and address the two inner conflicts he is facing: how can his mission be accomplished when his death is being planned and who he is exactly. The answer to the first is that his journey to death constitutes the fulfilment of his mission and the answer to the second is that he is the Son of God, the chosen one. And in the clarity of those answers Jesus' face becomes radiant and aglow. Something must have been revealed that had never been disclosed before. This prayer experience helps Jesus to take the road to Jerusalem. On Tabor Jesus gets his answer to: "Who do you say I am?" Someone knows who he is and that someone is none other than God the Father.

On Tabor Jesus is transfigured, on Golgotha he is transfigured. But disfiguration does not have the final word. There will be another transfiguration at the foot of the hill of the skull.

Coming down from Tabor Jesus performs yet another transfiguration on a transfigured boy – another son is transfigured.

Jesus now speaks to his disciples about his imminent death and suffering. But they do not understand because they are not privy yet to what he knows. It would only later that their eyes are opened, after the resurrection, after they receive the Holy Spirit.

So there is a connection between what happened on Tabor and his decision to face the trials and tribulations that would meet him in Jerusalem. Now he understands, that being who he is, he must face the sombre music. He is ascertained about his identity and his destiny – the two being linked together will lead to a violent death. Jesus after the

reassurances he gets on Tabor is able to face Jerusalem better once he knows that there is a purpose to the violence he would be facing and the fact that he would not be making the journey alone but with the support of God.

As I reflect on the transfiguration of Jesus, I realize that I too must during this Lent find time to pray and talk to God that he, in his own good time will reveal to me my true identity and show me, given who I am and the gifts he has given me, what he is expecting from me, his beloved son whose name he has written on the palm of his hands. I have to give space to God during this season of Lent so that his answers would transfigure me to be the son he has created me to be, with the hope that one day I would hear him acknowledging me too as the son in whom he is well pleased.

But what does it take to transfigure me so as to look radiant and aglow exuding this new life I am called to exude? What would have to happen to bring about this change in me? What needs to be treated ... something wrong in my life might need to be seen to ... what is this something? Perhaps some distortion in my personality that needs to be treated or disorientation in my life that needs to be redirected.

On the other side of the coin as I mull over the transfigurations wrought by Jesus I realize that that transfiguration is ongoing in the new order of things brought about by Jesus. But it can only be brought about through Jesus current agents, the likes of you and me. We are God's agents of transfiguration when we attend to people and to the world around us. Unfortunately we can be agents of another master whenever we exclude and ignore and sideline people, when we abuse the order of creation so perfectly put in motion by the creator of 'sea and sky'. There are queues of distorted people longing to be attended to, to be transformed by our mercy and kindness ... people in Haiti in particular, at this moment in time. You see, saints are people who paid attention to the plight of distorted people ... the blessed are commended by Jesus in the gospel for their actions and not just for their attitudes, for what they did and not for what they thought and just prayed for from the cosiness of their prayer corner.

Third Sunday in Lent

7th March

The schoolteacher takes his class out of the classroom and walks them down to the imposing entrance hall of the famous old school. There he gathers his students around the photographs of students from years gone by — students who are by now long since in their graves. He gets the students to lean in to listen to what the boys in these old photos might have to say to his current students, who have their whole lives

before them. “Can’t you hear what they’re saying to you?” the teacher whispers. “They’re saying ‘Carpe diem’. Seize the day, boys, seize the day.” That powerful scene from the film *Dead Poets’ Society* encapsulates that piece of ancient wisdom: Act now. Life is short, don’t waste it. Use the opportunity life offers to you today. Who knows what tomorrow might bring? Grasp the moment. Seize the day.

Today’s readings all focus on that piece of wisdom. But curiously, in the first reading, it is the Lord himself who seems to be seizing the day. He has heard the sighs and wailing of his people. “I have seen ... I have heard ... I am well aware of their sufferings,” God tells Moses. And so the Lord will seize the day, he is going to act on behalf of his people: “I mean to deliver them ... and bring them ... to a land ... where milk and honey flow.” From the human point of view, it is almost as if the Lord has woken from slumber, heard the cries of his people, remembered who he is: “I Am who I Am ... the God of your fathers”; the Lord who has made a covenant of love with his people. And now God is going to act on that covenant.

Jesus has a very strong sense of God acting now — that the day has come. Jesus knows that, through him, God is acting to bring that covenant of love to its fulfilment. Through Christ’s passion, death and resurrection, God is about to act to set all people free. And because the kingdom of God is so close — because God is acting in such a dramatic way in the person of Jesus — time is short. People have to make a choice, they have to seize the day, make a decision. In this curious passage, Jesus refers to some topical tragedies — the people killed in an accident, the Galileans who suffered such a terrible fate at the hand of the Romans — and Jesus warns people not to think that these victims did anything wrong. Rather, Jesus advises that what happened to them should be a warning: there is a far worse fate going to overtake anyone who refuses to repent.

What is at stake is eternal life. This passage concludes a whole series of warnings in which Jesus invites people to respond with urgency to his call. He tells them: “Seek God’s kingdom ... Let your hearts be girded and your lamps burning ... Be ready for the master to return ... Read the signs of the times ... Settle with your accuser beforehand, lest you end up in prison.” There is an urgent need to repent, Jesus tells his audience. Seize the day, time is short, act now to be saved.

Seize the day. Repent. Lent is the time for us to respond to that urgent appeal of



Christ. Such repentance is not simply a one-off event, but is a way of life, a daily turning of the whole of our lives to the Lord, who alone can lead us to the promised land of eternal life. Paul reminds the Corinthians to act in ways that are fitting for a repentant people. He recalls that even though the people of Israel were freed from Egypt — indeed, had a kind of baptism and spiritual communion with Christ — nevertheless, their continued disobedience meant that they perished in the wilderness: only their descendants reached the promised land.

The warning is clear: though we Christians are baptised and eat the spiritual food and drink which is Christ, we must be careful not to fall. True repentance means leading a life that reflects that communion with God. Remember the fig tree: if it fails to bear fruit, it will be cut down, removed from the vineyard, which is the ancient symbol of the promised land. In this season of grace, God is acting. We too should act now to seize the day, by turning back to God who leads us to the fullness of life.

Fourth Sunday in Lent

14th March

Jesus' parables have been described as heavenly stories with an earthly meaning or in the words of PG Wodehouse 'stories which sound at first like a pleasant yarn but keep something up their sleeves which suddenly pops out and knocks you flat.' These stories are timeless. Their message and challenge are for now as much as they were for the people who first heard them. They deal with human existence, with men and women, their joys and sorrows, hopes and disappointments, successes and failures. Human existence remains the same though language changes with the passage of time. When we hear these timeless stories we can easily say: 'This concerns me'.

Some of the parables of Jesus have a way of breaking the shackles of time and speaking their word of God to every age. One parable of Jesus which escaped the captivity of time and inspired artists like Rembrandt and composers like Debussy is the story of the two sons or as some have called it, 'The Story of the Waiting Father'. The prodigal son is still with us. He gripes against parental authority or the establishment as he sees it. He wants to get away from it all and have his fling, he wants to go and sow his wild oats. The elder son is the conventional Christian wrapped up in a world of self-righteousness. T W Manson said the younger son wanted an overdraft from his father, the older wanted to open a deposit account and of the two the latter's is the greater sin. The abiding truth in the story is the kindness of God, the Father, waiting to welcome home the prodigal and to say to the stay-at-home Christian: 'Son you are always with me and all that is mine is yours'. There are a few stories which might help illustrate how this parable can be applied to our contemporary situation. Take the story of the modern

prodigal son who turned up in the 'far country' of a neighbouring parish. The parish priest advised him to go back home and his father would kill the fatted calf for him. The prodigal did so and some months later he met the priest again who asked him hopefully, 'Well, and did your father kill the fatted calf for you?' 'No,' came the rueful reply, 'but he nearly killed the prodigal son!' This story raises the question: Is this in fact how earthly fathers always welcome home their returning prodigals?

There is a version of the parable appropriately titled: *The Parable of the Prodigal Son as Jesus didn't tell it*. Here it is: 'And he arose and set out for his home, and when at last he arrived at the door, he banged and there was no response. He stood there in his piteous rags and hunger for a while, and then he knocked again and again a third time; and finally a window opened and his father looked out and said: "Oh, it's you! You're spent up, I suppose. You look a nice beauty. What have you come home for? You've had your share of everything. You know where to come when you're hungry ..." And he said, "Father, I have sinned against Heaven and in thy sight ..." But his father banged the window and left him for a while on the doorstep. Presently his father opened the door and said, "You're an utter disgrace to me and all your relatives. I'm ashamed of you, utterly ashamed. But I'm your parent, and I've thought it out, and I'm prepared to put you on probation for three months, and if, at the end of three months I can find no fault in you, well, perhaps I'll have it in my heart to give you another start!"' The point is that the story as Jesus *did* tell it is larger than life. The father in the parable is not just an ordinary human father but an extraordinary father whose extravagant love knows no bounds. God keeps loving us come what may. And he wants us to love each other come what may. That's a tall order ... but they'll know that you're Christians by your love ... forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass us.

Some years ago the Dominican Scripture Scholar, Barnabas Ahearn, was in Ireland to give an unusual retreat, unusual in the sense that all the participants were members of the Irish hierarchy. Predictably his talks were all solidly based on Scripture. His modern day presentation of the parable of the Prodigal Son was impressive. He set it in the context of a bishop's relationship with one of his wayward priests and it went as follows: 'Supposing, bishop,' he said, 'one of your priests creates one hell of a scandal in the diocese; he absconds with diocesan funds and takes himself off to Paris where he lives it up with wine, women ... the lot! Then when he's down in his luck, and like the prodigal he comes to his senses and says: "I will arise and go back to Ireland to my father" ... and you, bishop, are the only father he's got. What do you do when he comes back to you and tells you that he has sinned against Heaven and

against you? You run down the steps of the Archbishoppal palace to meet him, throw your arms around him and then you rent the local hotel and invite all the priests of the diocese to a welcome home dinner! And then', says he, noting the amused reaction of their lordships, 'you cap it all by making him your second in command, your vicar general!'

Sr Briega McKenna tells an extraordinary story about a priest in somewhat similar circumstances. Once in the course of a priests' retreat which she was conducting a priest came to her for advice. As she prayed with him she had a vision of Christ kneeling on a rugged road holding the priest's hands and saying to him, 'Robert, forgive yourself, I have forgiven you. Come back to me. Remember the story of the prodigal son. That was you. I'm waiting for you to come back to me. Forgive yourself and return to me again.' When she told him that the Lord had forgiven him he broke down and told her his story. He had been the centre of a great scandal which forced him to leave his parish. After a while he acknowledged his mistake but despaired of forgiveness and the pardon of his bishop. Then one day he read the story of the prodigal son and got the courage to go to his bishop. Here is how he tells the story. 'The bishop was sitting at his desk, he got up and came around the desk and took me in his arms. He said like a father to a son, "Robert, I'll take you back. Jesus has forgiven you, and so do I."'

This man like the prodigal son came to his senses and returned to the Lord in repentance. He also experienced the tenderness and fatherhood of his bishop. We need to pray that every priest and bishop and each one of us will have the heart of a father and will discern how to respond in love in any situation.

Forgiveness ... forgiveness is a decision taken in favour of the other person over and against his past. It is a decision taken in favour of your husband/wife over and against whatever he/she has just done to you. And remember: the measure of your love for your husband/wife is the sum total of how capable you are of forgiving past and not so past mistakes. We are instruments of God's love and forgiveness. We are called to mirror God's quality of forgiveness: forgive always, without reservation, come what may. Forgiveness does not come either easily or cheaply ... that's why we need God's help to be able to forgive and love in difficult and testing times. And this help is readily available to us in sacraments and prayer.



Fifth Sunday in Lent

21st March

It amazes me how the Gospel writers, are able to paint such a complete scene in just a few words. We refer to today's Gospel story as the Woman Caught in Adultery. We really don't know who this woman was. I guess the only thing that matters is that the woman who, stood before Jesus was a sinner. She was also terrified and humiliated. She was terrified because the Scribes and the Pharisees wanted to kill her. She was humiliated because her private sin or sins had now become public knowledge. They made her stand right there in the middle of the crowd. Embarrassed and disgraced, maybe she thought that she would be better off dead.

That is what sin does to people who still have a conscience. When we do something wrong, we wish we were dead.

And unfortunately many people just give up. They say, "I've destroyed myself, why bother with changing? I'm going to hell, anyway." People who have destroyed their marriages with affairs, their lives with substance abuse or gambling or crime, will hear the voice saying that there is no use trying to change. That is the voice of despair. That is the voice that led Judas to hang himself. That is the voice that rejects the presence of the compassionate Lord - a healer and forgiver. It takes humility to recognize our human frailty and seek forgiveness and healing strength from God. Judas did not have this humility and gave in to the forces of evil. Peter was humble enough to seek forgiveness. The adulteress didn't even have the chance to seek forgiveness. But Jesus in his mercy offers forgiveness even before we are capable of asking for it. That is how much he loves us his children. Atheistic existential philosophers like Sartre, saw suicide as the only reasonable response to life. They were overwhelmed by sin. They let sin beat them. But the Christian existentialists like Gabriel Marcel recognized that Christ gives meaning to life and embraced him as the solution to their problems.

Today's Gospel could also be called the story of the *Forgiving Compassionate Lord*. When the woman was dragged before Jesus, she may have thought that she was alone in a world that was humiliating her and wanted her dead. But soon she received an experience of God's love and compassion. And she realized that she was not alone. The one who would be forsaken by all except that very small group who stood at the foot of the cross, would not abandon this woman. And she was



transformed, transformed from a sinner into a follower of the Lord.

Jesus will not abandon us. He loves us too much to leave us to our own devices. He continually prods us within our consciences and with the grace of the sacraments, the encouragement of others and the moral demands of our society. The compassionate, loving Lord is more concerned with each of us as individuals than with the results of our sins or the results of our achievements for that matter. We just have to recognize our sins and do our best to fight off sin in the future. That's all he wants for us: to be cleansed, to be absolved.

The story of today's Gospel could also be called the *Story of the People holding Stones*. The scribes and Pharisees had righteous anger in full grasp. They had the Law of Moses on their side. They had stones they were ready to throw at the woman. They had everything and everyone on their side. They had everything except love. They had everyone except God the father of us all sinners and righteous alike. Like the elder brother of the parable of the Prodigal Son, their anger resulted in their excluding themselves from the banquet of the father, or, in this case, the presence of the Lord. They walked away rather than drop their stones and remain before love incarnate. Like them, we have often let our anger cut us off from the presence of the Lord. We had good reasons to be upset, we claim. We can justify our anger. We have been hurt. This can all be true. But unless we let go of those stones that we are holding us, that accusing finger, that anger, that hatred, we cannot stand before our loving, compassionate Lord. We have to let go and let God take control. The scribes and the Pharisees refused to do this and walked away unrepentant and unforgiven. But what about us? Is our anger more important than the presence of the loving Christ?

Jesus is the solution to the problem of life. He is the one who will never abandon us. And his presence in our lives is infinitely more important than the stones we hold, stones of anger and hatred, stones that hold us back and weigh us down, hold us back from the Lord of life.

Palm Sunday

28th March

They say that everyone loves a parade. We've probably all enjoyed watching some kind of parade make its way through the streets, celebrating a special occasion. When it comes to parades, nothing succeeds like excess: large floats, loud music, dressed-up people and outlandish characters, all competing for our attention. The streets become the scene for a movable feast and with all the drama it becomes difficult for the passers-by to pass by a parade.

Of course, the whole point of a parade or a demonstration is to grab people's attention and hold it for as long as possible. The appeal is big

and loud - making parades unknown for their subtlety. Often the parade is a demonstration to publicise people's concern. Sometimes, we watch unmoved; sometimes, we might be moved to join in. Parades and demonstration always try to *engage* the onlooker to be more than an onlooker and be moved to action. That is why parades are always public: they are always aimed beyond themselves.

But not everyone loves a parade. As Will Rogers proclaimed in 1924: "Parades should be classed as a nuisance and participants should be subject to a term in prison. They stop more work, inconvenience more people, stop more traffic, cause more accidents, entail more expense, and commit and cause hundreds of misdemeanours." Demonstrations make some people nervous, particularly those people in authority who might stand to lose if the parade is successful. And in today's Gospel we have a parade that makes some people very nervous.

In today's liturgy we recall Jesus' parade and entrance into Jerusalem. In the Gospel Luke shows Jesus in control of events as he organises his own parade to the place where he has an appointment with death. Throughout his ministry Jesus had to face the prospect of Jerusalem which killed the prophets of old; now he has to face the reality as the city confronts him. But Jesus faces Jerusalem with style. So, it is on with the parade!

The disciples are told to go and fetch the required colt, and when they bring it back they cover its back with some of their clothes for a makeshift saddle. The fact that no one has ever sat on this colt shows how Jesus' presence is something completely new in history. As the procession moves on, the people throw their cloaks on the ground - an early version of putting out the red carpet to welcome important people.

As the parade gets under way the disciples get into the spirit of things by praising God at the top of their voices for what he has accomplished in Jesus. The disciples organise an uproar of prayer, and a charismatic jamboree becomes an essential part of this parade. But not everyone



loves a parade, and there are onlookers who remain unmoved by what is happening. The Pharisees suggest volume control, probably because this demonstration has messianic overtones. Is Jesus the liberator they've been waiting for?

Jesus does not think too much of the Pharisees' suggestion: he is in no mood for controlled enthusiasm. This is not the time for silence. The time for silence will come later. For the moment, the parade is on with all its loud rejoicing.

The parade leads Jesus, as it leads us in today's liturgy, into the passion - the time of Jesus' ultimate trial and death. Jesus has a rough time ahead of him. The last supper when his disciples choose to have a seminar on which of them is the greatest. The talk about betrayal as if it is one man's problem. His chosen friends snoring through his loneliness and suffering. Being arrested by a friend's kiss. Being disowned three times by the one you've chosen to rely on most.

The time of being kicked around like a political football. Being flogged to placate a politician's conscience. Being handed over to a mob because of political cowardice. Making the way of the cross without the disciples. All the time being watched and stared at. Exercising a talent for forgiveness right up to the end. Taking a last breath when all your friends are at a safe distance. The last time for being. Death.

The parade which began outside Jerusalem leads to the cross as we hear in the reading of the passion. In the passion we will hear of another parade where the mood is different and the absences more noticeable.

Can we join the parade that Jesus began? We know where it is leading. Are we onlookers watching unmoved? Does it matter to us enough to join the parade? Today the Church asks us to be the parade, to proclaim that it *matters* what happens to him. We will not leave it to the stones to cry out. We demonstrate our love of Jesus; we demonstrate our care and our thanks that *we mattered so much to him that he faced Jerusalem*. So, we cancel the advice of the Pharisees and go public on our love of Jesus. So, let our parade begin!

Prayer for Lent

Good and loving God,
each year you give us this season of Lent
to turn our hearts and minds back to you.
May the prayer we offer during this season
draw us closer to you in love
as we seek forgiveness for our sins.
May our fasting help us see
that even as this world is a gift from you
it is still passing away and will not endure.
May our almsgiving honour you
as we care for our brothers and sisters
whose need is great and whose hope is in you.
Help us in this holy season to be reconciled
with you and with any whom we have harmed
so that we may celebrate an Easter of eternal joy.
Amen.



Maundy Thursday



As the old woman shuffled along the sidewalk, she complained to her companion, "When your feet hurt, you hurt all over! You can't stand; you can't walk, and you can't think about anything else but finding a place to sit down." Perhaps Jesus had a sense of what that kind of discomfort was like.

When we are cleaned and refreshed, we can put our best foot forward in life. In symbolic fashion Jesus offered this gift to his disciples. Once he convinced them to let him minister to them, he challenged them to do the same for the people they would meet along the way. He asked them to see that giving people a fresh start through compassionate love, was the most important service they could render.

How many of us want to get down to the level of our neighbour's feet? How many of us can acknowledge that we need someone else's help to refresh ourselves? As we hold the foot of our neighbour to our heart, can we embrace the arches of support that bind us together and kiss the calloused heels of hope that buffer us through all the traumas of life? In the sacred action of washing can we consecrate the feet of our neighbour to the service of the Dancer?

Prayer: My feet are dragging today, Lord, but my neighbours can't even walk. Help me to wash away their pain and lighten their step. May they come to know you through my words and actions.

Good Friday

The Backstreet Boys sing in a hit song, "Show me the meaning of being lonely." Some situations in life lead us into loneliness, and we need to be able to embrace those not-so-pleasant moments. Sometimes, in order to deepen our trust in God, we need to experience abandonment, the sense that God is missing from our hearts. It is not an easy place to dwell. It is the starkest part of the desert.

Dancing to Calvary is not for the faint-hearted. Physical pain, ridicule, and rejection are all painful dance partners, but when the beacon of love that has sustained us through the whole journey seems to have gone out, the journey is much more difficult. In this moment of abandonment Jesus made the ultimate leap of faith and kept his eyes focused on the will of God. He did not struggle against it or try to escape it. According to the old Shaker hymn, *Lord of the Dance*, Jesus "danced on a Friday



when the sky turned black. It's hard to dance with the devil on your back." Indeed, it was almost impossible for Jesus, but because he was

able to dance up that hill, we know salvation today. Jesus, the forsaken one, was willing to carry our infirmities upon his shoulders.

Can we understand the fact that Jesus is willing to die for us again today? For our sins, our failings, for our redemption the Lamb is willing to lay down his life. If all the people on the planet disappeared and the 'we' became only 'me', I do know in my heart that he would still embrace the cross and die?

Prayer: I really cannot comprehend that you, the Son of God, would die for my soul, but I do believe that you would. In the times when my belief is shaken to the core, may my eyes remain fixed on you.

Holy Saturday

It is quiet around the gravesite. In the lives of those of us who saw Jesus as the Messiah, everything has come to a crashing halt. After the frenzied activities of the trial and the climax of death upon a tree, the world is quiet. Birds sing, insects buzz, and the winds still blow, but in the hollowed out spaces of our hearts all is quiet. Everything has been poured out from our spirits in this final dance of death.

Yet quiet is good. After the last dance on Calvary, we need the quiet, we need the silence. We can hear what we could not hear with all the blaring music. In a desert that seems to go on forever, we come to a stop. Today we look back at all the dancing we have done these past forty days. We have had some fine times, haven't we? We have seen what we have never seen before, heard what can only be called 'the truth', and we have learned to step gracefully into life and death. But now that it's over, was it really worth it?



How long have we been here now? Six hours, twelve hours, twenty-four, thirty-six? How does one keep track of time in this void? Let it go! It is finished. So what are we waiting for? It's a little foolish trying to hear music in the cave of death, but perhaps a part of us is doing just that. How can we ever expect to pick up a beat buried in this grief and pain? Forget it, forget him! Not yet? Let's wait a little while longer? Wait ... do I hear what I think I hear?

Prayer: Without the complete and utter silence of this Holy Saturday, I would be unable to pick up the first tiny sounds of the resurrection. Jesus, help me quiet my mind today so I might discover the joy of your resurrection.

Stories

Mary

I was walking to church, deeply involved in my own thoughts, when I saw her. She had arrived out of nowhere, dragging a camel's hair coat behind, one sleeve on, the other off. Her faithful dog trotted patiently at her side, looking as confused as she. Plaintively she asked me, "Are you a priest?"

She really didn't care if I was or was not. All she wanted was a listening ear, a care-filled human person to pay her heed. Her lucid sentences were few. Her language unintelligible except, perhaps, to herself. She struggled to bring clarity into comprehensible words, but what emerged was an incoherent jumble of consonants. She could not control her words; they eluded her grasp. She was an intelligent woman who had lost possession of her ability to speak clearly.

When I asked her name, she fumbled with the pockets of her coat. Reaching into their depths, she retrieved a small packet of papers bound together with a heavy elastic band. "Here," she said. "This is who I am." I felt sorrow at the poverty displayed before me, and shuddered to think that someone's identity could be bound up into a tiny bundle of creased, tattered papers. Here was a woman whose very name had escaped her. Somewhere in the maze of indifference, medication, loneliness, anxiety, or troubled days and fearful nights, she had lost her name. All she had left was a packet of papers, frayed at the edges and worn with care.

Scraps of paid bills mingled with a driver's license, a car registration, a torn sheet from an address book, a twenty-euro note, and a key for a safety deposit box. I looked through the papers until I found a name. "You are Mary," I said. "Yes, yes," she agreed. "Mary. I am Mary. My dog is a good dog. She just looks at me and stays with me."

Knowledge of her name brought a startling clarity into Mary's speech. For a few moments, she could speak without lapsing into incoherency, and in those moments, she told me that she needed water - not for herself, but for her dog.

Looking around for an outside tap and discovering one nearby, she turned it on. Cupping her hands, she filled them with water for her thirsty dog. As he drank, she was satisfied. Then, scooping him up into her arms, she sat down on a nearby bench. Tenderly, she stroked her dog. Each time her hand passed over his body, her frenzy lessened.

I decided to call social services, who would take her to the polyclinic for the help she sought and needed so desperately. When I told Mary, she agreed. Peacefully and passively, Mary surrendered her weakness to another's strength.

As we waited for the nurse, Mary told bits and pieces of her story. Ever since her husband had died, perhaps months or years ago - the event had faded into a timeless blur for her - Mary had been left to wander alone through the paths of her own mind. She had contemplated suicide. "I know I'm going to die anyway," she said. As she became more ill, she asked her neighbours for help and understanding, but they did not care. Mary then turned to her family, but heard only words of rejection: "You're crazy. We never want to see you again."

After a while, the nurse arrived. Mary reached out her trembling hand to me one more time. I sensed that she was hoping that this time someone would grasp her hand with tenderness. Mary's hope was in a God who had the flesh of humanity, just as she did.

My encounter with Mary left me happy, though not with the giggling, bubbly laughter that accompanies a good joke or a fun time with friends. I was blessedly happy. Through Mary I was seeing the poor and learning that the reign of God is theirs. I was being asked to accompany one who was hungry so that I could help her be filled. I was in the presence of one who wept, knowing that laughter was her hidden gift. I was in the company of one who was hated, ostracized, and insulted because of her demands on our Christianity.

On that day, I rejoiced and exulted with Mary. I knew that her reward would be great in heaven. I also began to discover that heaven is grasped on this earth. Heaven is gleaned in companionship with those who stumble into our paths bringing gifts we fear to unwrap, yet dare not leave untouched. Heaven is understood in partnership with all who entrust us with the tattered and torn bits and pieces of their life, who seek only to be found and given a name.

Walking to church that day, I was deeply involved in my thoughts, my own personal needs. Self absorbed, I was unaware, unsuspecting, and unseeing - until Mary found me and I found God.

A Smart Puppy

A man went on a safari in Africa and took his faithful pet dachshund along for company. One day, the dachshund starts chasing butterflies around the camp and before long realizes that he is lost in the bush.

As he wanders around the wilds searching for the camp, he suddenly notices a leopard heading rapidly in his direction, with the obvious intention of having him for lunch. Alarmed, the dachshund thinks, *Now I'm really in trouble!* Then he notices some bones on the ground close by, and immediately settles down to chew on



them with his back to the approaching feline lurking with intent. Just as the leopard is about to leap, the dachshund exclaims loudly, "Boy, that was one delicious leopard! I wonder if there are any more around here?" Hearing this, the leopard halts his attack in mid-stride, overcome by fear of the unfamiliar and deceptively small dog. Slinking away, the leopard climbs up a tree and sighs in relief. "Whew! That was close! That dog nearly had me."

Meanwhile, a monkey, who had been watching the whole scene from the safe distance of a nearby tree, realizes the ruse and decides he can put this knowledge to good use, trading it for protection from the leopard. He hurries off, but the dachshund sees him heading after the leopard with great speed and figures that something must be up.

Soon the monkey catches up with the leopard, spills the beans, and strikes a deal for himself with the leopard. The leopard is furious at being made a fool of and says, "Here, monkey, hop on my back and see what's going to happen to that conniving canine!" Soon the dachshund sees the leopard coming with the monkey on his back and thinks *"What am I going to do now?"*

But instead of running, the dog sits down with his back to his attackers, pretending he hasn't seen them yet ... and, just when they get close enough to hear, the dachshund says, *"Where's that darn monkey? I sent him off half an hour ago to bring me another leopard!"*

The Secret of Success

A man and woman had been married for more than 65 years and talked about almost everything except the shoebox the old woman kept in her closet that she cautioned her husband never to ask about. He respected her wishes, but one day the wife got very sick and the doctor said she would not recover. In sorting out their affairs, the little old man took down the shoebox and took it to his wife's bedside. She agreed that it was time he knew what was in it. When he opened it, he found two crocheted dolls and a stack of money.

"When we were to be married," his wife explained, "my grandmother told me the secret of a happy marriage was to never argue. She told me that if I ever got angry with you, I should just keep quiet and crochet a doll."

The husband was so moved, he had to fight back tears. Only two precious dolls were in the box. He almost burst with happiness.

"Honey," he said, "that explains the two dolls, but what about all of this money? Where did it come from?"

"Oh," she said, "that's the money I made from selling all the other dolls!"



The Parish

First Holy Communion

It will take place
at the Seminary Chapel
in Tal-Virtu` in Rabat on
Sunday 30th May at 10 am.

Parish Christmas Lunch

The Christmas lunch this year was again a big success. It is a pity we could not take in more than 40 guests

Marriage Preparation

32 couples have attended the autumn - winter marriage preparation course at the Millennium Chapel. The next session will take place in the autumn.

The Annual Appeal



A total of €6834 has been received from 169 parishioners. This is about €1270 more than last year. Many many thanks to all those who sent in their contribution.

Lenten Retreat

The Lenten retreat will take place on Saturday 13th March between 10am and 4pm. Please phone Franz (21444287) or Maria (2179710051) to book. The preacher will be the Irish Salesian Fr Michael Ross.



Two marble slabs are being put up above the Parish graves in Vittoriosa Cemetery. There is already one marble slab in the middle with a few names on it. The two new ones will be put on either side of it. The slabs are ready and we are in the process of organizing the list of names that will go on them. The names of the person buried will be written in bronze lettering together with year of birth and death. Hopefully this will make do away with the little marble slabs that are clattering the place at the moment. Please come back to me if you have any queries. It is sad to see some very close parishioners buried in so called common plots while they could be laid to rest with some of their closest friends in the Parish graves. Please let your relatives know about what is available once the Lord calls you for promotion to heavenly bliss.

This and That ...

St Patrick's Day blessing

*I wish you not a path devoid of clouds,
Nor a life on a bed of roses.
Nor that you should never feel pain.
My wish for you is:
That you might be brave in times
of trial, when others lay crosses
upon your shoulders,
When mountains must be climbed
and chasms crossed,
When hope scarce shines through.
When every gift God gave you
might grow along with you,
And let you give the gift of joy to
all who care for you.
That you might always have a
friend who is worth that name,
Who will defy the storms of life by
your side.
That in every hour of joy and pain,
you may be close to God."*

Believe while others are doubting.
Work while others are wishing.
Save while others are wasting.
Listen while others are talking.
Smile while others are frowning.
Commend while others are criticizing.
Persist while others are quitting.

I am not what I ought to be.
I am not what I want to be.
I am not what I hope to be.
But still, I am not what I used to be.
And by the grace of God,
I am what I am.

—John Newton (1807)

"The greatest thing is to be found at one's post as a child of God, living each day as though it were your last, but planning as though our world might last a hundred years."

C.S. Lewis

"The preaching of St Francis of Assisi was effective because he lived the Word. He pondered the Word; he nurtured the Word; he became the embodiment of the Word. And thus when he proclaimed the Word, people saw the Word come to life."

Roch Niemier, OFM

"'Unforgiveness' is like a scratch on an old record. The song never goes on to the end. It keeps the beautiful music yet to be released unheard, and all that resounds are the same old three or four chords again and again and again."

Katherine Walden

"Everyone has inside of them a piece of good news. The good news is that you don't know how great you can be! How much you can love! What you can accomplish! And what your potential is." *Anne Frank*

Fast from gossip;
Feast on the Gospels.
 Fast from junk foods;
Feast on the Bread of Life.
 Fast from bad news;
Feast on "The Good News."
 Fast from darkness;
Feast on the Light.
 Fast from the secular;
Feast on the sacred.
 Fast from despair;
Feast on hope.
 Fast from revenge;
Feast on forgiveness.
 Fast from tears of sorrow;
Feast on tears of joy.
 Fast from getting;
Feast on giving.
 Fast from complexities;
Feast on simplicities.
 Fast from horror;
Feast on humor.
 Fast from listlessness;
feast on laughter.



Cool it with spiritual joy, brother!

So They Say ...

When enthusiasm is inspired by reason, controlled by caution, sound in theory, practical in application, reflects confidence, spreads good cheer, raises morale, inspires associates, arouses loyalty, and laughs at adversity, it is beyond price."

Coleman Cox

All worthwhile people have good thoughts, good ideas, and good intentions, but precious few of them ever translate those into action.

John Hancock Fields

Humour is also a way of saying something serious.

T.S. Eliot

Happiness consists more in small conveniences or pleasures that occur every day than in great pieces of good fortune that happen but seldom.

Benjamin Franklin

The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality.

Dante

Children brought up in church are seldom brought up in court.

Many things are opened by mistake, but none so often as the mouth.

Make sure no one is worse off because of having you for a neighbor or associate.

Stan Baldwin

Your talent is a gift from God. How you use it is your gift to God.

Palestine in Jesus' Day

The overall population of Palestine at the time of Jesus is estimated to have been between two to three million. However at no time it was wholly Jewish. Foreign occupations and migrations had left their mark, primarily in the cities. Caesarea Maritima, the Roman headquarters for the province, for instance, had a Gentile majority. A Jewish minority lived in their own section, scrupulously observing their culture.

Aramaic had been the spoken language for several centuries, originating with the Arameans, a Semitic people widely scattered throughout the East. Used chiefly by traders and diplomats at first, Aramaic eventually became the common language. Hebrew, though no longer understood by the masses, remained the language of sacred Scripture. Greek was at the time the international language of commerce, and many Palestinian Jews probably had at least a rudimentary knowledge of *koine*, a common dialect of this language.

Three kinds of authority wielded power during Jesus' lifetime: Roman, royal, and religious. Each imposed taxes and tithes in its own domain. Residents of Jerusalem, for example, paid taxes to the Roman governor. In Galilee, taxes were collected by Herod Antipas, with some funds passed on to Rome as tribute. All Jews paid Temple taxes and tithes as well.

Partly as a result of the economic system, in which the heavy burden of taxation led easily to indebtedness, much of the country's prime agricultural land had fallen into the hands of Roman officials, the Herodian family, or members of the priestly aristocracy. Jesus' parables of tenant farmers and day labourers would have struck a responsive chord.

Romans and royals each had a court system and a bureaucracy to deal with the larger issues. In small towns and villages, where most Jews lived, municipal affairs were managed by a council of elders chosen from heads of local families. A local judicial body settled legal disputes and dispensed justice, with religious law governing virtually every aspect of daily life.

Life revolved around long hours at work, raising families, and finding comfort in the practices of their faith: observing the weekly Sabbath and celebrating religious festivals. Weddings and births gave added cause for joy.





Girls reached marriageable age as early as twelve and a half, or at puberty. Depending upon financial circumstances, a young man might wait until his late teens or even twenties to marry. The wedding usually took place a year after betrothal.

Jewish society was like all others in one respect: its adherence to a patriarchal system. In the home, although the wife managed the household, the family head was male, and males also

took first place in inheritance of property and other forms of wealth. Before marriage a daughter owed allegiance to her father; after marriage she came under her husband's authority. However, patriarchy notwithstanding, in the privacy of the home male-female dynamics could alter the situation.

For all the stability that customs and traditions appeared to provide, it belied the fact that the first century was a markedly critical period. The Jewish faith was undergoing intense introspection as well as public debate. Schools of thought ranged from ultraconservative to moderate to liberal. Debates could be stormy over issues such as Sabbath observance - some interpretations of the Law going far beyond biblical requirements. In the Qumran community by the Dead Sea, for instance, monks made a discipline of not relieving themselves on the Sabbath! The demands of ritual purity were emphasized as never before. Archaeology reveals a notable increase in the number of mikvahs, or ritual baths, both in private homes and public places. The biblical prohibition against graven images extended to any display of figural art. To violate that was enough to trigger a riot. Though the Jewish religion had never been considered a missionary one, proselytes were now being accepted in some quarters, and charismatic leaders such as John the Baptist employed the ancient rite of baptism to an unusual degree.

Stepping into this maelstrom of conflicting ideas and practices, to offer his own revolutionary approach, Jesus begins his public ministry.

A Prayer

Lord, help me to remember when things seem hopeless, that you have died and risen, and will triumph through us. I would like to live always with a sense of the joy of the resurrection, but sometimes the pains and sufferings of life seem to over-shadow it. Keep alive a little flame of joy in my heart, and never let the waters of sorrow and pain extinguish it. Forgive me if I waver a little; it's only temporary, for I know that no sorrow, danger or pain can take this inner joy and elation from me, because you, my redeemer live and I live with you!

Fun Pages

A mother was getting irritated with her five-year-old daughter, who wouldn't clean up her toys in the den. "Mummy, I can't clean up the den," the little girl said after her mother fussed at her for the third time. "Why not?" the mother asked. "Because I gave up cleaning for Lent," she replied.

A cautious preacher concluded his sermon with the words: "The sinners referred to in my sermon are fictitious. Any similarity to members of this congregation is coincidental!"

QUESTION: What is the first thing many Christians give up for Lent?

ANSWER: Going to church.

People want the front of the bus, the back of the church, and the centre of attention.

A minister parked his car in a no-parking zone in a large city because he was short of time and couldn't find a space with a meter. Then he put a note under the windshield wiper that read: "I have circled the block 10 times. If I don't park here, I'll miss my appointment. Forgive us our trespasses." When he returned, he found a ticket from a police officer along with this note "I've circled this block for 10 years. If I don't give you a ticket I'll lose my job. Lead us not into temptation."



Observe your dog: if he's overweight, you're not getting enough exercise.

Somebody has said there are only two kinds of people in the world. There are those who wake up in the morning and say, "Good morning, Lord," and there are those who wake up in the morning and say, "Good Lord, it's morning."

A minister waited in line to have his car filled with fuel just before a long holiday weekend. The attendant worked quickly, but there were many cars ahead of him. Finally, the attendant motioned him toward a vacant pump. "Reverend," said the young man, "I'm so sorry about the delay. It seems as if everyone waits until the last minute to get ready for a long trip." The minister chuckled, "I know what you mean. It's the same in my business."

Answers to children's exam:

Q: Name the 4 seasons.

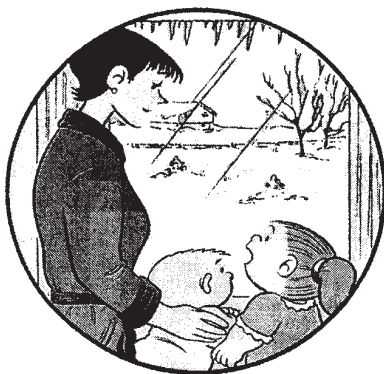
A: "Salt, pepper, mustard, and vinegar."

Q: How is dew formed?

A: "The sun shines down on the leaves and makes them perspire."

Q: What does the word 'benign' mean?

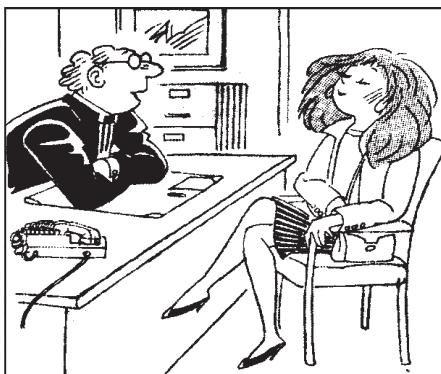
A: "Benign is what you will be after you be eight."



"Remember last summer when we prayed for cooler weather, Mommy? I think we overdid it."

A weather forecaster was heard to declare on a radio station:

"Today's forecast is bright and sunny with an 80% chance that I'm wrong."



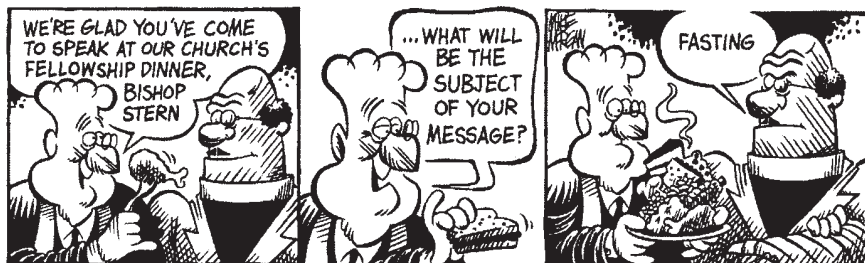
"That's great! I don't know anyone else who gave up tanning salons for Lent."

In 1850, upon his appointment as Bishop of Lincoln in the Church of England, Edward King was informed that his clergy "could be divided into three categories: Those who had gone out of their minds; those who were about to go out of their minds; and those who had no minds to go out of."

Epitaph on an old tombstone:

"Sacred to the memory of Jared Bates who died Aug. 6th, 1800. His widow, aged 24, who mourns as one who can be comforted at 7 Elm Street, this village, and possesses every qualification for a good wife."

FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE



Questions you might not think to ask:

- How come a wise man and wise guy are opposites?
- Why do people who know the least know it the loudest?
- Do massage therapists ever rub people the wrong way?
- Why is it that people say they "slept like a baby" when babies wake up about every two hours?
- Why do dentists ask you questions when they have their fingers in your mouth?
- How come that Americans choose from just two people for President and 50 for Miss America?
- Why does seafood cost more the closer you get to the water?
- Why don't people say "We live in a cat-eat-cat-world"?
- Has anyone actually killed two birds with one stone?
- Why do dogs stick their heads out of a moving car and get annoyed when you blow in their face?
- Why is it called a fast when it goes by so slowly?
- Is it true that cannibals don't eat clowns because they taste funny?

One day, Joe, Bob and Dave were hiking in a wilderness area when they came upon a large, raging, violent river. They needed to get to the other side, but had no idea how to do so. Joe prayed to God, saying, "Please, God, give me the strength to cross this river."

Poof! God gave him big arms and strong legs, and he was able to swim across the river in about two hours, though he almost drowned a couple of times.

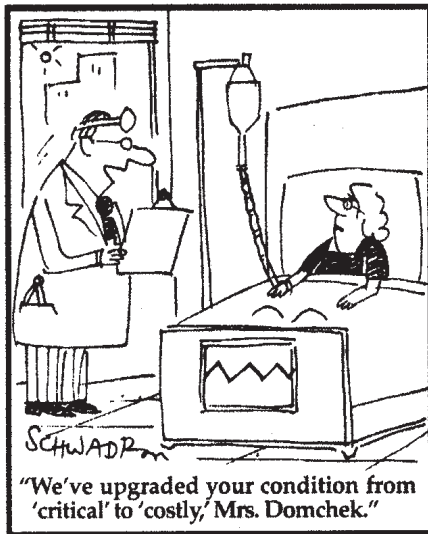
Seeing this, Bob prayed to God, saying, "Please, God, give me the strength and the tools to cross this river."

Poof! God gave him a canoe and he was able to row across in an hour, after almost capsizing a couple of times.

Dave had seen how this worked out for the other two, so he also prayed: "Please, God, give me the strength and the tools and the intelligence to cross this river." Poof! God turned him into a woman. She looked at the map, hiked upstream a few yards, and crossed the bridge in ten minutes.



"Since you can't get up early enough, I brought the church to you."



One day, a little girl is sitting and watching her mother do the dishes at the kitchen sink. She suddenly notices that her mother has several strands of white hair sticking out in contrast on her brunette head. She looks at her mother and inquisitively asks, "Why are some of your hairs white, Mum?" Her mother replied, "Well, every time that you do something wrong and make me cry or unhappy, one of my hairs turns white." The little girl thought about this revelation for a while, and then said, "So, Mummy, how come *all* of grandma's hairs are white?"

The Sunday school teacher pointed to a picture of "The Last Supper" and asked the class: "What do you think Jesus was saying at the Last Supper?" Little Jimmy raised his hand and answered: "If you want to be in the picture, come around to this side of the table."

A man wrote a letter to the Income Tax Department: "I have been unable to sleep knowing that I have cheated on my income tax return. I understated my taxable income and have enclosed a cheque for two hundred euros. If I still can't sleep, I will send the rest."

It is easy to meet expenses ... you find them everywhere.

What was Moby Dick's favorite dinner? *Fish and ships!*

How can time be such a wonderful healer but such a terrible beautician?

If swimming is so good for your figure, how do you explain whales?





Lenten Retreat

It will take place on Saturday 13th March.
Bookings: Franz Portelli (99807734 or 21444287)
or Maria Vella (79710051).
The speaker will be **Fr Michael Ross**

Lenten Sermons at St Patrick's Sliema from Monday 8th to Friday 12th March

The sermon will be during Mass starting at 7pm
Preacher: Fr Michael Ross an Irish Salesian

Holy Week Services

at **Santa Barbara**

Republic Street Valletta

Maundy Thursday: 6.30 pm

Good Friday: 3.00 pm

Holy Saturday: 8.00 pm

Parking in Valletta is free at all these times



NEWSPAPER POST

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"Yesterday is the past, tomorrow is
the future, but today is a *gift*.
That's why it's called the present."