

## Chapter 1

Who is this Shebna, mentioned in our first reading from Isaiah? Shebna was the royal steward of King Hezekiah in the 8th century before the historical birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. You remember how important the role of royal steward was in Genesis regarding the Patriarch Joseph, son of Jacob. Pharaoh says to Joseph, "you shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only as regards the throne will I be greater than you."

Behold, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and arrayed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck; and he made him to ride in his second chariot; and they cried before him, "Bow the knee!"

Shebna was something comparable to Joseph. He was powerful and fulfilled a unique and unavoidable political function in the daily running of the kingdom. He would have been someone akin to a prime minister to the king. The judgement specifically levelled against Shebna is to be viewed in the context of many within the kingdom of Israel at that time.

A few verses earlier, Isaiah tells us that Shebna, in his pride, had already constructed a grand tomb for himself, listen: "what have you to do here and whom have you here, that you have hewn here a tomb for yourself, you who hew a tomb on the height, and carve a habitation for yourself in the rock?"

Shebna's tomb, as much archaeological evidence reveals, was built high up on the Kidron Valley, in an imposing manner facing Jerusalem, the holy city; and it was built in Phonecian style, in a style alien to the holy city. Shebna's tomb reveals that in the holy city of Jerusalem, many in Israel had turned towards other nations, neglecting and betraying the Lord.

The Lord thus dismisses Shebna. The Lord seeks to appoint a royal steward, a prime minister, who will be faithful, who will honour the royal House of David. Jesus, in the Gospel, in appointing Saint Peter as the first royal steward of His Church, alludes heavily to this text from Isaiah. The binding and loosing is echoed, so too is the key, and that he will be something solid and dependable. The true royal steward is to be a father to Israel for the glory of the Father.

Why does Jesus appoint Saint Peter as the first royal steward, the first prime minister of His Church? Essentially it is because Saint Peter confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, come as man. Here in the midst of the disciples is the eternal Son of the Father. Here is God, in human flesh. So whatever Jesus says, whatever Jesus does is of the most supreme and greatest importance for every human being, for all creation. Here in the midst of the disciples is eternal heavenly glory come in our human flesh. Jesus is glory.

Saint Paul in the reading from Romans speaks of the depths, the wisdom, the glory of the Lord as always being so rich, so impossible to fully understand. Indeed. So we are given the Holy Spirit to teach us, to keep us united to Jesus, as part of His Body, the Church, the Way to heaven. Saint Peter, as Jesus says, is able to confess Who Jesus is because he was so deeply open to the eternal glory of the Trinity: it was the Spirit - sent by the Father in heaven Who revealed to Saint Peter that This Man standing in front of the Saint was eternal glory, veiled in our human flesh, Jesus.

The keys, which the eternal Lord has bestowed upon Saint

Peter, are solely for the heavenly glory of the Father. The authority which is entrusted to Saint Peter is to keep the House of David, the New Israel, the Church, in the eternal light of heaven. To give the members of the Body of Christ divine life in the Sacraments, the living presence of Jesus; and by continuing to teach the faith as taught by the Lord to the Apostles, as taught by the Fathers, the Doctors, and the Saints of the holy Church for two thousand years.

We see that the Lord Jesus, in bestowing this heavenly grace upon Saint Peter who is the first royal steward, whom we call Pope, which comes from the Greek word for father, papas the Lord desires that all subsequent royal stewards continue to be supremely guided by the Spirit sent from heaven. The Popes, these royal stewards are to be true fathers, thrones of glory for the Father, as we read in Isaiah.

As Shebna was unfaithful and dismissed by the Lord, may we beseech our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, to guide our Popes; that they may truly embrace the Spirit's counsel and teach the way to heaven, as commanded by Jesus.

## Chapter 2

The Transfiguration is the historical event where Jesus, Who is the eternal Son of Man, permits His divinity, which is eternal, to shine through His human flesh. This shows that human flesh and divinity can become united. What is dust, what is marred by our sin, can be transfigured by eternal divinity. Human flesh can be divinised. This is the goal of every human life: to be divinised, to be made holy, to become like Christ.

Let us comment on the title Son of Man. In the first reading from Daniel we are presented with a father figure Whose great age signifies that He is older than everything. Further his hair is described as pure as wool. Wool primarily comes from sheep and lambs; we remember that Jesus is called, by Saint John the Baptist, the Lamb of God. Further in Isaiah we read, "Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool". So we see that something of the eternal purity of the Father is to be ours, too. We are to share in divine, eternal purity, and this can only happen through the Son of Man, Who is the Lamb of God.

The Son of Man in the book of Daniel is One Who is united to

the One of great age, for the Son will be given eternal sovereignty, He will be Lord of all peoples and nations. The Prophet Daniel describes this Son of Man as coming on the clouds of heaven. This line, "coming on the clouds of heaven, one like a son of man", is vastly important. In Saint Mark's Gospel we read, "again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" And Jesus said, "I am; and you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven". And the high priest tore his garments, and said, "Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?" And they all condemned him as deserving death".

In Saint Matthew's Gospel, "And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his robes, and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgement?" They answered, "He deserves death". In the Acts of the Apostles, at the stoning of Saint Stephen for blasphemy, we read, "Behold, I see the

heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God". But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together upon him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him; and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul".

And in Revelation, "and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. [] to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen".

Jesus in the Gospels refers to Himself as the Son of Man some 80 times, and the reference to the, "coming on the clouds of heaven", signalled to the religious authorities of the day that this visible man, Jesus of Nazareth, was claiming to be, in an absolutely clear manner, the Messiah, the long awaited Son of Man. That is why Jesus' assertion of Who He is prompted them to seek His death on grounds of blasphemy: for He claims to be one with God the Father.

The Transfiguration is the historic event when Jesus revealed in

and through His human flesh that He is indeed the Son of Man, the Messiah, come from heaven. His eternal divinity transfigures His human flesh. He revealed this as a sign to aid the Apostles in living the gift of faith in Him; in spreading the truth that Jesus is God the Son, who suffered, died, and rose.

Too, the Transfiguration is about each of us. When the priest lifts up the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ, there, before your eyes, before your mind, before your heart, is the Transfigured Jesus. He has come as the Lamb of God, Who will wash our scarlet and crimson sins away so they shall be as white as snow, become like pure wool, like the Father, even. Jesus thirsts to transfigure our souls, our bodies, our choices, our motives, our lives. Let each of us look anew, guided by the Holy Spirit, at how we are choosing to live. Do you see the utter beauty of the transfigured Jesus Christ? Here is the One who can transfigure fallen, sinful flesh into eternal life, through true repentance. We need to embrace His gift.

## Chapter 3

The Psalm this Sunday, sings these words, "O God, you are my God, for you I long; for you my soul is thirsting. My body pines for you like a dry, weary land without water. So I gaze on you in the sanctuary to see your strength and your glory for your love is better than life, my lips will speak your praise".

We see here something of the fire which is to be present within every believer. The believer longs, the believer thirsts. The believer is coming to the realisation that the Lord, Who calls, is able to inspire within the breast of every human being such longing for Him, such thirsting for His eternal friendship. And with this call, with this divine fire given to us, we must live differently.

Never forget how the Lord touched the former persecutor of the Christians, Saul. Recall those moments from Acts when Saul had just consented to the murder of Stephen, and was now travelling to Damascus with letters from the high priest, granting him permission to bind any Christian and then deport them to Jerusalem. And then the Lord fills this misdirected zealous soul with a love which ravishes Saint Paul's heart, mind, and soul. It is from this point that Saint Paul begins to realise that he has

been recreated by the tenderness, by the forgiveness, by the majesty of the living God. But what happened to Saint Paul is also meant for all of us, for we are pupils, learning from this great Apostle, whose heart was reconfigured by Jesus.

Remember those awesome words from Hebrews, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God".

With the psalmist, Saint Paul now truly thirsts, truly longs for the living God because the love of Jesus has purified him, so that He may now learn to embrace, with all his heart, with all his mind, with and all his body, Who Jesus is. In the reading from Romans today, Saint Paul commends each of us to think of the mercy of Jesus. What is the mercy of Jesus? It is that the eternal Son should take on our human flesh, that He should suffer for our sins, die for our sins, and then rise that we might be glorified with Him.

To experience this love, such as Saint Paul did on the road to Damascus, is to experience that our minds need to be remade in the risen life of Christ. Saint Paul, who is becoming divinised by the light of Jesus Christ, exhorts us to offer our bodies as a holy sacrifice. This means that we need to welcome the pure beauty of the risen Jesus through the gift of prayer, through celebrating

the Sacraments, especially Confession and the Eucharist, and by reading and discovering the Holy Bible regularly. You see, once we begin to truly invite the Lord's power into our hearts and minds we begin to see ever more clearly how, as Saint Paul teaches, we are not to model ourselves on the behaviour of the world.

In the Gospel, Saint Peter, fails to grasp that the Son of God has come, as prophesied by the Scriptures, as the definitive and true sacrificial Lamb of God. Saint Peter has just, in response to the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, declared that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. But now he fails to understand how the holiness of God, the purity of the Lord, is so different from man's way. Saint Peter needs to hunger and thirst for the Lord.

Jesus is emphatic that the glory He brings, the door which He alone opens to heaven, is to be the utter and complete focus of our lives. How we pick up our cross, the extent to which we renounce ourselves, as Jesus teaches, is so deeply tied to how willing we are to truly have our lives recreated by His risen and glorified Sacred Heart. God is not a god of half measures, or lukewarm, or tepid.

In the first reading from Jeremiah, we see how, despite the trials and hardships Jeremiah suffered, he could not walk away from the thirsting and longing which the great and all powerful Lord had placed within him, as he says, "then there seemed to be a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones". This teaches us that, at times, following the Lord's ways will demand from us to pick up our cross, to practise fortitude in temptation, to renounce ourselves, to choose glory of the Lord's mercy.

We all need to ask ourselves, whether we are truly hungering and thirsting for the living Lord? Are we modelling our lives on the world or on the eternal life of God's holiness, goodness, and purity, given to us? All the readings, in the strongest terms, command us to live lives which are continually being transformed by Him Who lives for ever, Jesus the Lord. He will come again in glory, let us ready ourselves in His saving and beautiful grace.

## Chapter 4

Saint Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, teaches, "for the body does not consist of one member but of many. As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. But God has so composed the body, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another".

This analogy between a human body and all the members of the Body of Christ teaches that our lives are deeply connected for good; it matters how we choose to honour the gift of our minds, hearts, bodies, and souls. Responding to the gift of being a human person, beloved by God, is never an individual affair. We; therefore, need teaching, directing to live as part of a body, part of a family. Our feelings need always to be translated, healed, through what is holy and true.

Jesus, in Saint Matthew's Gospel teaches, "judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgement you pronounce you will be judged. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" When Jesus mentions judging in this context, He is calling to mind those times when we sadly put someone down in our thoughts and words unjustly; when we judge someone harshly to make

ourselves feel better, superior even. This is not good for the Body of Christ. But there is actual judgement which is absolutely necessary and important to growth in holiness, maturity, and responsibility.

We are given the Ten Commandments from the Lord, which are not to be broken. In these cases we are able to judge truthfully and always for the good of the other. Jesus refers to them as does Saint Paul in his letter to the Romans. Jesus in the Gospels is clear in His teaching that He desires all of us to stop sinning; indeed, on two occasions, to the sick man at the Pool of Bethesda and to the woman caught in adultery, he commands them both to sin no more.

Jesus has not come only to take away our own guilt and the stain of the Original Sin by His suffering and dying on the Cross, but He also comes with His victorious love, His risen Spirit. His Spirit recreates us to freely choose to live in His Body. We receive His risen Spirit in the Sacraments; in prayer; reading the Bible; indeed, whenever we turn towards the holiness of the Lord, in the Spirit.

At Confirmation the Christian receives the seven gifts of the

Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. These gifts are both spiritual being capable of transforming our souls, hearts, and minds, by wisdom, understanding, knowledge, fear of the Lord - and moral, how we then choose to live them concretely in relation to others, by fortitude, counsel, and piety. We are given supernatural seeds which need to be watered, nurtured, so that we may be truly configured to Him, body and soul, in thought and deed in His holy Body. What a gift! To be a part of Jesus' Body.

As the Spirit we receive incorporates us into the whole Body of Christ, we grasp that we are brought into a Body which also transcends time. By receiving the risen Jesus in the Eucharist we are made part of the Body of the Christ where the Saints in eternity dwell. We thus stand in awe realising that our decisions, our choices, freely made, are made in the full sight of the glory of heaven.

We see why in Holy Scripture the Lord has continually sent Prophets, like Ezekiel, to bring His people back to a flourishing relationship with Him; and the communion of Saints is to be a living compass for each of us. We, the Baptised, are also

prophets, filled with Spirit to be servants of the Lord, lighting a path for others in the world. This is especially true of all the Confirmed.

In the Gospel, Jesus gives divine instructions to correct and help others. This is not about judging another with a log in the eye. No, it is a community affair, an affair of the whole Body, on earth and in heaven. It respects the freedom of the other person to place themselves outside of the Body of faith, if they so wish. And Jesus teaches that those who freely reject divine teachings are to be considered as pagans and tax collectors: those who were considered to be truly outside. But let us never forget that it was also to these people that the Lord also taught and worked great miracles. The Lord never ceases to call peoples into His eternal Body. Eternal joy is to become totally His. May we, in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, pray, think, and act in His wisdom, flowing from His sacrificial love.

## Chapter 5

In our world there is much that can disconcert us. There is much to wound our trust in the goodness and stability of life. Natural disasters, disease, and the dreadfulness of human pride, cruelty and violence. But this is not the whole picture; indeed, this is not the foundation of life.

As Christians we are to live lives which are rooted in Him Who was able to command the natural world; He Who was able to heal every disease; and He Who stopped the false authority of human wickedness by embracing its inhumanity and transfiguring it through divine sacrificial love: His Passion, Death, and Resurrection.

We thus see that the passing challenges of this life are not to have a crippling hold over us. But in Jesus Christ, through an ever deepening faith and discipleship, we are to spend this life learning to look more steadily through our eyes with a heart which is being purified by the heavenly Jesus. Saint Paul, in the reading today, writes, "avoid anything in your everyday lives that would be unworthy of the gospel of Christ".

For a moment, let us truly reflect on some of the things that

we freely choose to do. Are they firmly fixed on the glory of the heavenly reward which Jesus Christ has won for us? What would our lives look like if we really did live to praise, more and more, the risen glory of Jesus Christ? Can we do better? To say yes, is to realise that we do hunger for the wonder and glory of heaven, let us long to believe more fully and so put into action the risen power of Jesus.

Let us not be in any doubt that the programmes we watch, the broadcasts we listen to, the books we read, the music we hear, the food we eat, all have a profound effect on our spiritual and moral lives, on our response to Jesus, Who is Life; and we cannot deny either that the thoughts we pursue also have a significant influence on our lives. Saint Paul is in no doubt.

Who Jesus is. Indeed, Saint Paul has abandoned himself to be overflowing with the glory and the mystery of the risen Lord Jesus.

In the life of Saint Paul we discover a man, far from being alone among the Saints, who was so filled with faith in Jesus that he gave himself without complaint to bringing the Gospel of Jesus to others. In his second letter to the Corinthians he shares how he suffered beatings, hunger, shipwrecks, harsh

weather, toil, and betrayal and still he continues to consider himself the most fortunate of men, because of Jesus. We must acknowledge that for Saint Paul the kingdom of heaven is a truly binding reality.

Jesus in the Gospel speaks of the kingdom of heaven. The denarius which the landowner offers is a metaphor for the necessary grace to enter heaven. The landowner reveals the overriding generosity of the Lord to offer salvation to all who will accept His gifts. Now, contrast the response of Saint Paul to that of the workers who have worked all day in the heat. Whereas Saint Paul was eager for any tribulation, any toil, the workers in the Gospel are envious of those who received the gift of salvation by following an apparently lighter path.

The workers in the Gospel parable are disturbingly blind to the heavenly glory of God's gifts; to the inestimable, the immeasurable generosity of God's saving love, which, if truly embraced, banishes envy, and frees us from counting the cost. In the first reading from Isaiah we hear how the Lord's thoughts are not our thoughts, how the Lord's ways are not our ways. Foundationally the ways of the Lord, the thoughts of the Lord are rooted in the glory of heaven, opened by Jesus

Christ. But do we truly long for this?

Saint Paul is a living example, as are so many of the Saints, of a person whose awareness of the Gospel of Christ leads to a true rebirth. A life that is ordered and open to the healing, saving, and recreating power of God, will become more and more Christlike, for Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

As we listen to the sacred word of God, as we receive the living Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus from heaven on His altar, may we learn to rejoice in the utterly glorious generosity of the Lord's love. May we live more fully in the Lord's ways; be moulded by His thoughts. May we, as Saint Paul teaches, truly, "avoid anything in your everyday lives that would be unworthy of the gospel of Christ". We need to choose often: are we going to become a blind, envious and self-entitled worker, or will we trust in the risen living love of Jesus and so become gradually filled with His glory?

## Chapter 6

What is it about Christianity which invites men and women to give all they have for the Gospel, to give all they have for Jesus Christ?

In the first reading from Ezekiel, we see that the Lord will indeed judge all persons on an individual basis. This is a deepening of the generational understanding whereby later generations are punished for earlier generations' sins. Here, Ezekiel teaches that the Lord cares supremely how each of us freely chooses to live. The Lord is appalled by Israel seeking to justify its own sin, and expecting the Lord Himself to change, to renounce honesty, and the beauty of divine laws. The Lord challenges Israel to freely choose integrity. Perfect integrity can only be found when a human life lives in harmony with its Creator. Later Ezekiel will prophesy, "I take no pleasure in the death of anyone - it is the Lord who speaks. Repent and live!"

So, we know that we are to renounce sin and choose what is upright. We have a sense that, in this divinely encouraged but free decision of ours, our sins are forgiven by the Lord. This is extraordinary. A human heart, which is humbly prepared to

admit its sin, its wrongdoing to the Lord, will receive peace from heaven. That a movement of our hearts and minds can effect such a gift from the Lord is extraordinary. It teaches us Who the Lord is, and how he hungers to forgive and take away our guilt. Again, those words from Ezekiel, "I take no pleasure in the death of anyone - it is the Lord who speaks. Repent and live!"

Jesus gave to His Apostles the power to forgive sins in His name, the only name that can accomplish this. This power has been handed down to their successors, bishops, and their co-workers, priests. The power to forgive sins, perfectly given to us in the Sacrament of Confession, teaches how important it is to the Lord's Sacred Heart that each of us learns to live in the light from heaven, turning away from sin and complacency.

The Lord, when we repent, confess our sins, and choose to do His will - as taught by the Commandments and fulfilled in the Beatitudes bestows peace, a sense of the deepest integrity that we are living our lives in accordance with eternal Truth. We receive this peace only through the forgiveness offered to us by the Lord.

Saint Paul in his letter to the Philippians describes the Revelation of the Lord's eternal forgiveness. Saint Paul starts by teaching that the eternal and divine state of the Son is the same as the Father, 'consubstantial' we pray in the Creed. Jesus, too, confirms His equality with the Father. In Saint John's Gospel, Jesus says to the Jews, "truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am", referring to God's name in Exodus. There are many others. Thus, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, Who is eternal, freely chooses to enter His creation as a human person, as Jesus.

Saint Paul is ravished by this act of the Lord. That the eternal Son, the Word, should consent to be born as a man in this world of sin, and to freely and humbly accept death, even death on a cross, is the definitive, the complete Revelation of love. Every sign of love, if it actually be love, will always share, to some degree, in the Revelation of God, Who is Love. Love is essentially sacrificial, always done for the God-given good of the other.

This self-abasement of the Son is the greatest act of humility through all time and creation, it should be held high at every

moment of our lives. But the Trinity continues to bestow. Saint Paul continues: the Father then raised Jesus high, and gives His Son a Name above all, that we should kneel at the Name. These words of Saint Paul have inspired composers to soar upwards to the eternal beauty and realm of heaven. Anton Bruckner's *Christus Factus Est*, which was sung when the late holy Pope Benedict came to these shores, is one such work. In the more ancient chant, sung on Passion Sunday and Good Friday, words cease as the choir soars higher and higher, bowled over by the risen, glorified, exalted humility of our Lord Jesus.

The Christian man or woman will indeed give all for the Gospel, all for Christ, because in the place of sin and selfishness is Jesus. Jesus' divine humility enters the chaos and division of suffering and sin, the fruit of human pride, and takes away its false allure, its grasping authority, and frees us, for ever, to grow in holiness and joy, frees us for silent adoration, frees each of us for heaven, and peace.

## Chapter 7

From all eternity, the Holy Trinity, almighty God, knew of the hardness that would grip the human heart once sin had made a home in us. And so the Lover of all our souls and bodies, to bring us back into eternal Life, to the sacred Bosom of the Trinity, acts in what we call salvation history: salvation history is the way, in time, that the Lord of Hosts reveals Himself, His power, and His call that offers us the grace to heal humble hearts and prepare us for heaven.

Speaking of humility, it is helpful for each of us to reflect that this entire universe, every atom and cell, every thought and insight only continues to exist, in time, because the eternal Lord wills it. We realise that every part of us, whether spiritual or physical only, only continues to live because the Lord permits it. When we reflect on this, on the unchanging majesty of the eternal Trinity, we gasp with astonishment at how often and quickly humans forget that everything is a gift, that we truly own no thing, that we are stewards of His gifts.

In the reading from Isaiah, the Lord sings of how He wanted Israel to live with His justice, to live with His integrity. But instead He saw bloodshed and heard the cry of distress. In the

Psalm we hear how Israel admits its betrayal of the Lord and His Covenants, but still bloodshed and the cry of distress continue to our day. It is not what the Lord desires. What has become of our hearts? God longs for each of us, human persons, who have been created with the capacity to know Him, to respond with faith, with prayer, to be filled with a heavenly love which can heal the stone heart.

Isaiah, presents the Lord as a Lover, Who is singing of His love for His vineyard. We must take note of this intimacy. Do we approach the Lord as a Lover, as the One Who loves us so deeply? We learn that the vineyard owner did everything possible to make His vineyard a place where sumptuous grapes could grow. Through Salvation History think of how the Lord promised, right at the start, that final victory would be given over the serpent, Satan, before Adam and Eve left Eden; think of Abraham being told that his pure faith would be a blessing for all who accept the Faith, for ever; ponder on the magnificence of the Exodus through the Red Sea; the feeding of the Israelites for forty years in the wilderness; and there are many others. But despite all this love, the fruit of His vineyard, Israel, was sour grapes: bloodshed and cries of distress. Jesus in the Gospel, which refers to this prophecy

from Isaiah, also speaks of the prophets that the Lord sent to proclaim His saving word, but alas to deaf ears and violent hearts.

But the Lord is indefatigable in His longing to save His hardened people. And so within the prophecies we begin to see a prophecy which teaches that, at the appointed time, One will come, Who will be rejected but will be the perfect sin offering for all, the keystone. We also see this prophecy made by Isaiah in the Suffering Servant song, "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all", and "with his stripes we are healed". Jesus is the Suffering Servant sacrificed to redeem repentant hearts, Jesus is indeed the rejected Keystone.

To truly heal human hardness of heart, to truly heal us of our pride, and fear of placing our trust in the eternal God, the Father sent the Son. His miracles revealed Who He is. His willingness to empty Himself and come to His universe, born as a human reveals eternal love for us. His glorious resurrection from freely choosing to suffer under the weight of

all sin and die, sings of the love of God, which no evil, no sin can silence. Do we want this, do we want Jesus as He is; do we want to sing at all times and in all places of the love and deeds of the Lord?

The Lord, the Holy Trinity, through Salvation History, has never ceased to offer all people the Way back to heaven. Will we be like the Israelites and forgot God's love through pride and sin, or will we be the new Israel, washed and redeemed in the Blood of the Lamb, recreated by the rejected Keystone Who rose glorious from the dead? Jesus is the Lamb of God, Whose victory over sin is the power to heal such hardened hearts. In repenting, in turning all that we are to Him, Jesus can begin to reveal who we are in His light from heaven. The becoming-the-good-grapes-of-the-Kingdom is offered from altar. Come and flourish, become holy.

## Chapter 8

"So, you have received an invitation from the king to attend the wedding of his son. Not only that, the king has sent the invitation to you personally. His personal courier is at your door". As with the parable last Sunday, Israel does not listen to the messengers again, and kills them. We; therefore, do need to see that this is no ordinary wedding feast. The parables of Jesus always have a twist: they sound straightforward and then call us to look beyond.

The king is God the Father, and the Son is Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of the Father, so humbly born in our human flesh. The king's fearsome response is rooted in what Israel is rejecting: the wedding feast is the invitation to heaven. The king's response is to make us sit up and realise that for anyone to freely reject heaven is the ultimate terrible choice.

Last week, in the Gospel, Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven will be taken away from Israel - for they have rejected the keystone, Jesus and given to others who will bear fruit. We see the same this week: after the invited guests have freely rejected the invitation to the wedding, the king orders his servants to go out and invite everyone: for the Lord yearns to

establish an eternal covenant with us, to marry us, and longs for us to reciprocate, to return His love. And so, the theme of marriage and of the wedding banquet are central to the Bible.

Explore with me a few examples: Adam and Eve become one flesh and are to feast on the glorious fruits given of Eden. God wants this husband and wife to live their wedded lives close to Him for ever. Moses, after He has received the 10 Commandments and Israel has promised to obey the covenant, brings many others to eat and drink in the presence of God on the mountain. The Lord wants to bring His people to a wedding banquet at which He, the King, is present.

Our first reading today from Isaiah, speaks of the heavenly wedding banquet for all peoples. This eternal wedding banquet is the joyful celebration of salvation offered to all who hoped in the Lord. Listen to the words of Isaiah again, "That day, it will be said: See, this is our God in whom we hoped for salvation; the Lord is the one in whom we hoped. We exult and we rejoice that he has saved us; for the hand of the Lord rests on this mountain". As we also see in the parable, the eternal wedding banquet is not what we make of it, we do not go there and tell the Lord to do things

differently: heaven is the Lord's glory and communion with Him changes us. It needs to be freely chosen by us with truly life-giving repentance and joyful obedience. The Trinity is the Host of the glorious eternal wedding banquet. And at this banquet, the food and drink heal us to become like God.

Jesus, Himself, acts as the divine Bridegroom at the wedding at Cana. Remember, Jesus is not the actual bridegroom, but a guest. And it is the bridegroom's responsibility to provide the wine. Jesus, at this wedding, provides fine strained wine, as we read in Isaiah. Jesus is revealing that in Him the wedding banquet has started.

In Saint Mark's Gospel, Jesus refers to Himself as the Bridegroom, and that His wine is new wine and is for fresh skins. Again the reference to wine, the wine of the eternal wedding banquet. But to drink this new wine, we need to become fresh skins, recreated skins rather, dressed in heavenly grace. Grace is the spiritual fruit of His humble suffering, dying, and overcoming all evil - Resurrection. The grace won for us is so costly, do we see that? No wonder the King was aghast at Israel's rejection. In the last book of the Bible, Revelation, we read, "Let us rejoice and exult and give him

the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure". We are called to be His Bride, made pure in Him.

So the necessary garment to enter heaven for the eternal wedding banquet is grace. The grace of Jesus recreates us bright and pure, dressed in heavenly linen sinless through Him. The Mass is the direct gift of the necessary grace for the heavenly wedding: we eat the sacrificed Lamb of God, Who takes away the sins of the world. His grace, worthily received, heals and unites the one human family so we can cry out with Isaiah, "That day, it will be said: See, this is our God in whom we hoped for salvation; we exult and we rejoice that he has saved us". As we approach the altar of the wedding banquet, the Supper of the Lamb where peace between heaven and earth, and peace between all peoples is achieved - let us pray for our entire human family that no one may ever turn away from the eternal wedding banquet of the Lord.

## Chapter 9

So the Pharisees have sent some trainee Pharisees, together with some of the servants from the Herodian court to ambush Jesus, to entangle Him. One of the phrases they use, "because a man's rank means nothing to you", portrays Jesus as a maverick. It tries to portray Him as some sort of anarchist, Who seeks to destroy the structures of society. It denies His divine majesty and seeks to bring Him down to the level of a mere man, fighting for a religious cause.

But Jesus is far from wanting to destroy rank. Reflect on how he speaks with the centurion with the sick servant in Saint Matthew's Gospel. The centurion presents himself as being under authority and having others under his authority, he is a man of rank. The centurion also comes to seek the healing of his servant, thus revealing that He is a man of compassion, who sees beyond human rank, he sees dignity in all. And it is this true wisdom which makes Him open to receiving the gift of faith in Jesus. The centurion refers to Jesus as Lord, and says, "I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed". Words which we say every Sunday, if not every day, at holy Mass. This pagan centurion believes that Jesus is God.

In response, Jesus refers to the kingdom of heaven and how all must believe in Him to enter. Not once does Jesus seek to change the worldly order, the rank. His is not a kingdom of this world, as we read in Saint John's Gospel. No, Jesus longs for our faith in Him to grow. How do each of us turn to Him daily? How do we pray as families? How do our children see the life of faith as the unchanging rock in busy lives? First Holy Communion, Confirmation need to be such cherished moments already rooted in lives which practise the Faith at home and at church? How can we truly see without heavenly light? The rank which Jesus offers is eternal, that of a Saint.

Jesus does not seek to change this world from the outside as a social or religious reformer, but He first thirsts for the hearts of all His children, us, to be continually converted to Him. Why? For Jesus has come into His world to open the eternal rank of heaven. To truly stand at the foot of His cross, to choose to kneel at His feet, is to say loudly and clearly that I am a sinner in need of heavenly forgiveness and the new wine of heaven. That I am broken, but ready to be made anew. There were two people at the foot of the Cross Who should be our pattern to heaven. One we cherish and honour so deeply,

the perfect disciple; the other, from whom we can learn how to repent. First, Mary, the Mother of God, is perfect innocence, our goal in Christ; secondly, Saint Mary Magdalen, our Patron, is perfect penitence. She, after having been freed from her seven demons, spent the rest of her earthly life, in such gratitude, longing to become truly holy for the eternal life. Saint Mary Magdalen yearned for the rank of heaven.

Saint Paul today writes of the three Theological Virtues: faith, hope, and charity; infused heavenly gifts of the Holy Spirit, only possible through Jesus. These three gifts are fundamental to our being formed for the heavenly rank. They are gifts which must underpin our daily discerning of God's will for our lives. God's will for our lives is not some strange quest that we have to find like hidden treasure. Jesus wants us to discover it with Him, one step at a time: it will always lead to heaven and be the way to our deepest joy.

The sad ensnarers, those servants of the cowardly Pharisees and Herodians, try to trap the Son of God. And Jesus, Jesus ascends over their petty riddle. And note, He does not diminish rank here, too. In fact, He gives clear distinction: give the world its worldly due, but to God, well, our very lives

are His gift. Our Gospel reading today does not include the next line, which reads, "When they heard it, they marvelled; and they left him and went away". This shows that Jesus' heavenly mastery of this malicious trap was able to touch so many. I wonder, how many would have then said with the centurion and with each of us, "I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my soul will be healed". Jesus is the glory of God in miracles and in words.

As the Lord, in His majesty, honoured the rank of the pagan Persian king Cyrus, to restore Israel to Jerusalem; as the Lord invited the pagan centurion of rank to worship Jesus and bring the gift of faith back to his household; so, how are we going to welcome the heavenly grace of the risen Lord, into our workplaces, our homes, our relationships, our decisions? Our place in life, our rank is an opportunity to serve, to give, to love with light from heaven. May we marvel at what Jesus has done and is doing for us at all times and in every place.

## Chapter 10

"You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind". How do we do that? How do we love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind? What are the foundations for such love?

The Collect prayer, said near the beginning of Mass, is always worth pondering over as it collects together central teachings from the readings into a prayer to guide us as we hear the sacred word proclaimed. This Sunday's Collect prayer is no exception. It asks the ever-living God to increase our faith, hope, and charity and make us love what He commands.

As you remember from last week, in Saint Paul's same letter to the Thessalonians, these three gifts faith, hope, and charity were singled out as being power from the Holy Spirit. So the Collect prayer is teaching us that in order to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind, this can only happen if we freely choose to follow God first, above everything else. Do we really want to love God and what He commands? Does the Faith mean more than the world to us?

Learning to love God, with every fibre - spiritual and physical - of our being, demands a deepening realisation that the ever-living Lord is supernatural, above nature, Light in which there is no change. And we humans have been especially created to be able to turn our hearts, minds, souls to Him in faith, moment by moment. For all of us, it is a work of continual spiritual battle and pilgrimage. To truly love God, we need to be ready to say yes to God, and reject anything that obscures His supernatural light.

In repentance, a true penitent becomes transformed by the infused, which means given from heaven, the infused virtues of faith, hope, and charity - the necessary building blocks of holiness. The growth that takes place in the soul of the person who is becoming changed by the heavenly and supernatural God is real and tangible. God loves us by offering grace-filled freedom to accept Him always. He has total faith in us. He has shown this in the suffering, death, and resurrection of His Son. It is then for us to be vulnerable in the presence of His love. The Trinity looks at each of us with a gaze which sings of the perfection that we can only become in Them.

So to love God is to look back at Him, to return His gaze, gleaming with the heavenly faith, hope, and charity with which He blesses us. It is to realise that all goodness and healing flows from His supernatural gifts, which are to be lived-out, currently, in this world. Jesus always challenges us to live a more disciplined faith, a more jubilant hope, a burning charity. So we always need to ask, "is what we choose. weakening our longing for Him?

When we approach God, as His beloved creatures, we do so with a genuine sense of our weaknesses, our fears, pride, our sin, which is why every Mass begins with an act of penitence. We see that at one time we were, all of us, strangers to the grace of Christ, Who suffered and died for us. To acknowledge that we were all strangers to the Lord - idolaters as Saint Paul refers to the pre-Christian Greeks - to acknowledge this, is at the heart of how we must then serve others.

Our real poverty, our need for Him, for His healing, teaches us that we cannot laud it over anyone "for you lived as strangers" as the Lord says to Moses. And so to love our neighbour as ourselves demands that we see them as persons

who are also vulnerable, frail, in need of the Lord. And the Lord, in the first reading, gives to Moses specific instances where this just kindness and compassion must be lived. It teaches that we, who were also once lost, can never treat the defenceless, the lost, strangers, without compassion.

To love the Lord with everything first demands that we open ourselves to Him humbly, for we were lost. Our humility is the way of repentance, through which His gifts of faith, hope, and charity effect a burning change within us. The subsequent joy, at realising that we are loved and healed by God, spills forth into how we serve our neighbours. For now we thirst to be the Lord's instruments, that our neighbours may see, too, that they are called to become adopted children of God, free to move in the grace of Christ with gratitude. Loving God totally and loving our neighbours as ourselves, in the power of the risen Lord, is the only way in which humanity can begin to be healed.

## Chapter 11

When Jesus commands the people that they must not call anyone Rabbi, or father, or teacher, Jesus is speaking in a hyperbolic manner. He is speaking dramatically. Remember how He proclaimed, "if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away". He says these things to make us listen to Him, to take Him seriously, more than anything.

We know that Jesus is speaking hyperbolically here for the Fifth Commandment commands us to honour our fathers; in Genesis, Joshua, and Isaiah, Abraham is referred to as father. Saint Peter refers to Mark as his son; and Saint Paul to the Corinthians writes, "for I became your father in Christ Jesus through the Gospel", and frequently refers to others as his sons: Timothy, Titus, and Onesimus.

Regarding the title teacher, Jesus, Himself, commands the Apostles to teach the nations all that He commanded. The Magisterium, the divinely instituted teaching office of the Apostles and their successors, instituted by Jesus Himself, is there to teach the eternal saving truths of Jesus, in and out of season. From these brief examples we see that Jesus is not speaking literally.

Jesus is appalled at the way these religious fathers and teachers serve others. The readings from Malachi and Saint Matthew's Gospel lay serious charges at the feet of priests and those who teach the Faith. The Prophet accuses the priests, some five centuries before the birth of Jesus Christ, of straying terribly from the way. They have betrayed their calling to be a bridge for others. They have caused many to stumble whom they should have helped soar to heaven.

What is the point of a priest if he does not teach and does not strive to help others adore the saving truth of Jesus? As the priest acts in the Person of Jesus Christ at the altar, and in all the Sacraments, he must be a slave to the purifying and sublime light of Christ for others, whom he has been anointed to serve. A priest makes no sense if he does not hunger to be constantly reformed by Jesus. A priest is a man for others, for Jesus came for others, and not for Himself.

In the Gospel, Jesus is not taking away the importance of the scribes and the Pharisees, for they truly occupy the chair of Moses, the teaching office of Moses. But what Jesus abhors is that they do not lavish care on the people who are learning to

live by the Commandments. They teach the divine laws, place holy burdens upon the people, but then step away, and focus instead on themselves: their appearance and social esteem. They are not for others.

The Prophet Malachi elsewhere teaches that, "the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is a messenger of the Lord of Hosts". Here we read something of the divine purpose of a priest: to open the Scriptures of salvation for others. A priest is also to offer sacrifices to God for and on behalf of the people. Your Catholic priests re-present the one saving Passion and Resurrection of Jesus at every holy Mass. A priest is truly a man for others, to offer the gifts of salvation.

So it is, then, truly heartening to read in Saint Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, an example of a great priest, who taught and accompanied the Christians in Thessalonika, who took God's message and devoured it with enthusiasm and faith. Saint Paul, and his assistants, Saints Silvanus and Timothy, taught and prayed with such devotion that the whole community shone with the light of Jesus Christ. The Church in Thessalonika, like a parish, became truly missionary,

offering others the light of Christ. The mission for all churches is the same.

The Prophet Malachi and Jesus, in the Gospel, start by rightly condemning those priests and teachers of the Faith who are harming themselves and others. But both prophet and Saviour end by addressing all the people. "Have we not all one Father? Why, then, do we break faith with one another?", cries Malachi. Jesus commands all to renounce any self-satisfied status which is not humbly rooted in the one eternal Father, the one eternal Teacher.

The Lord desires for all peoples, clergy and laity alike, to be rooted in the saving truths and acts of the eternal living God, fulfilled in Jesus. No-one is exempt, we are all addressed. So we must then ask ourselves, "how are we encouraging our parish, our Christian community, to grow in holiness; are all churches a new Thessalonika? Are we truly missionary, the ends of the earth?" Jesus is a living power amongst us.

## Chapter 12

Remembrance Sunday has its roots in the official ending of the First World War on 11 November 1918, when the armistice was signed near Compiegne, north of Paris. Every year since 1919 solemn gatherings have taken place to remember and commemorate, especially, the sacrifice of British and Commonwealth military and civilian servicemen and women in all wars since the First World War.

That the human family should ever have had to resort to war, to the killing of our brothers and sisters from the one human family, is a sign of the deep woundedness found in the human heart, and of the wiles of the evil one, of whom the Bible and Jesus speak most clearly. From Kane and Abel to Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, man's inability to respect God's gift of life remains hideously visible to all.

The Royal British Legion, which aims to provide life-long support for ex-serving personnel and their families, speaks of Remembrance as honouring those who serve to defend our democratic freedoms and way of life. This teaches that, at times, some wars are regrettably necessary: an aggressor, who imposes themselves destructively upon another state or

people, needs to be repelled; the recipients of this unwelcome intrusion must defend themselves. And into this vile fray, the mess and unpredictability of war will deeply affect the moral decisions of all, and take the lives, from this world, of many souls.

It is, especially, at this Mass, that we pray for the repose of the souls of all British and Commonwealth servicemen and women who have died in service; and because the Lord Jesus is the Saviour of every human person, body and soul, that has ever been loved into creation by the Lord, we pray too for the souls of all who have lost their lives in the scourge of human conflict.

In the first reading from Job, written about 1,800 years before the birth of Jesus Christ, we see one of the first instances where bodily resurrection is explicitly mentioned in relation to a Redeemer, the Hebrew being go'a'li, and the Latin being Redemptor. We read that this Avenger, in our translation, of death will cause us to look at Him in the flesh. Not only that, but that of God, by Whom our flesh will have been recreated to gaze upon Him, is the deepest yearning for Job. Recall how Job has lost his children and all his possessions, but it is the

eternal gaze of the Redeemer, God, Who will take His stand in earth, Who is the true goal of Job's longing, his yearning. Remember how Jesus, hyperbolically, commands us to hate father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, even our own lives, so as not to obscure the fire of love implanted within each of us for the living God.

This witness of Job, this divinely inspired prophecy, fills us with real wonder of the promises of Jesus. The bodily resurrection of each of us is the teaching of Jesus, and we pray it every Sunday in the Creed. Let us live with this wonder and so let us thus pray for all the departed in war, that they may too know that their Redeemer liveth and that He will, on the last Daym raise their bodies to glory at the Final Judgement. The evils of war, the seemingly hopeless loss of life at man's unnecessarily cruel hands, is not the last word.

Saint Paul, the former killer of Christians, who now having experienced the risen and glorious Lord Jesus is, also, like Job, emphatic that in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, the human body is made for eternal life, for love eternal, and for bodily resurrection to see the Lord in glory for ever. How is our response to the gift of faith in the bodily resurrection, how are

we living that, praying in that hope?

In the Gospel, Jesus teaches that it is only if our souls, if our lamps, are oiled in His grace that He will know us. The more anointed by Him we are, the more awake we become, longing like Job, longing like Saint Paul. The Psalm sings, "my head you have anointed with oil; my cup is overflowing". The believer believes that in all things the Lord will lead us through the valley of darkness. Saint Mary Magdalen, our Patron, anointed the feet of Jesus with precious nard oil, but how precious that oil became after anointing the Body of the Son of God.

In the Holy Spirit, our prayers become as precious as holy oil to the Lord, they have power to lead souls to heaven in preparation for the final day of Resurrection, and so we sincerely pray for the departed. May we too, we who live in this world, value ever more devotedly the Lord of eternal resurrection, Who wishes to anoint us for the heavenly banquet. Let us stay awake for Him.

## Chapter 13

The readings this Sunday share a connecting theme: how are we preparing ourselves for the coming of Jesus?

Saint Paul wrote this letter barely twenty years after the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ. Saint Paul is so focussed on Jesus. We always do so well to remember that Saint Paul was, before meeting Jesus, a murderer of Christians. Let us not mince our words. It was in Jesus, coming to meet Saul on the road to Damascus, that the future Apostle would be awakened from his blindness and see that Jesus truly was risen from the dead. This fact is Saint Paul's foundation.

Saint Paul was a man deeply focussed on serving the Lord with every fibre of His being. There is a lesson here for all of us. Are we as focussed on serving the Lord as Saul was? For God to teach and guide this Israelite man to become His Apostle would have been, on many levels, a very straightforward affair: Saul's heart and mind were so prepared to receive divine Truth. His heart and mind were very well oiled; he was ready to meet the Bridegroom.

How prepared are we to receive the living wisdom of the Lord? Are our hearts supple and malleable to receive His wisdom, His grace? Or are we so swamped with all sorts of information, much of it unwise, current news and hobbies that we have reduced the amount of time and energy which we should really devote to the Lord, as the eternal Sustainer and Redeemer of all life. Every second of history is His.

Saint Paul was aching to know God, rather like Job, who, in the midst of trial, would proclaim, "this I know: that my redeemer lives, and he, the Last, will take his stand on earth". We see here two hearts and minds docile and longing for the courts of the Lord. The wise virgins in the Gospel are also prepared, longing for the coming of the heavenly Bridegroom.

The oil of which the parable speaks is not literally oil, for when the foolish virgins, or bridesmaids, according to our translation, address the Bridegroom He says that He does not know them. The oil brings about a state of heart, a state of mind, a state of daily habits which have been turned to Jesus; they need to be cleansed in the oil of His grace. How prepared are we to welcome the Lord Jesus, the heavenly Bridegroom

when he comes?

It is most unlikely that we are going to be perfectly ready for Him for He is the eternal Son, Prince of Peace, Everlasting Father, and yet He willingly and devotedly lavishes upon us every grace we could ever need. From us He must have an open heart, repentance and the recognition that He is Lord. Think on the repentant thief on the cross next to Jesus in Saint Luke's Gospel, he opened Himself to Jesus and the Good Shepherd was straight in there, promising repose, fresh and green pastures, and restful waters as the sublime Psalm sings.

The first reading confirms how willing the Lord is to meet us with His Wisdom. Wisdom, the reading says, is already sitting at our gates; quick to anticipate those who look for her. This teaching of Wisdom being always available, always present confirms what the Lord Jesus says in Saint John's Gospel, "you did not choose me, but I chose you". God is omnipresent, and to the humble open soul He brings light from heaven.

To keep our divine lamps burning, to keep our souls being readied for the coming of the Bridegroom, the Lord has given us many means to be prepared, to be full with His holy oil. The Holy Eucharist, His Body and Blood, the heavenly Bread

of eternal life at every Mass; in the Sacrament of Confession we are given the special grace of knowing that our sins have been washed away and that we now completely filled with His eternal light, this holiness brings such strength to the Church. Reading, praying, and studying the Holy Bible, the Lord's love letter to His world, is the living reminder of the ways in which He always comes to save His people. And devotions: Adoration and the Rosary, to name two.

We are given so many ways to be prepared for the coming of the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, for His Judgement. Let us be dazzled and inspired by Saint Paul; let the perseverance and faithfulness of the wise virgins keep us sober and humble; and may the lightness and affection of holy Wisdom keep each of us always alert to His coming, the coming of the Bridegroom, Jesus the Christ.

## Chapter 14

'But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working still, and I am working." This was why the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the sabbath but also called God his Father, making himself equal with God'. In Genesis, we read that on the seventh day, the sabbath, "God rested from all his work which he had done in creation". Yes, God rested from creating the universe, but the entire universe, all created life, depends on God 'working' to sustain all life, our lives, in existence. If for one moment the Holy Trinity stopped willing our existence, stopped working, all would cease to exist.

Jesus, in His words from Saint John's Gospel, teaches that He and His Father always work, united in the Spirit. They are the very Life of all creation. The Father has created all through His Son, the Word; and, through the Son's, through Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection, Father and Son send the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of eternal life to us.

It is important that we see that the Holy Trinity is always working; the Father and Son never cease to gaze and sigh in eternal love for each other, sighing out, breathing out the Holy Spirit. And it is this indwelling of the Spirit that we are given

in the Sacraments: we are given living talents, living gifts, the eternal risen Jesus - Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. And so our divinisation, God willing, is to continually unfold within our souls, revealed by our lives, in our work, we are to become more like God, in Whose image each of us are made. These are the talents which the Lord gives to each of us.

Now, let us turn to the Gospel for today. There we read, "for To everyone who has will be Given more, and he will have more than enough; but from the man who has not, even what he has will be taken away". When it says, "from the man who has not", this specifically refers to the way in which this man has rejected the talent, the spiritual gift that was lavished upon him. This man has willingly thwarted the promptings of the Holy Spirit. He has, in essence, blasphemed against the Holy Spirit; he has committed the only unforgivable sin: to turn his back on God, to deny the Lord's true sovereignty over his soul and body. And, consequently, "even what he has will be taken away", so his body, his soul, his natural gifts, even those will now be taken away, for that person has rejected the Lord.

The Holy Trinity, God, is eternal self-gift to each other - They are Love and they bestow gifts upon Their universe. They

call each of us persons to grow in Their image, to be like them. The glory of every human being is to honour the gifts which we have been given, and to strive in our lives, guided by the Spirit of Jesus' resurrection, to cooperate with the Lord to bring these gifts to perfection in His light. Humility is necessary, as we abandon ourselves into the Lord's hands, if we long to see His gifts to each of us blossom and bloom in ways that we could never have foreseen. God is glorious.

Saint Paul puts it so powerfully, "no, you are all sons of light and sons of the day, we do not belong to the night or to darkness, so we should not go on sleeping, as everyone else does, but stay wide awake and sober". As redeemed children of the eternal light of Jesus - as parts of His Body, each of us with different talents, some more, some less we are all desired and loved by God to grow for the good of the whole Body, the whole human family. A gift is always for all.

The first reading for this Mass, taken from the end of Proverbs, describes to us the perfect woman and wife. How inspiring this is, that at the end of Proverbs, we are not given a king, priest, prophet, or sage, but a wife and mother. This speaks powerfully about the importance of women and their

essential contribution to society.

Our translation starts, "a perfect wife who can find her?"

The Hebrew, actually, is far more military, it means something like "a woman of force", "a woman of valour". Furthermore, she is linked with the description of Wisdom Herself, as the reference to jewellery is made twice for Wisdom, and here again for this wife and mother.

This woman has picked up her talents and they have moulded her internally and externally. The Lord would truly say to her, ""Well done, good and faithful servant; you have shown you can be faithful in small things, I will trust you with greater; enter into the joy of your master". The greatest woman, wife, and mother was Mary, who is holy, valiant, and wise. The Lord, Who never stops working, found in Mary, a servant,' a handmaid, who lived to magnify the wonderful talents lavished upon her by the good Lord. Let us put aside all that is dark, and discover anew the talents, the gifts, which the Lord has given to each of us. They lead to glory.

## Chapter 15

Jesus, in the Gospel, teaches that He is intimately connected to every human being. Jesus points to the weak, the lost, the defenceless. He challenges us not to be indifferent to anyone. He says, "and the King will answer, 'I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me'". Jesus wants us to grasp that when we look at someone else we are looking at Jesus Christ Himself.

In the Creed we pray that the Lord Jesus Christ is, "Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made." Psalm 19 sings, "the heavens proclaim the glory of God and the firmament shows forth the work of his hands. No speech, no word, no voice is heard yet their span extends through all the earth, their words to the utmost bounds of the world".

This Word that extends through all the world - through Whom time, the cause of the Big Bang, the creator and sustainer of all things this, the eternal Word, was made flesh and dwelt amongst us. There we begin to see the incredible extent to which Jesus is King of the Universe. Jesus, Who walked,

talked, ate, suffered, prayed like any human person in history, is also, the eternal Word, a divine Person, the Son. He is; therefore, Truth, the unchanging truth of all the universe. When Jesus says this is my Body, this is my Blood, Truth speaks. Truth bellows through all creation and eternity. "Listen to my beloved Son".

Many areas point to Jesus being the King of the Universe. The Scriptures, the prophecies; the scope of His miracles; the impact of the resurrection and Pentecost on a group of men and women, so transformed that they take this historical fact to all the corners of the world; we have the Eucharistic miracles where, over many centuries, the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ has indeed miraculously turned into His Flesh and Blood. A recent Eucharistic miracle took place in Poland in Legnica in 2016: a host changed into a reddish fleshy material which, when tested by modern techniques and equipment, was found to be human heart tissue. And of course we have the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin, where so many miracles over the centuries have taken place, and all the Saints. All these areas point quite clearly to the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord and King of the Universe. The single most important Person to have ever been born in the universe, for it.

is His universe. The Word Who made it and sustains it.

In the Scriptures today, Ezekiel prophesies a Shepherd Who will lead His flock to rest; Who will also exact judgement as Lord. Jesus fulfils these words in the Gospel. There Jesus speaks of His glorious coming again at the end of time, when all nations will be judged by how we have obeyed Him, for how we obey Jesus has eternal consequences.

For the last three weeks the Sunday Gospels have been teaching us how we must respond to Jesus in our daily lives. First the wise virgins and their oil, which is the grace of Jesus, won for all humanity by His suffering, death, and resurrection; poured out in Baptism. Every soul to enter heaven needs Jesus' grace. Last week we had the Talents. Here the gifts each of has received, according to our abilities, must be nurtured, brought to fruition in humility and joyous service for the King, to hear Him say, "well done, good and faithful servant; you have shown you can be faithful in small things, I will trust you with greater; come and join in your master's happiness". And this Sunday, our sins of omission, of neglect are brought into His glorious gaze. Because the eternal Word took on human flesh, the King of the universe, Jesus, shows

His care for every human. From the manger, He has come to save. His rising from the dead teaches that the King thirsts to give His crucified and risen Spirit to all.

This is why Saint Paul speaks of God being all in all. Jesus is the mediator: He is the divine and eternal Word; and enters creation, born of the holy Virgin, as a human. He is the King of all creation, come to save us from sin. The oil of the wise virgins, Jesus' grace, lavishes gifts for eternal life; these gifts are Talents, which He teaches must be nurtured, must be prioritised. And these Talents necessarily lead us to serve the most dejected, the lost, for that is how the King of the universe lived and taught, giving us a model. He is the eternal King Who serves; we are His People, His sheep, His friends. We are to do likewise, this day and every day. Lord Jesus, come and reign in us.

## Chapter 16

We start Advent, and right from the outset the Lord Jesus looks straight into our hearts. Do we actually realise how much we need Him to come? Are we awake to the necessary healing which salvation demands?

Celebrating the Birth of the Redeemer, of Jesus, can be heartwarming: clear crisp evening skies, stars, candles, straw, statues, meekness, adoration. But there is more. We can also become a bit like Saint Martha: so many things that I have to do, running hither and thither. Rather, we must become more like Saint Mary Magdalen, who grows in her need for Jesus as the core, the centre from which all her activity must flow. Indeed, Saint Mary Magdalen is such an Advent person, an Advent woman. She lives for Jesus in her soul, her heart, her mind, her body, that she will be prepared, awake, to meet Him at the Second Coming.

Advent is a time of preparation. The readings for this first holy Sunday of Advent are not focussed on the birth of Jesus at all, but rather on whether we are awake to receive Jesus, whether our hearts are hardened as Isaiah writes, or whether we are awake to the gifts of the Spirit as Saint Paul urges us to

be in preparation for Jesus' Second Coming, the definitive Advent. Do we hunger for the Spirit to be truly awake for Jesus?

The reading from Isaiah, from the end of his book where he looks to the final coming of the Messiah, focuses on Israel's desire to repent, how Israel admits that it has followed paths which have led to hardened hearts. A human heart will always harden when it turns from God. Are we open to seeing this hardening? One of the clear signs that our society is turning from the Lord is the gradual erosion of the holy rest, the sacredness of Sunday. Is Sunday a day of sport or a day of prayer? Where is your heart? The Israelites freely admitted that they had chosen to turn away; do we have the same courage to own and confess our own corner-cutting? Are we truly preparing ourselves for the coming of the Lord, the King of the Universe? Or for someone else, someone we can mould? But hold on a minute, we are the clay, not the potter!

Isaiah speaks of Israel as clay. Are we good quality clay which can be moulded into fine vessels to contain the Holy Spirit - a temple of the Holy Spirit, as Saint Paul will teach the Corinthians? Or are we sloppy clay that will never stand

up well, clay that first needs God's purification to be moulded into a work of art? We need to be, everyone one of us, clay, supple hearts, to receive the Lord's masterstrokes of divine love.

Jesus in the Gospel, commands us to be awake for Him, four times He says this. Jesus also mentions four specific times when we must be awake: evening, midnight, cockcrow, and dawn. Why these four times? By reading on in the Gospel, we see that these times have an important bearing on the lead up to Jesus' arrest and how the disciples and others were not awake.

In the evening, Jesus is at the Last Supper and there He prophesies that His disciples will all fall away, they are not truly awake to Jesus. Will we fall away, has Sunday Mass become another thing rather than the source of life for the human heart? At midnight, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Saints Peter, James, and John, are not awake in two senses: they are asleep, but also they neglect to comfort Jesus in His great sorrow: the sorrow He experiences when He sees the full extent of our sin, for which he will suffer and die. They are asleep to Jesus' sorrow. Where do we see Jesus crying out in

great sorrow in our brothers and sisters today, are we awake to their needs? With the cockcrow, we think of Saint Peter denying that he even knows Jesus three times. Saint Peter, at this point, was truly not awake, He was riddled with fear. This fear of total discipleship would later be healed by the Lord, and Saint Peter would be willing to have an open heart, to be clay in the Potter's hands. Are we awake to total discipleship, or do we sleep? And at dawn, Jesus is arrested like a criminal, as a threat to Jewish order. His dignity forgotten, someone to be silenced. His own people were not awake to Him.

We see from these great readings chosen for the first Sunday of Advent, that being awake for Jesus points directly to the state of our hearts. Jesus came to bring salvation, to sing from the Cross that we need a Saviour. Our hearts need healing.

Does the clatter of our lives hide this? He sends His Spirit to prepare us, to awaken us for the final Day, the Great Advent. Staying awake teaches us to be clay, to be open hearts to His Spirit, that when He comes again, for He will come, He will find us awake and ready for His transforming love.

## Chapter 17

Last week we noted how the readings all pointed to the state of our hearts, and whether they are good clay, whether we are awake. Jesus commands us to look at four specific times to see whether we are awake. We saw that the disciples were not truly awake to Jesus at the Last Supper, the first Mass, when He explicitly says that this is my Body, this is my Blood. And so Jesus says, at the Last Supper, that they will all fall away, and they do. Are we awake to the glory of Jesus come down to us on His altar and in His Tabernacle?

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter, James, and John are asleep. They are not awake. They are also not awake to His great sorrow. He looked for their compassion and there was nothing. Are we awake to the great sorrow of Jesus' suffering for our sins? Are we awake to the sorrow of our brothers and sisters? We remember how Jesus teaches that what we do not do for the least of our brethren, we do not do for Him. Are we awake to the sorrow of others?

At cockcrow Peter has denied Jesus three times. The fear of following Jesus publicly has shrivelled his faith, he was not awake, our beloved Saint Peter was cowering. Are we a

cowering disciple of Jesus, or are we awake to discipleship? And at His arrest, His own people come to arrest Him. These men would have known His miracles, His power, and yet they have rejected the possibility of being awake to the Lord Jesus.

So the First Sunday of Advent was very focused on whether we are awake, open to the demanding gift of faith in Jesus Christ. Isaiah spoke of a repentant Israel now seeing themselves as unclean, their integrity like filthy clothing, like withered leaves, and how they now wanted to be moulded by the divine Potter. So why all this acknowledging of our need to repent, our need to be awake, our need to become tender hearts and firm clay? Because, as Saint Mark writes in his Gospel, "the beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God". We must be awake for the Son of God.

Saint Mark quotes from Isaiah, with influences from Malachi and Exodus. From Exodus, the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I send an angel before you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place which I have prepared". The Lord said this when He was leading His people from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. But Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is leading to the greatest land, to heaven. From Malachi,

"Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" In Malachi, we see a messenger who is to announce the Lord's coming, in Whose presence repentance is vital. And from Isaiah, "[a] voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God". Here is the messenger announcing the need to repent for the coming of the Lord.

Saint John the Baptist, as proclaimed at his birth by his father, Zechariah, as the one to announce the coming of the Lord, takes on the words of these prophets as the final prophet heralding the coming of the Messiah. The Baptist is an example of one who is truly awake, truly open, truly repentant - he has rejected any over-attachment to the world, which is shown by his clothes and food. Saint John the Baptist cries out our need to be awake, to be open to receive Him Who will baptise us with the Holy Spirit from heaven, the Promised Land to which Jesus has come to take us. Do we live with eyes which are awake, which are being raised to heaven? We need to, we have been given the Holy Spirit.

The power of the Holy Spirit, in an open, awake, repentant

person is able to make, in the words of Isaiah, "a straight highway for our God across the desert"; every valley will be filled in, every mountain and hill will be laid low. You see the power of the Holy Spirit, which changes bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is the only means by which a person can be moulded into living a holy and saintly life; to do our best to live without spot or stain, as Saint Peter teaches in the reading.

During Advent, we prepare ourselves to rejoice in the gift of the Son of God born of the Virgin Mary at Christmas; during Advent we seek to be awake, open, good clay, to receive the gift of Jesus' Holy victorious Spirit, to be made holy and saintly; and we do this for our greatest privilege, our greatest joy is His Final Coming, the Eternal Advent when, as Isaiah prophesies, "Here is the Lord coming with power. The prize of his victory is with him. He is like a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms". Let us be awake, let us repent, let us grow with His Spirit, let us seek heaven with Jesus, the Son of God.

## Chapter 18

Jesus, at the start of His public ministry, in Saint Luke's Gospel, comes to His hometown: Nazareth. Before that He had been working mighty miracles in Galilee. It is the Sabbath Day and Jesus enters the Synagogue.

Let us listen to Saint Luke, "He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and went into the synagogue on the sabbath day as he usually did. He stood up to read and they handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll he found the place where it is written: The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour. He then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the assistant and sat down. And all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to speak to them, 'This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen'. And he won the approval of all, and they were astonished by the gracious words that came from his lips".

As this encounter develops the inhabitants of Nazareth become bitter that Jesus will not perform miracles for them as

in Galilee; they see Him only as the son of Joseph; and when He suggests that they are lacking in faith - Jesus reminds them how the Prophet Elijah helped a Sidonian widow, not an Israelite widow, and how he cured the Syrian leper Naaman instead of an Israelite leper they try to kill Him. They do not know Jesus the Messiah.

This bringing good news to the poor, binding up broken hearts, freedom to those in prison, which Jesus reads from Isaiah, is not a social programme. Rather, it describes the coming of the kingdom into a human soul. These words need to shake us. In the Catholic Church, we are given the kingdom at Baptism, we are given the kingdom in all the Sacraments. Coming to Mass is never about school forms, fulfilling requirements, or just another thing. It is the kingdom; it is heavenly joy.

It is why the reading from Isaiah continues with, "I exult for joy in the Lord, my soul rejoices in my God, for he has clothed me in the garments of salvation, he has wrapped me in the cloak of integrity, like a bridegroom wearing his wreath, like a bride adorned in her jewels". The Psalm today is not a psalm, rather it is Mary's song of joy from Saint Luke's

Gospel: the Magnificat. Mary has just said yes to the archangel; she, unlike the inhabitants of Nazareth, has believed the message of the Lord. She is the woman, par excellence, of joy, of rejoicing. She has just been adorned with jewels, as promised by the Prophet Isaiah, for the jewel of Jesus Christ will grow, will become the fruit of her blessed womb.

In the Gospel, Saint John the Baptist receives some priests and Levites, sent from the Pharisees in Jerusalem. This event happened before Jesus was to visit Nazareth. These Judaens were very focussed on who Saint John the Baptist was rather than his message of joyful repentance. Was he the Christ, prophesied in Isaiah; was he the prophet as prophesied by Moses; or Elijah come again, as prophesied by Malachi? No, He is a voice, proclaiming the Word of God, Jesus Christ.

Very importantly, John also tells these emissaries that even though the Lord has been in amongst them they do not know him. We think again of the people of Nazareth, that even though the Lord had been amongst them for years, they did not know Him. They were closed to the joy of the Messiah, the joy of the kingdom.

This Sunday is called Gaudete Sunday, Gaudete is Latin for rejoice, from the Entrance Antiphon which quotes Saint Paul writing to the Philippians, "rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice". Saint Paul in the reading this Sunday, to the Thessalonians, commands us to, "be happy at all times", to, "never suppress the Spirit", to live, "spirit, soul, and body, for the coming of our lord Jesus Christ". Joy is central.

Dearest brothers and sisters in the Lord, the gift of faith that the Holy Spirit gives us is the cause of heavenly joy and rejoicing. To be able to say that Jesus is Lord is the work of the Holy Spirit, (as Saint Paul teaches to the Corinthians).

This Gaudete Sunday are we especially aware of the holy joy which is given to us from heaven? This joy sings with a radiance, a brilliance, a heavenly power, which no thing on this earth can ever match. Isaiah, Our Lady, Saint John the Baptist, and Saint Paul all teach us that we must live in the gift of the Lord's joy. May we let go of all that holds us back from flourishing in the kingdom.

## Chapter 19

We come here, each and every one of us, in a particular time in history. Each of us is born into a family, a town, a nation. This sense of history echoes loudly in the readings. Every moment since the beginning of time, since the dawn of creation, history has been forming one line of time, which is still unfolding. And into time God brings eternity. You have come here this holy evening because God, Who is without beginning or end, outside of time, is born in a stable for us.

But back to history. In the reading from Acts, Paul is preaching in the first century since the birth of Jesus. And Saint Paul, one of the two greatest Apostles, places everything within history. He immediately refers us to Moses, who was given power from the Lord, to bring the Lord's people out from slavery in Egypt, to, eventually, live as His people in the promised land.

First they lived in the wilderness for forty years: a time of testing and change, a time of privilege: learning how to follow the Lord. They found following the Lord required real faith, real conversion, repentance. Many times they failed, yet the Lord came to help them grow in discipleship, obedience, and

faith. The Entrance Antiphon is taken from this time in history, from the Book of Exodus, it says, "today you will know that the Lord will come, and he will save us, and in the morning you will see his glory". It refers to the time when the Israelites, after complaining, were given miraculous bread from heaven, Manna, and the flesh of quails to eat.

The bread from heaven and the flesh immediately make us think of Jesus' Body, His Flesh given for us on the Cross, from where He will save us; and Jesus speaks of Himself as The Bread from Heaven. These words found their fullest meaning, the meaning for which they were intended, over a thousand years in the Birth and Life of Jesus Christ.

Saint Paul then speaks of King David, about a thousand years before Jesus. Many prophecies in the Old Testament speak of the importance of the House of David; indeed, the Psalm for this Holy Mass sings how King David's throne will be established through all ages. In our Gospel we saw how Joseph and Mary travelled to Bethlehem, because this was the birthplace of King David and Joseph was of the royal House of David. The prophet Micah, some seven hundred years before Jesus, also teaches that the Messiah will be born in

Bethlehem, of the royal House. The throne of King David will last for ever, for Jesus is the eternal Son, and the foster son of Saint Joseph, of David's line.

Saint Paul is teaching the Israelites that the prophecies for over a thousand years have all been pointing to the birth of this one promised Child, the Messiah, Jesus. In history, in time, into His universe, comes the Eternal Son, taking flesh from the Blessed Virgin Mary, and is given a name, the name above all others names: Jesus. In this baby is both the eternal unchanging God, the eternal invisible Son of the Father, and our visible human flesh, a human heart, a human soul, a human mind. Jesus Christ is at one and the same time both eternal and in history. Eternity and history meet in this holy and absolutely adorable baby. He is so adorable, so holy, that any truly open heart, by gazing upon Him, will be changed for ever, for heaven.

In Jesus Christ, a marriage has taken place between heaven and earth. Jesus thus becomes the only way to eternal life, only Way to heaven, because He has come from heaven: the eternal Son. We see; therefore, why the first reading from Isaiah has been chosen. There we read of the end times, when

history, when time will be no more. There we read of the Lord, Who is the Bridegroom Jesus calls Himself the Bridegroom - Who has come to marry, to make holy all those who truly repent of their sins and seek to follow the Promised One, prophesied over centuries, Who has been born for all people this very sacred night. The Suffering, Death, and Resurrection of this Baby will open the unmerited gift of heaven to all, for He is God.

This evening we see our children, young, innocent in so many ways, re-acting the Birth of eternal Light, Jesus, in time. May we see through and above this heartwarming scene to the fact that eternity, the saving eternal love of God, has been born for you, for me this evening. How are each of us going to follow Him daily, as He commands? How are each of us going to guide, teach, and lead by example these young souls around us? It is at Mass that we receive the eternal Son, the Lord Jesus. Here heaven and earth meet, here the marriage begins. Come, with repentant hearts, to the eternal wedding banquet of the Lord Jesus. May a blessed Christmas be ours.

## Chapter 20

Every one of us here this evening has been touched by the light of Christ. We come to the Crib, this sacred night, in different places on our spiritual pilgrimage, at different stages of growth. Essentially each of us is open to the utterly sublime goodness of Jesus Christ. We see in the Nativity Scene how life truly can be on earth: we see a husband and wife, Mary and Joseph, in peace, we see nature, humans, animals, the spiritual realm all in joyful harmony. And now we ask why is this so? Who is the cause of this peace, this hope, which has brought each of us here, on this sacred night?

From the opening pages of the Holy Bible, we read that the rebellion of humans will be, and can be truly healed. We are required to see that mankind is wounded, we cannot heal ourselves. Looking at our beloved world we see so clearly the need for a remedy which can heal the person, for men and women are so often incapable of saying to their neighbour, "I can only live safely if you can live safely", or "I can only be at peace if you also are at peace".

To discover peace requires us to confront our hearts; and to acknowledge when we turn away from the truth that we are

one family, meant for each other. Love, which is truly sacrificial, is the way for all humanity. The endless array of distractions, distractions which we also find difficult to assess, and the noise of the world, make it difficult for us to recognise the inherent woundedness of our hearts, and also to find the actual remedy, the saving path to non-transient joy.

Christmas night is the moment in all history when the eternal remedy, eternal healing is born for all. Jesus Christ is heaven visible on earth. Our true healing, the recreation of our hearts and bodies, being citizens of heaven, starts in earnest this night. The Light is born, the gift is given.

Our first reading from Isaiah starts in darkness, deep shadow. And into man's world of discord and broken promises comes a great unchanging light. Isaiah describes this Light as, "Wonder-Counsellor, Mighty God, Eternal-Father, Prince of Peace", "for there is a child born for us, a son is given to us". A few lines earlier, Isaiah describes a, "yoke that was weighing on him", "a bar across his shoulders", "the rod of his oppressor". These words point to the Cross which was weighing on Him, the bar across His shoulders. Here we see that the Mighty God, the Prince of Peace would indeed be

born as a baby, and would suffer in our humanity to bring peace for all, to bring healing, to take us to His throne that will never end. At His birth, it is not only the shepherds who will exult, and take the greatest news to others, but angels, too. For in His Birth all that is created, which includes angels, has been united to the uncreated eternal Lord. Jesus is always eternal God and Son of Mary.

As the Son of Mary, He can suffer, He can die in His humanity. And this is how God, Jesus, offers Himself, as the sacrificial Lamb of God for the weight of sin, for the wounded human heart. As Jesus is always eternal Lord, after He willingly suffered and died as the perfect sin offering, His divinity resurrects His humanity; His human flesh is resurrected in a new way, in an eternal way, never more to die. Jesus is now the victorious One over sin, victorious over death, and He thirsts to offer each of us His risen Life. Isaiah speaks of the jealous love of the Lord of Hosts; Jesus' love burns to make us holy, to lead us to Him, to eternal friendship with His Father in the Spirit, and with all the Saints.

It was this risen Lord, this blindingly glorious Jesus Who met Saint Paul on the road to Damascus. Saint Paul, who

previously had been a deadly foe of Christians, was ravished by the holy jealous love Jesus poured out on him. Saint Paul is so deeply healed in his heart that he is moulded to become one of the foremost teachers of Who Jesus is and that He alone can save every human person who accepts His grace. The letter from Saint Paul to Titus reveals how precious is the grace of Jesus. The grace of Jesus is His victorious Light from heaven, it is the remedy, the healing power to effect within each of us a right heart, which is open to receiving endless life from God.

The life of the God man Jesus Christ, born some two thousand years ago in Bethlehem fulfilled ancient prophecies. His teachings and life, His miracles and the Resurrection shatter-darkness and anoint humans with heavenly freedom: grace, by which we can truly live; here is the hope of all the nations. Every human, each of us is made for this glory. May we turn to Him more wholeheartedly to embrace His jealous risen love. May the divine harmony of the Crib teach us to make holy music by the manner of our lives: "a son is given us".

## Chapter 21

The readings for this Christmas Day Mass are taken from what is called the Mass at Dawn. This is important. Dawn takes place when new light fills the horizon. The light at dawn can bring hope to any human heart. Dawn can stop us in our tracks and make us ask of ourselves, "am I living a life which truly responds to and seeks the fullest dignity of being a human person?"

At the heart of the readings and the prayers today is the dawn of the light of Christ, born for us today. This light is not merely a natural phenomenon. I ask each of you here today, this holy morning, I ask myself, "are we prepared to bathe our hearts and our minds in this Light, in this Person from heaven?" "Are we prepared to stop and be reformed, made anew for heaven, in the eternal Son, Light from Light, God from God, Who has been born into His world this very dawn, this new Day?"

The Opening Prayer for this Mass at Dawn, the Collect Prayer, says, "that, as we are bathed in the new radiance of your incarnate Word, the light of faith, which illuminates our minds, may also shine through in our deeds". We see, then,

that this Dawn Mass is a sacred opportunity to acknowledge our need of the Lord's grace to illumine our minds and hearts, that in His holy radiance our deeds may shine, may bring His peace and balm to all our celebrations on this sacred Day.

Behind all the excitement, all the preparations, is His holy radiance, which He is willing to shine into every part, every aspect of our being. Are we willing to be healed by His radiance?

We give gifts, we give of ourselves to others at Christmas, because God the Father has given to each of us His Beloved Son, born of Mary, this Day. This gift of the Father to us reflects the eternal love of the Trinity: the Father gives everything to the Son, and the Son, in response, gives all to the Father, in the bond of the Holy Spirit: this is eternal joy. Endless self-giving. Complete generosity and never counting the cost. And it is in this image and likeness that each of us has been made.

And the eternal Trinity, the eternal self-gift One to the Other - knowing that mankind would wound its beautiful nature, would ill-use the gift of freewill, which is necessary for loving - They, the Trinity, planned from all eternity how to save us

from our sin and bring us into Their Life. The immortal Trinity sent the Son to His universe in our human flesh, so that by dying for sin in the flesh, and then rising in victory, with now glorious human flesh, we could be given the gift which puts all others in the shade - eternal life in heaven.

The reading from Saint Paul to Titus explains that the gift which the Father has bestowed on all creation, on every human life is given because of the compassion of God. Saint Paul explains that the Father gifts His eternal Son to be born of the Blessed Virgin, and that through Jesus' willingness to suffer and to die for our sin we might see how utterly fortunate we are to be offered this gift of His saving grace.

The grace of Jesus Christ, light from heaven, was won by costly and sacrificial love; it is the only light which defeats darkness; and it is offered to each of us. A gift of eternal value offered to sinners. That is compassion.

In the first reading we learn something of the cost that Jesus went through to send us His grace: the prophet Isaiah prophesies, "look, your saviour comes, the prize of his victory with him, his trophies before him. They shall be called the 'The Holy People', 'The Lord's redeemed'". The prize of the

Saviour's victory is the resurrection, the defeat of darkness, sin, and death. And we, if we actually open our hearts, and sincerely desire to keep them open, the Lord, by His grace, turns us into His trophies - Saints.

In the Gospel, amongst the excitement and jubilation, the energy of the praising shepherds - this reminds us of the joy, the excitement of so many of our young people at Christmas - but amongst all this right exulting, there is one person who is still, who is basking in the holiness, the Light from heaven.

There is this woman, the queen of all the Saints, who is pondering, treasuring the eternal Light which has descended from heaven and Who has been born from her womb. Mary is at the heart of the Dawn Mass. Mary is teaching us how to live for the eternal Light, Jesus Christ. Today, amidst all the gifts and the generosity, be filled with wonder, like Our Blessed Lady, and be filled by the greatest gift the grace of Jesus, the Saviour born for you.

## Chapter 22

The readings today teach us so much about Who Jesus Christ is. In the letter to the Hebrews, the sacred author describes the Son as the One whom the Father has appointed to inherit everything. To inherit everything teaches that the Son, in some way, owns all creation, that He has rights over all the universe, over each of us. All space and time; every thought, every impulse of any creature is His. All authority and power is His.

The sacred author also writes that the Son is, "sustaining the universe by His powerful command". This means that no thing, no amount of time, no moment, is able to continue in existence without being sustained by the Son. Thus the entire universe was begun, is sustained, and looks forward to its true culmination in the Son. It is why in Revelation Jesus proclaims that He is the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last; and the Gospel says, "not one thing had its being but through Him".

In Psalm 90 and in Saint Peter's second letter we read how our time is of no duration to God, "For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night". The point is that before creation, before time, God simply is. Father, Son, in the bond of the Holy Spirit, simply are. And

desiring to share Their eternal splendour, Their eternal love for each other, They create the universe from nothing. Creation is thus an act of love, for God is love. These are immense thoughts, thoughts that humans have been created to contemplate, it is part of our God-like dignity.

But we see, hinted at in all the readings, that the freedom in which we humans were created to love and obey the Lord and each other has not been honoured by the one human family, we have not cherished this holy freedom; our relationship with the eternal Lord is wounded by sin. Isaiah speaks of the ruins of Jerusalem and that the Lord is redeeming Israel; Hebrews speaks of the Lord, Who has destroyed the defilement of sin, reigning from heaven; and the Gospel speaks of the dark, of darkness, of His own people not accepting Him.

And so into His created universe, He Who is outside time, Who never changes, Who is; therefore, eternal Truth - is born in time, born in human flesh. This baby is at once eternal power and fragile, is at once the Lord Who sustains the entire universe and soon to be the Lamb of God, slain for our sin, our errors. Christmas is both about the warmth and devotion of the Holy Family around the crib, where all creation is at peace, whilst

also pointing to the mission of redemption that the Son has been sent to accomplish, for each of us. And each of us here today treasures the sweetness, the stillness of the Birth of the Saviour, but, too, we ask for the gift to live in burning gratitude that the Lord Jesus Christ has suffered, died, and risen to take away the defilement and guilt due to our sin. He has come to open what we had closed.

To understand Jesus aright is always to see His life of thirty three years in one view: He is the prophesied divine child born for us; He is the slain Lamb of God, the perfect sin offering; and He is the eternal risen King, Word of the universe. We do need the grace of His Spirit to grow and mature in this sacred wisdom. The Gospel of Saint John says, "but to all who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to all who believe in the name of him, who was born not out of human stock or urge of the flesh or will of man but of God himself". How are we accepting Him, do we underestimate what being a child of God entails?

To ponder on Jesus at Christmas is to approach the holy Crib with hearts and minds ready to be prised open by the glory of eternal Light, the power of heaven. His will is that we be saved,

that we might freely accept His risen power, and begin the lifelong transformation from ruins into a child of God. Come to the Crib, bow down in the presence of your Lord, let us truly discover our epic need for gratitude. Come to His eternal power and become His child of Light, be changed by Him in Whom there is no darkness at all.

The reading from Isaiah proclaims, "your watchmen raise their voices, they shout for joy together, for they see the Lord face to face", and, "the Lord bares his holy arm in the sight of the nations". Look into the eyes of the baby Jesus and see, with repentant hearts to be made pure, that these same eyes looked powerfully on the disciples, face to face, after the resurrection. Look at the baby Jesus' holy arm and see that this fragile arm was raised on the Cross, so that one day, in the courts of heaven, He will embrace, with this same glorious holy arm, all His children, Who did accept Him. He, Who has the power to make us children of God, is born today.