Intention of the Apostleship of Prayer
(The Holy Father's Monthly Intention)

July 2020: We pray that today’s families may be accompanied with love, respect and guidance.
August 2020: We pray for all those who work and live from the sea, among them sailors, fishermen and their families.

An Apology
The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in an extraordinary situation, and Daily Flash is also affected. Since print and postal services were stopped for some time it is likely that many of our esteemed readers may not receive Daily Flash in time. Kindly accept our heartfelt apology. We hope that normalcy will soon be restored.

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DAILY FLASH
Reflections on the Word of God
by Lay People

JULY-AUGUST 2020

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From the desk of the Coordinator
Mary – A Living Witness of God’s Love

On August 15, the Church joyfully celebrates the solemnity of the Assumption of Our Lady when, according to our faith, Mother Mary “having completed her course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory”. Why does the Catholic Church lay so much emphasis on Mary? Why does it acknowledge and acclaim her as “Co-Redemptrix” with Christ?

The Church glorifies the Lord for giving Mary first place in his mission of saving souls here on Earth. Mary plays an important role in God’s salvific plan, and therefore, she is called Co-Redemptrix. To recall St Paul’s statement, “I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col 1:24). In other words, the redemption of Christ – that one, full, final sacrifice – is applied and brought alive in the present moment by our willing participation. Does that make us equal to Christ? Certainly not! Rather, by Christ’s grace, our cooperation becomes a part of his all-sufficient sacrifice. Paul appeals to us to do just that when he says: ‘Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God’ (Rom 12:1). And Jesus himself says, “if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mt 16:24).

Mary was the person closest to Jesus. As his first disciple, do not these truths apply equally to her? When Jesus was presented in the temple, Simeon, inspired by the Holy Spirit, prophesied to Mary: “A sword will pierce your own soul too” (Lk 2:35). This verse is the basis of our understanding that Mary shared in the sufferings of Jesus in a
mysterious but real way. And that her sufferings were a part of the suffering Jesus went through.

When someone very close to us dies tragically or unexpectedly don’t we often express our grief by saying, “I feel like part of me has died today”? This is what Mary, who had the most intimate relationship with Jesus, must have felt as she sat at the foot of the cross and watched him suffer and die a terrible and shameful death.

Fr Dwight Longenecker says, “In Westminster Cathedral in London, a beautiful painted crucifix hangs over the central altar. On the front is a portrayal of the crucified Lord, and on the back is a portrait of Mary with a pained expression, her arms in the orans position of prayer. This crucifix illustrates the idea of Mary as Co-Redemptrix. Through her suffering she identified totally with her son, and by bringing him into the world, enabled the accomplishment of Redemption.”

He concludes that Mary “was not simply a neutral channel for God to come into the world. She engaged with God, and that matters. Mary was not discarded by God once her purpose was completed. Instead, her cooperation installs her into an eternal accomplishment of Redemption.”

Instead, her cooperation installs her into an eternal accomplishment of Redemption. Mary was not neutral, engaged with God, and that matters. Mary was not discarded by God once her purpose was completed.

The prophet Amos (First Reading) may perhaps have enlightened him.

Amos reminds us that God is not interested in our parroted prayers, but waits to see a genuine change of attitude (Amos 5:24). He doesn’t want our empty sacrifices either (Focus). Instead, he seeks mercy and justice from us, that we may build relationships with people and touch their hearts. The psalmist quotes the Lord: “What right have you to recite my statutes…? For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you” (Ps 49[50]:16-17).

An important spiritual lesson here for us.

**Fruit:** Let us reflect on an area of our life that the Lord wants us to yield to his will and resolve to act accordingly.

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**Wednesday, July 01, 2020**

**Readings:** Amos 5:14-15, 21-24; Ps 49[50]:7-13, 16-17; Mt 8:28-34

**Focus:** ‘Even though you offer me your burnt offerings… I will not accept them’ (Amos 5:22)

Two friends were discussing their troubles. One could not find a job. The other had a history of broken relationships and was emotionally shattered. In desperation, both decided to make a retreat.

During the retreat, the first one resolved to obey God’s will even though it would mean some difficult changes in his life. His friend, unable to bring himself to accept God’s principles, decided instead that he would double his prayer time. He would even throw in some extra ‘sacrifices’, hoping to see a change in his life situation. The first was soon blessed with a good job. However, the other couldn’t understand why his prayers weren’t answered.

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**Thursday, July 02, 2020**

**Readings:** Amos 7:10-17; Ps 18[19]:8-11; Mt 9:1-8

**Focus:** ’When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God…” (Mt 9:8)

A doctor worked in a remote village caring for the poor without a fee. The rich landlords decided to oust him from their village. And so they accused him of practising black magic. This is similar to what happened in today’s readings. Of Amos, they said, “Amos has conspired…” (Amos 7:10). And of Jesus, “This man is blaspheming” (Mt 9:3). However, both continued their good works undeterred by the jealous people around them.

Our God is a God who gives life. He desires that we be set free from oppression, sickness and darkness. With this in mind, he calls people down the ages to be his ambassadors. However, through wicked empires, perverse ideologies, dictators and corrupt governments, the evil one places many obstacles for their good works, sometimes even to the extent of having such people killed.

The scene is not much different today. God still calls us to be his agents of love and peace. And the evil one still attempts to foil God’s plan through increasing moral relativism, cynicism, atheism, anti-life propaganda, threats and violence.

However, when our mission comes from God, impediments become opportunities to forge ahead with determination knowing well that God’s grace is available to us. In this way, the world will experience God’s love and glorify him (Focus).

**Fruit:** By choosing to cooperate with God’s plan, I can bring healing to the world and glorify him.
Friday, July 03, 2020
St Thomas
Readings: Jer 1:4-9; Ps 116[117]:1-2; Eph 2:19-22; Jn 20:24-29
Focus: “We have seen the Lord” (Jn 20:25)
FOMO is an acronym used by the millennium generation to express their ‘fear of missing out’. Did St Thomas experience something like that?

An attitude of ‘knowing everything’ leaves no space in our heart ‘for the unimaginable’ as the poet Mary Oliver lamented. Although we are baptised Christians we may not have encountered Jesus personally. Hence we are unable to fulfill our mission to preach the Good News. As we see from the account of the woman at the well (Jn 4:1-42) it is only when we ask with an open mind – ready to align our free will with that of Jesus – that we can confidently proclaim him (Focus).

St Thomas walked and talked many years with Jesus. But only after he had personally encountered Jesus (Gospel), and himself said, “My Lord and My God!” (Jn 20:28), did he have the courage and will to travel to distant Indint to preach the gospel.

In the same way, whenever we experience a spiritual low in our life, it may be fruitful to read such passages of encounter, and seek our own encounter with the Lord.

The resurrected Christ was an unimaginable truth for Thomas. What is the wildest and most precious truth that is unimaginable for me?

Fruit: If I have not encountered Christ, can I ask the Holy Spirit for the gift? If I have encountered Jesus can I witness to someone in despair?

Saturday, July 04, 2020
St Elizabeth of Portugal
Readings: Amos 9:11-15; Ps 84[85]:9, 11-14; Mt 9:14-17
Focus: “New wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved” (Mt 9:17)

Jesus often spoke in parables, and John’s disciples must have been thoroughly confused with the reply they got to their query (Gospel). What did Jesus mean by saying put “new wine” in “fresh wineskins” (Focus)?

We, the people of God are the wineskins and the new wine is the teaching of Christ. In the Old Testament, people were given the Law and the rules to follow it. There were prescribed punishments for those who deviated in any way. Over a period of time the Pharisees and the like became rigid and merciless. Such “old wineskins” (Mt 9:17) could not accept the new norms of grace and mercy that Christ preached.

We are the temple of Christ. His teachings, with the power of the Holy Spirit, will help us grow in him – for which we wineskins have to bear the pain of stretching. But if we are hard hearted and unwilling to change our ways according to God’s word, we will be lost. That is why Jesus calls for renewal of hearts when he says that no one can see the kingdom of God until they are born again (Jn 3:3).

What if we feel others are going astray? Instead of criticising them, we must pray for their salvation and try to help them.

Fruit: If I judge people who I feel are not living good and holy lives, am I a new wineskin or old?

Sunday, July 05, 2020
14th Sunday of Ordinary Time,
Day for the Pontifical Society of St Peter
Readings: Zech 9:9-10; Ps 144[145]:1-2, 8-11, 13-14; Rom 8:9, 11-13; Mt 11:25-30
Focus: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28)

A tall, attractive statue of Jesus stands in front of the main entrance of a busy hospital. Its wide open arms and this soothing Bible verse (Focus) have consoled generations of patients and their families as they arrive. Many persons of different faiths testify that they are filled with hope, peace and calm after a few moments of prayer before it.

Having assumed our humanity in its fullness, Jesus knows that life can be hard at many different levels. Even if the troubles are self-made – a result of sinful patterns of life – his open arms invite us to him, to put our burdens down and rest (Gospel).

Physical tiredness can be relieved by a good night’s sleep. Tiredness of soul needs a stronger remedy. One of the heaviest burdens is the illness of a loved one (think Covid-19). As medicines fail, consultations lead nowhere, and conflicting advice of well-meaning friends confuses us, we are helpless and hopeless. Then Jesus calls us, “Come to me,” – an invitation to place our load in total surrender at the feet of the only one who knows what to do. Then we shall be able to take his yoke upon us, learn from him and find rest for our souls (Mt 11:29).

Fruit: Whenever I am overwhelmed by my burdens let me place them at the feet of Jesus.
Monday, July 06, 2020
St Maria Goretti
Readings: Hos 2:16-18, 21-22; Ps 144[145]:2-9; Mt 9:18-26
Focus: "Your faith has made you well" (Mt 9:22)
I often wonder what gave the woman with the haemorrhage such deep faith (Focus). Was it born of desperation? Was it the pain and emotional suffering of being 'untouchable' and ostracised?

To touch Jesus meant to make him also 'unclean' according to Jewish law. Yet she took courage, firmly believing that just one "touch" (Mt 9:21) would bring the much longed-for healing.

Surely Jesus knew who touched him, yet he waited for her to own up. Rather than intending to humiliate her he wished people to know that even an 'unclean' woman was deserving of his attention – because she was in pain. Secondly, he wanted her to know that it was her faith rather than a magical garment that brought her healing. True faith involves action. Against all odds, she fought through the crowd, reached out, and touched him. Her actions proved the genuineness of her faith.

In the larger context, her faith was in sharp contrast to that of the Jews who were constantly running to Baal. The Lord promised them a time when "You will call me, "My husband..."" (Hos 2:16). That promise was fulfilled with the coming of Christ.

In this new time there is faith like the woman's. The blood of Maria Goretti, and thousands like her who died for their faith, stands as a witness to this. 

Fruit: Let me reach out to Jesus in faith, knowing he will heal me – body, soul and spirit.

Tuesday, July 07, 2020
Readings: Hos 8:4-7, 11-13; Ps 113B [115]:3-10; Mt 9:32-38
Focus: "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few" (Mt 9:37)
Our Lord has given us many material blessings. We flaunt our wealth, mansions, flashy cars and the latest mobiles and gadgets – today's 'idols'. We devote more time to them than to God, while our religious duties have become mere obligations. Some of us spend time drinking and smoking and dancing the night away at parties and other such events. Even the sacraments of Baptism, First Communion and Confirmation are treated mainly as social occasions – displays of wealth, abundance and conspicuous consumption.

It all points to one thing. We have lost track of our final destination: eternal life with our Creator and Saviour. We have become like the Israelites in the First Reading, who chose to worship carved idols instead of the true God. But while Hosea warns them of punishment (v. 13), a compassionate Jesus sees us as 'sheep without a shepherd' (Mt 9:36).

Our merciful God wants us to detach ourselves from our material possessions and return to him. Jesus himself showed the way: he worked among the poor, the sick and the oppressed, healing them and filling them with love and hope (Gospel). Even today he is in search of labourers to send into his plentiful harvest (Focus). However, if materialism has us in thrall, we will have no time for Jesus. 

Fruit: Am I ready to rethink how I treat my wealth and possessions and align myself with Jesus?

Wednesday, July 08, 2020
Readings: Hos 10:1-3, 7-8, 12; Ps 104[105]:2-7; Mt 10:1-7
Focus: 'It is time to seek the Lord' (Hos 10:12)
Like some people travel far from home 'to find themselves', so also others go to various shrines or programmes 'to find the Lord'. If it works for them, fine. But the Lord is right here all along, and it is the Lord who seeks us out like a shepherd keeps track of his own lost sheep (cf. Mt 10:6). What is our 'seeking' then?

Seeking the Lord (Focus) implies we open the door of our heart to him, accept him, accept his guidance, and accept the mess he makes of our selfish ways. 'Break up your fallow ground' (Hos 10:12). If we do break up our selfish and unjust habits, and plant generous and just habits, we will reap the steadfast, unending love of the Lord.

Some fruitful habits for those seeking the Lord are listed in today's Psalm: praying with a listening heart (v. 4); reading scripture (v. 5) to understand the Lord's priorities; recalling scripture (v. 5); rejoicing in the Lord (v. 3), in the Persons of the Trinity; singing praises to God (v. 2), and proclaiming to other people the Good News of salvation (v. 2). The task which Jesus entrusted to the apostles (Mt 10:7) he entrusts to us as well. As we share Jesus with others, we 'find' him more and more.

Fruit: Do I seek the Lord's presence continually (Ps 104[105]:4), every day, in every detail of my life?

Three ways to tell us what you think of Daily Flash:
1) Write a letter 2) Email: dailyflashgoa@gmail.com 3) WhatsApp/SMS: +919130664062
Thursday, July 09, 2020
Sts Augustine Zhao Rong & Companions
Readings: Hos 11:1-4, 8-9; Ps 79[80]:2-3, 15-16; Mt 10:7-15
Focus: “The kingdom of heaven has come near” (Mt 10:7)

While we were singing carols around our ward last Christmas, we came across a few rag picker children. I suggested that our Santa Claus give them sweets, which he did. As we moved away we noticed their group huddled together in discussion. Then one of the bigger girls came across and put Rs 500 in our collection box. Rag pickers are generally despised by other people but here were some who immediately responded to the little attention that we gave them and even taught us a lesson in nobility. They had kind and generous hearts.

When Jesus sent his disciples to proclaim the Good News to the people, he asked them to take absolutely nothing with them (Gospel). While they were to share peace with others they would have to depend on their goodwill and generosity for their basic necessities. They would be meeting different kinds of people and were told to move out of homes where they were not welcome (Mt 10:14).

On the other hand, there would be some like our little rag pickers who would be warm and welcoming. This is what Jesus meant when he said that the kingdom of heaven is near (Focus). If each of us could be like the rag pickers we would see the kingdom of heaven right here on earth today.

Fruit: In my effort to make the kingdom of heaven a reality, I will treat all people warmly.

Friday, July 10, 2020
Readings: Hos 14:2-10; Ps 50:3-4, 8-9, 12-14, 17 [51:1-2, 6-7, 10-12, 15]; Mt 10:16-23
Focus: ‘I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely’ (Hos 14:4)

Hosea was deeply concerned about Israel’s faithlessness towards God. Idolatry had a powerful hold on the people and they indulged in crimes such as murder, adultery, cheating and stealing. Could the Israelites who were steeped in sin turn back to God? Yes, through Hosea God reveals his love and mercy (First Reading). He wants the people to experience his infinite love by giving up their sinful ways and truly repenting. He could have abandoned and punished them severely. Instead he pours out his blessings and promises them a new life.

God loves us in the same manner as he loved the wayward Israelites. No matter how far we have strayed, irrespective of the different idols we have created for ourselves, he does not condemn us. He yearns to have us back, to deepen his friendship with us. Will we accept his generous offer or reject him for all the world has to offer?

If we return to God and tell him that we are grateful he can heal our faithlessness (Focus), he will help us. Like King David, who came to realise his sinful ways through Nathan, we must ask God to change us by creating a pure heart and a renewed spirit (Ps 50[51]:10). ‘The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love’ (Ps 102[103]:8).

Fruit: I can experience God’s gift of redemption by staying in his loving presence always.

Saturday, July 11, 2020
St Benedict
Readings: Isa 6:1-8; Ps 92[93]:1-2, 5; Mt 10:24-33
Focus: “Here am I; send me!” (Isa 6:8)

At a recent seminar a priest highlighted the role of lay people as ‘missionary disciples’ in response to Jesus’ farewell statement, “You are my witnesses” (cf. Acts 1:8). This is also the theme of the Pastoral Year 2020-21 for Goa. Using the example of today’s First Reading, he explained how an encounter with God involves a profound realisation of one’s own unworthiness (Isa 6:5), purification leading to transformation (Isa 6:7), and finally a mission (Isa 6:8) ending with “Send me!” (Focus).

A brainstorming session followed on what we could do to spread the gospel, how each of us could be witnesses in our own special way – as wives or husbands, mothers or fathers, daughters or sons, sisters or brothers. In our parish or Catechism class or Parish Council or Small Christian Community. Perhaps writing on social media or for mainstream newspapers or magazines. Witnessing in our workplace or on a journey – each of us proclaiming the Good News in a unique way.

St Benedict too followed the Lord’s call and after studying in Rome retreated to a monastic life. Much like today’s entrepreneurs he was an innovator. We learn that he used his skill and his talents of rhetoric and debate much like a hammer – to promote God rather than vice.

Fruit: Are we ready to be sent? Have we experienced purification leading to transformation? What prevents us from going forth today?
The Seven Christian Virtues-1

‘I, Wisdom, Live with Prudence’ (Prov 8:12)
(This new 7-part series covers the Cardinal Virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance, and the Theological Virtues of faith, hope and charity)

A bright young woman I used to know had a father who laid down the law very sternly. When he forbade her to go out to parties at night, she defied him, and once got home in the early hours of the morning. The father opened the door and said to her, “Get out!” She did, never to return. She quickly got into a marriage, and died very young. Was her father’s action prudent? It was certainly one of the difficult decisions that parents have to make. But probably one that he regretted for the rest of his life.

An old proverb says that if we have no regrets we haven’t lived long enough. When we look back at the life we have lived what will be our deepest regret? Perhaps that in the name of prudence we were cowards. Prudence is one of the Cardinal Virtues (CCC 1805). However, it is not another name for timidity or fear, rather a call to discern what is the true way and the means to achieve it.

Jesus himself advises a prudent path. “Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, “This fellow began to build and was not able to finish”” (Lk 14:28-30). Jesus asks that we acquire the habit of discerning what is right and putting it into practice. We use our reason to discover what is right and act on it, and we pray that we may have God’s light and ‘wisdom’ (Prov 8:12) every step of the way. This natural virtue can thus assume a supernatural dimension through sanctifying grace.

An act of prudence goes through various stages:

a) We make the effort to understand what is right through careful thought and by asking others for counsel;
b) We judge correctly on the basis of the evidence we have;
c) We act according to the judgement we made.

Asking for counsel from people whose judgement we respect requires humility and courage. The counsel we receive must then be evaluated by us. Our Pope’s advice or that of a spiritual director is clearly to be taken more seriously than that of a casual acquaintance. We also need to consult our deepest selves and what feels right for our own calling or what the Japanese call our ikigai, our specific reason for living. A young football player will view his or her life differently from an old retired nurse. Prudence helps order our time, desires, actions and resources according to gospel values. Our goal is always to love God and neighbour and to discipline our selfish impulses.

What is to be done when, despite our efforts at prudence, we take a decision that turns out to have been mistaken? An atheist resisted his friend’s nudging to faith. He challenged him, “Ask your God what sins I have committed! Ask him if he can forgive!” The friend replied after prayer, “God says he does not remember your sins.”

We are only human. For mistakes we repent of, God’s loving forgiveness is total (Heb 8:12).

- Isabel Santa Rita Vas

Sunday, July 12, 2020
15th Sunday of Ordinary Time
Readings: Isa 55:10-11; Ps 64[65]:10-14; Rom 8:18-23; Mt 13:1-23
Focus: “Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain…” (Mt 13:8)

Someone gave me two seeds of a special variety of drumstick tree. In turn I gave one to a friend. My seed sprouted and the tree yielded some 500 drumsticks in the first crop alone. Sadly, my friend’s seed was gobbled by a chicken!

The seed (Gospel) is a fertile image even for those who are not farmers. What miracle keeps a tiny seed alive in the dark soil? Jesus points to the conditions that make his words life giving (Focus). Perhaps distractions make it difficult for us to read and ponder God’s word? Perhaps we do not water our understanding with meditation; we prattle, but fail to really listen? Or could the thorns be sinful attitudes, bad habits and the absence of prayer?

How fortunate were the disciples to hear Jesus in person! What if I had lived in the time of Christ? Would I have been receptive to his call, or as lazy and selfish as I am today?

It is comforting to remember that God’s grace is ever-present and innumerable persons through the ages fine-tuned their inner ear and heard the voice of God. These were the saints, like St Augustine, attentive to the soil of their lives. The precious seed yielded rich fruit at its appointed time.

Fruit: Do I tend the soil of my life by Scripture reading, contemplation, and prayer so that God’s word yields rich fruit in and through me?
Monday, July 13, 2020
St Henry
Readings: Isa 1:10-17; Ps 49[50]:8-9; 16-17, 21, 23; Mt 10:34 – 11:1
Focus: “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Mt 10:34)

Following Jesus needs great commitment. The “sword” (Focus) is often the painful consequence, signifying fraternal struggle (Gospel). Jesus came to bring not a peace that compromises, but one given to those who dare to believe and live in uprightness.

Conversion to Christ can result in strained family ties, violence, persecution, and even martyrdom, as was seen in the early Church. Following Christ presupposes a willingness to endure such trials. Jesus demands total commitment and surrender – this must form part of the message proclaimed to others. Christ lives in his people; to welcome his disciples is to welcome him.

Don’t we sacrifice home and family and go to any part of the world for better prospects? Yet when it comes to giving our life to Jesus, we put family first! Some cultures even have extreme family loyalty termed as ‘amoral familism’.

For a Christian, God must be first. Yet educated and affluent families often kill the religious call of their children. We must realise that ‘the first vocation of the Christian is to follow Jesus’ (CCC 2232). If we seek only success and comfort we will not be happy; for we were sent to serve God. We can hoard life, but we will lose all that makes life valuable.

Fruit: “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Mt 10:39).

Tuesday, July 14, 2020
St Camillus de Lellis
Readings: Isa 7:1-9; Ps 47[48]:2-8; Mt 11:20-24
Focus: “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!” (Mt 11:21)

Chorazin and Bethsaida were two cities north of the Sea of Galilee, close to Jesus’ base at Capernaum. All three were cold to his ministry.

To understand Jesus’ scathing indictment of these cities, we need to go to the preceding verses, where, having extolled the virtues of John the Baptist (Mt 11:11-15), he is critical of the faithless people of his generation (v. 16). Despite all his miracles of healing, they were disinclined to accept his invitation to embrace the kingdom.

His analogy of the children’s song (Mt 11:17), highlighted both the joyousness of a wedding (“we played the flute”) reflected in his ministry, and the solemnity of a funeral (“we wailed”) reflected in John the Baptist’s stern call to repentance. This served to caution the unbelievers to be discerning of the intrinsic merit of both these ministries, and to give up their irrational disbelief and opposition (v. 19).

Jesus’ caution however fell on deaf ears. The populace of these cities, privileged by Jesus’ presence and works, thus bore the greater guilt for rejecting him than even the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon. And Jesus was unsparing of them (Focus).

We, as beneficiaries of credible accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, need to take heed of his views on those who stubbornly reject the kingdom.

Fruit: I will be responsive to the signs of Christ’s saving presence in my life and so avoid his censure.

Wednesday, July 15, 2020
St Bonaventure
Readings: Isa 10:5-7, 13-16; Ps 93[94]:5-10, 14-15; Mt 11:25-27
Focus: “You have hidden these things from the wise … and have revealed them to infants” (Mt 11:25)

Critics of the Christian ministry in mission areas of India point out that it is usually illiterate tribes who are converted, more rarely the educated. The tribals they say are ‘easy targets’ since illiteracy is akin to stupidity. On the other hand, the educated are better informed and so harder to convince. While this may be partly true, one wonders: is Jesus belittling intelligence and praising ignorance (Gospel)? Is he condemning thinkers and endorsing simpletons?

No, no, no! The intellect and intelligence are God’s own gifts to us; why then would they be bad? It is intellectual pride that Jesus condemns, not the intellect. An ‘educated’ person who develops the attitude of ‘I know it all’ is unable to see or accept the “hidden” things that Jesus refers to (Focus). Arrogance and self-sufficiency blind him or her.

When Jesus mentions “infants” it is not stupidity or ignorance that he approves of, but humility. It is only through humility that we are able to understand these (hidden) things. These are the eternal truths of the kingdom that Jesus asks that we live by: love of God and neighbour, repentance, forgiveness, humility, selflessness and detachment from wealth. Sadly the world today advocates individualism, prosperity, pride, prestige and a ‘me first’ attitude.

Fruit: Have I succumbed to worldly values? Or am I wise enough to hold fast to God’s eternal truths?
Thursday, July 16, 2020
Our Lady of Mount Carmel
Readings: Isa 26:7-9, 12, 16-19; Ps 101[102]:13-21; Mt 11:28-30. In Masses of the BVM: Zech 2:14-17; Ps Lk 1:46-55; Mt 12:46-50
Focus: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me” (Mt 11:29)

Many of us wear the Brown Scapular on account of Mother Mary’s promise when she appeared to St Simon Stock, a Carmelite, that “Anyone dying in this habit shall not suffer eternal fire.”

Scapula = shoulder, but when Jesus says “Take my yoke” (Focus) it means far more than wearing a pious object on one’s person. Jesus would have known a lot about yokes. Perhaps he saw Joseph make or repair them. He would have seen teams of oxen yoked together to plough the land. The Romans also subjugated their captives by making them pass under a yoke – subjugam, in Latin.

Jesus calls us to surrender totally to him, to obey and to serve him, to live as he lived – to be ‘yoked’ to him (Gospel). In this union, our troubles become light as Jesus helps us carry our load.

When Jesus guides us, discipleship becomes easy. Following him is no longer irksome but becomes a way of life. In his will is our peace. He is “gentle and humble” (Mt 8:29). We learn from him if we cultivate the same virtues. Gradually we become one with him. While external objects make a statement about what we are, the way we live must proclaim, “I belong to Jesus. I am a Christian.”

Fruit: As we look at the crucifix in the home or car, let us pray, “Lord make me like you.”

Friday, July 17, 2020
Readings: Isa 38:1-6, 21-22, 7-8; Ps Isa 38:10-12, 16; Mt 12:1-8
Focus: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice…” (Mt 12:7)

God is a God of compassion and mercy, and he wants us to be like him. Unfortunately, we often miss the point. We think we please God or become righteous by praying the rosary, attending novenas or the Way of the Cross. All these things are beneficial but they should also make us more loving and sensitive towards others.

Do we assist the needy willingly? Are we forgiving when people offend us? Are we charitable when we speak about others? If not, where is the change of heart (Focus)?

In the First Reading we see how God himself is merciful and adds fifteen years to the life of King Hezekiah simply because he is moved by his prayer. And God goes all the way: he does not lose patience when Hezekiah asks for a sign but gives him one (Isa 38:7-8). He understands that Hezekiah is coming from a position of weakness.

Can I be like that?

Can I be more understanding of the elderly who perhaps don’t fit in with my plans? And kinder to the very young who often don’t know better? Or am I going to judge them only in terms of right and wrong, ‘should’ and ‘should not’?

Jesus ends the dramatic parable of the Good Samaritan with these challenging words: “Go and do likewise” (Lk 10:37). Can we?

Fruit: In addition to my devotions let me reach out to at least one person today in mercy.

Saturday, July 18, 2020
Readings: Mic 2:1-5; Ps 9:22-25, 28-29, 35 [Ps 10:1-4, 7-8, 14]; Mt 12:14-21
Focus: “He will not… quench a smouldering wick until he brings justice to victory” (Mt 12:20)

At an overnight picnic in a remote area we discovered that we had used our last match to light the fire and it was essential to keep the fire going till the next morning. Of course we forgot. When we awoke there was just a tiny ember left. And so we groaned and had to resign ourselves to neither coffee nor breakfast.

But one of us did not give up. He painstakingly blew on that ember and added straw and worked on it… and finally got a blaze going.

Today’s Focus offers a similar image of Christ gently and painstakingly working with hard-hearted me. He brings about the victory of justice without making waves. No hartals and morchas: “He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets” (Mt 12:19). Yet so-called ‘gone cases’ quietly change their lives every day.

Notwithstanding dire warnings given to ‘those who devise wickedness and evil deeds’ (Mic 2:1), God is merciful and accepts even the slightest inclination on our part to change. Despite the evil ways of wrongdoers (First Reading & Psalm) justice will eventually be restored (Focus).

How true it is that ‘in his name the Gentiles will hope’ (Mt 12:21)!

Fruit: God cares for me very deeply. Experiencing this makes me want to reach out to and care for others in the same way.
When God made the Earth, he filled it with every conceivable good thing for the enjoyment of his best creation: human beings. No matter how we lead our lives, God continues the pattern he ordained from the beginning of time. Unfortunately, we prefer to do things in our own way and interfere with his plans. Despite this, he continues to further his works.

On the personal level, besides the good people, some go around doing evil, sowing “weeds” (Gospel) and misleading others. But the patience of God is without measure. He bides his time. We often choose to follow. He watches as we proceed. He allows Good and Evil to co-exist (Focus), giving us a chance to reform ourselves, till the day he calls us back to him. This summarises his attitude.

We should learn to behave likewise. We should not be judgemental, categorising people or labelling them as “weeds” or “wheat.” That would be a horrible mistake. We must rather focus on our own spiritual progress and “shine like the sun” (Mt 13:43).

**Fruit:** Like “good seed” (Mt 13:24) we need to strive only to grow towards God and do his will.

**Fruit:** Let me abide by Jesus’ teachings, the greatest being to love the Lord with all my heart, mind and soul, and to love my neighbour as myself.

**Focus:** ‘What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?’ (Mic 6:8)

King David, above all things, was steadfast in his faith. He erred, but humbly acknowledged his sin before God. The Lord rewarded his son Solomon with unsurpassed wisdom, as Jesus mentioned (Mt 12:42). Solomon, however, got so consumed with himself that he forgot God who had bestowed on him this priceless gift. He went on to worship and serve other gods. This infuriated the Lord and Solomon’s progeny suffered the consequences.

In the Old Testament, we read of numerous instances of God’s people straying from him. God nevertheless loved them and was slow to reprimand (Mic 6:3). He was generously merciful when they repented. All that the Lord sought was for them to act justly, love tenderly and to walk humbly with him (Focus) – this he valued over any form of sacrifice. Like Solomon, we too falter when we take for granted our blessings and succumb to material and worldly pleasures. Realising our frailty, God sent his only son, Jesus, to save us. Jesus’ precepts which encapsulated the Law and the commandments were simple – to acknowledge our faults, to repent and to cleanse our hearts, lest we fall into ruin.

**Focus:** He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot’ (Mic 7:19)

Young people of the 1970s may remember tapping their feet to the catchy tune of By the Rivers of Babylon by Boney M. I learned decades later that the song is from Ps 136[137], a dirge sung by the Israelites yearning for their homeland while in exile.

Micah was just one of the many prophets who persistently warned the people to stay true to their covenant with God, lest they lose their land to invaders. Not only was their country invaded often, but their beloved temple in Jerusalem was desecrated and the people and artisans taken as captives to a foreign land. There they repented of their iniquities and turned to God again and again, pleading for his mercy and compassion (Focus).

Micah’s message (First Reading) is universal. We often ignore what is righteous in God’s eyes, even as we know it is meant for our good, thus deliberately moving out from under God’s mantle of protection. Only when things come crashing down around us, do we call on God’s compassion, asking him to overlook our wrongdoing (Psalm).

In today’s Gospel, Jesus endorses the relationship we share with him as family, when we hear and obey God – his and our heavenly Father.

**Fruit:** God’s word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path: a familial bond that unites me with Christ and gains for me his compassion.
Wednesday, July 22, 2020
St Mary Magdalene

Readings: Song 3:1-4 or 2 Cor 5:14-17; Ps 62[63]:2-6, 8-9; Jn 20:1-2, 11-18

Focus: ‘Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb...’ (Jn 20:1)

Are women the weaker sex? Maybe physically, but in all other ways it’s a big ‘No’.

A woman can singlehandedly run her home, raise her children and care for her sick and elderly. And even when she herself is ill or old she carries herself around and tries not to be a burden to others. Not so the man. And I say this although I’m male. The woman is emotionally and spiritually stronger. No wonder God said before creating Eve, “I will make him a helper as his partner” (Gen 2:18).

We see this clearly in today’s Gospel. Surely all the disciples loved Jesus, but who was the first to reach his tomb? Who must have not slept the previous night thinking about “where can I reach his tomb? Who must have not slept the previous night thinking about “where can I reach his tomb? Who was there during the watches of the night?” (Song 3:1, Ps 62[63]:6)? Mary Magdalene. She was there during his suffering and death, burial, and now ‘early on the first day’ at his tomb (Focus). The men perhaps were blissfully slumbering!

No wonder Jesus appeared to her first and gave her the opportunity to be the first to proclaim his resurrection (Jn 20:17)... just as our mothers and grandmothers were probably the first to tell us about Jesus when we were young.

Fruit: Let us honour and respect the women in our lives as well as those we come across each day.

Thursday, July 23, 2020
St Bridget of Sweden

Readings: Jer 2:1-3, 7-8, 12-13; Ps 35[36]:6-11; Mt 13:10-17

Focus: “Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear” (Mt 13:16)

The Holy Spirit reveals the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven only to true disciples (Gospel) because ‘no one can say “Jesus is Lord” without the Spirit (1 Cor 12:3). Blessed indeed are those who see beyond the visible, hear beyond the audible and touch the intangible (Focus).

The words and works of Christ fall like grace and truth upon our hearts, giving us spiritual sight and hearing. This grace and truth make us contemplate and be in constant dialogue with Jesus, listening to his every word. Contemplation stirs our desire to search our hearts and feel a sense of sin and the need to be freed from it. Only Jesus can release us from our guilt and help us to commit our lives entirely to him and follow him at all times.

As we revive our spiritual sight and hearing, we long to experience the glory of God. We put aside our old self and evil deeds to be born again in the image of God, so that Jesus can become our everything.

We then become true disciples of Jesus like St Bridget. Her visions of Christ crucified were the basis of her spirituality. She was able to put the word into action, bearing witness to the validity of a holy life in daily activities.

Fruit: Are we true disciples of Jesus who can see and hear and touch the kingdom of heaven?

Friday, July 24, 2020
St Charbel Makhluf

Readings: Jer 3:14-17; Ps Jer 31:10-13; Mt 13:18-23

Focus: ‘I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding’ (Jer 3:15)

“The water met its Master and blushed.” This is not an inspired explanation of the miracle at Cana by a Doctor of the Church, but a charming line penned by Richard Crashaw, an English poet and convert to Catholicism. Many times ordinary people by the power of the Holy Spirit have given witness and testimony as good if not better than the consecrated.

Many people come into our lives and at times we fail to recognize their significance. Are we conditioned to search for ‘knowledge and understanding’ (Focus) only in priests or people with multiple degrees, or do we see in our simple sisters and brothers qualities we can gainfully imitate?

The Lord promised Israel that he would give them shepherds after his own heart (First Reading). And Jesus, “the good shepherd” (Jn 10:11), was the supreme one. If we emulate Jesus we too will have a heart that beats for the poor and the lonely. Those we despise – like the office colleague who is not so efficient but is caring and compassionate to the peon or guard or worker – also have such a heart.

St Charbel Makhluf, a Maronite monk and priest from Lebanon, was a caring shepherd. He lived a holy and ascetic life and was a powerful intercessor.

Fruit: Lord, give me an understanding heart to reach out and comfort another person today.
Saturday, July 25, 2020
St James
Readings: 2 Cor 4:7-15; Ps 125[126]:1-6; Mt 20:20-28
Focus: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28)

St James was one of the three apostles who witnessed the Transfiguration of Jesus, his raising to life of the daughter of Jairus, and the Agony in the Garden. James was also the first apostle to be martyred (Acts 12:2).

Through the lives of the saints we learn how they lived and shared a beautiful life experience with Jesus. St Paul wanted the Corinthians to have the same experience as the apostles and disciples, saying these were ‘always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible’ (2 Cor 4:10).

Can we too take this message to heart? We need to carry the death of Jesus in our bodies, so that his life can be seen through our words and actions. Jesus is the living example of how to do this. He says that he “came not to be served, but to serve” (Focus).

If we live our lives like Jesus, not lording it over others, but selflessly serving them (Mt 20:25-27), we can bring many hearts to God. Through us, God’s graces will flow to many more, thus making them instruments to glorify the Lord.

Fruit: Let us ask the Lord to make us his instruments of loving service to others. All we need is to be good and to do good.

Sunday, July 26, 2020
17th Sunday of Ordinary Time
Readings: 1 Kings 3:5, 7-12; Ps 118[119]:57, 72, 76-77, 127-130; Rom 8:28-30; Mt 13:44-52
Focus: “The kingdom of heaven” (Mt 13:44, 45, 47)

Does Jesus use the word “kingdom” to mean a territory? Or the reign of God?

It would seem that when we experience the reign of God personally, God dwells in our hearts and we become the ‘territory’ for him to reside and rule. Then, like the pearl merchant (Gospel), we experience the immense joy of discovery – the acquisition of a priceless treasure that represents salvation in the person of Jesus, the only way to the Father and eternal bliss. Indeed, “the kingdom of heaven” (Focus).

To find Jesus, it is worth sacrificing everything that prevents us from possessing this priceless treasure. In human understanding, this can be likened to when a mother gives birth to a child – she is so bonded to her baby that she is prepared to give up anything for the infant. Even her life, if it comes to the crunch!

Can we say the same of our experience of Jesus and the salvation he offers? If not, why not?

What is it that prevents me from giving up everything, that I may have Jesus in my life? Is he not worth the cost? Or do I feel the price is so high that I would rather walk away from the joy of knowing Jesus and his rule over my life?

Fruit: I will introspect on what holds me back from allowing God to reign in my heart, and I will work towards overcoming these blocks.

Monday, July 27, 2020
Blessed Rudolph Acquaviva & Companions
Readings: Jer 13:1-11; Ps Deut 32:18-21; Mt 13:31-35
Focus: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field” (Mt 13:31)

Today’s Focus, as also the whole Bible, can teach us so much if we dwell on it by breaking it down. We could do it as a useful family exercise. Every person, including each child, shares a line from a reading of the day, making Bible sharing the main dinner table conversation.

Jesus mentions the kingdom of heaven and tells us what it is (Gospel). Heaven is God’s kingdom, where he reigns and his laws are obeyed in their totality. He then describes it as “like a mustard seed”. Why such a tiny seed for comparison?

The greatest achievements have had small beginnings. Microsoft started out of a garage, so did many other significant endeavours. We must sow the idea in the right place! It has to be planted in a fertile field, that is, our family. If it were sown in a pot it would not become a tree.

When we start truly living the gospel, God’s kingdom will extend to our family and the neighbourhood, and will continue spreading like a tree that never stops growing. Like the birds, all will gather into it to take shelter there, and find the peace that only God can give.

Fruit: Let us begin this exercise of discussing the Bible reading of the day at our dinner table and sow the seeds of God’s kingdom in our family.
Tuesday, July 28, 2020
St Alphonsa Muttathupadathu
Readings: Jer 14:17-22; Ps 78[79]:8-9, 11, 13; Mt 13:36-43
Focus: ‘Let your compassion come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low’ (Ps 78[79]:8)

Today’s readings remind us of the presence of evil in the world. We hardly need a reminder as in our own daily things are ‘worse now than then’ (from the song One Day at a Time). We see a ravaged environment with consequent disastrous climate changes. Diseases are being manufactured as weapons of mass destruction. The list of evil is without end. I am often asked, “If God exists, why does he allow such terrible things to happen?”

We blame God, forgetting that he has given us free will which he respects. It is our sinfulness that causes all these calamities. We are living in a way which is against the law of God. In the First Reading Jeremiah admits ‘we have sinned against you’ (Jer 14:20), and he reveals how God feels about all he sees on earth (Jer 14:17-18).

Still, our God is compassionate. He listens to our heartfelt prayers. We need to stand in the gap between sinful humankind and a loving but justice loving God. We need to cry out for mercy on behalf of ourselves and those who reject him.

Today we celebrate the feast of the first canonised Indian woman. Her greatness lay in her powerful prayers of intercession. That is something we can all emulate. Hence today’s Focus.

Fruit: Let us recite the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, keeping sinners and our ‘enemies’ in mind.

Wednesday, July 29, 2020
St Martha
Readings: 1 Jn 4:7-16; Ps 33[34]:2-11; Jn 11:19-27 or Lk 10:38-42
Focus: ‘If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us’ (1 Jn 4:12)

Today’s readings are both about love, but they could be confusing. Should we concentrate on loving God in others (First Reading), or on spending quality time with Jesus alone (Lk 10:38-42)?

When guests come over isn’t it right to entertain them? That’s Martha – a perfectionist who leaves no stone unturned in serving the Lord. Mary on the other hand sits quietly at the feet of Christ, just listening. Many would call Mary lazy. Or even selfish. Yet Jesus says, “Mary has chosen the better part” (Lk 10:42).

My colleague could spare only a short time to visit her close friend before leaving for another country. Knowing the friend would prepare a whole lot of things to eat if she phoned in advance, she paid her a surprise visit. She announced that she had only thirty minutes and could they just talk instead of the formality of coffee and snacks? But her friend insisted on preparing a dish and then serving it. As a result they hardly talked except for hullo, goodbye and a few trivialities!

I wonder about the relationship Martha and Mary had with Christ. And my own relationship. In the hurly-burly of serving Christ in my neighbour am I forgetting to keep time for personal prayer?

Fruit: How will I balance time spent serving Christ in others with time spent exclusively with him?

Thursday, July 30, 2020
St Peter Chrysologus
Readings: Jer 18:1-6; Ps 145[146]:2-6; Mt 13:47-53
Focus: ‘Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand’ (Jer 18:6)

Let us stop for a moment and look at ourselves in the mirror. Aren’t we fearfully and wonderfully made? Indeed we are – fashioned out of the dust of the earth by an awesome God, whose breath keeps us alive!

Why then do many of us nurse inferiority complexes about our bodies? ‘I am dark. I am short. I am ugly...’ Since we are God-made, should we not look at ourselves through his eyes and not the world’s? After all, as today’s Focus emphasises, we are like clay in God’s hands.

How many of us look beyond our physical characteristics and reflect on the higher purpose our existence? In 2 Cor 4:7, St Paul refers to us as ‘clay jars’ filled with treasure, which is nothing but the explosive power of the gospel that we carry in our fragile bodies.

We are nothing without God, but everything with him. Our flaws and our weaknesses are indeed made perfect in his strength.

So let us continue being vessels of his Good News – sharing his amazing love, joy, peace, mercy and grace with our fellow beings, to the ends of the earth. Then we can be sure that “at the end of the age” (Mt 13:49), the angels will gather us with the righteous.

Fruit: Today I will discern God’s plan for my life and allow him to mould me for his glory.
Friday, July 31, 2020
St Ignatius of Loyola
Readings: Jer 26:1-9; Ps 68(69):5, 8-10, 14; Mt 13:54-58
Focus: “You shall die! Why have you prophesied in the name of the Lord?” (Jer 26:8-9)
‘Speaking truth to power’ is a non-violent way of fighting against oppression or authoritarianism. It is to point out what people in authority are doing wrong. However, as we know, it can be a high-risk exercise – a sure way to attract criticism, violence, land in jail, or even endanger one’s life.

That is what Jeremiah learned when he warned the people to turn from their wicked ways and so escape the Lord’s wrath (First Reading). The priests and people listened patiently to every word Jeremiah had to say. Then they decided that the best way to respond would be to kill him (Focus)! We too may be put to the ‘speaking truth’ test at some time. And advice to keep quiet or look the other way may come from our friends or those dear to us who fear trouble from people in power. Jesus himself was well received by the Samaritans, but faced ridicule and opposition from his own people (Gospel). And he ultimately paid with his life.

Some fare better. St Ignatius was brought before the Roman Inquisition who did not quite like his Spiritual Exercises. But he was later released and the book received approval. The Exercises have helped millions discern the will of God in their lives.

Fruit: When I notice something wrong, the safest thing usually is to keep quiet. But is that the will of God for me?

Saturday, August 01, 2020
St Alphonsus Liguori
Readings: Jer 26:11-16, 24; Ps 68(69):15-16, 30-31, 33-34; Mt 14:1-12
Focus: “Amend your ways... and the Lord will change his mind about the disaster that he has pronounced against you” (Jer 26:13)
As I write this, the world is engulfed in the Covid-19 pandemic that has already infected millions of people, and claimed the lives of tens of thousands. Lockdowns have been imposed in many countries including India and they have brought everything to a standstill. The positive is that it has kept us indoors where we are able to spend time with our families as well as to reflect and pray. It makes us realise how fragile we are.

Where is the work of our hands and the gods we made out of material things? One viral message sums it up: ‘The coronavirus has shown that everything around us is temporary. Things our lives revolved around... work, gym, malls, movies, society have all gone for a toss as we learn to live without them. It has taught us that in the end, it’s our own home and family that keeps us safe.’

Yes, this calamity has come upon us to make us realise that we need to mend our ways and our doings and listen to God, much as Jeremiah exhorted the cities of Judah to do (First Reading). Only then will God take away the disaster that has afflicted us (Focus).

Fruit: Let us pray unceasingly that the Lord delivers us from the pandemic or praise him if it has passed by the time this is read.

Sunday, August 02, 2020
18th Sunday of Ordinary Time,
Day of Diocesan Clergy
Readings: Isa 55:1-3; Ps 144(145): 8-9, 15-18; Rom 8:35, 37-39; Mt 14:13-21
Focus: “You give them something to eat” (Mt 14:16)
Lost in the gloom of the Covid-19 lockdown are some amazing stories of people reaching out and cooking for migrants (Focus), delivering supplies, or standing in queues for disabled or elderly people.

We realise we have plenty, if shared. As Jesus promised the Samaritan woman, if we drink from him we will never thirst (Jn 4:14).

Today’s Psalm tells of God’s generous hand that satisfies ‘the desire of every living thing’ (Ps 144(145):16). In the First Reading, he invites all who are thirsty and hungry (Isa 55:1). In fact he has been generous from the beginning of time.

Just being born and getting a life is a great sign of God’s generosity. And each of us is called to be generous in our own way with our own resources.

When the lockdown began most of us thought we did not have enough. Yet in the thick of it, I found there was a surplus. Then what stopped me from behaving generously in the past? Was it fear of a shortage of food or clothing, or a meagre salary, or fear of violence?

My greatest resource is my own body, mind, time and energy that no one can take from me. I can give of them to anyone at any time with my free will.

Fruit: From today I will combine my resources of time and energy and my God-given hidden skills to behave more generously than before.
Monday, August 03, 2020

Readings: Jer 28:1-17; Ps 118[119]:29, 43, 79-80, 95, 102; Mt 14:22-36

Focus: “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Mt 14:31)

We have all experienced Jesus reaching out to us in difficult situations and bringing us to safety. Though we saw it as a miracle at the time, we soon forgot. And when the next storm hit us, we again became worried and afraid.

That is what happens in today’s Gospel. Jesus had just multiplied the bread and fish, but the very next morning, fear grips the disciples’ hearts when Jesus comes walking towards them on the water. They take Jesus for a ghost, because their mind is on the gusty wind and the waves that batter their boat, not on Jesus.

Jesus assures them that it is he, and Peter’s faith soars! He walks on the water towards Jesus, feels the wind and starts sinking. He instantly cries out to Jesus and is saved. Jesus assures them that he is in control.

Likewise our faith graph goes up and down depending on what we focus on. Nothing pleases God more than if our eyes are fixed on him, knowing that he is in control. It must sadden him when those who claim to believe in him do not have faith in him.

Fruit: I will strive by God’s grace to live by faith and help to strengthen others in faith in times of crisis.

Daily Flash makes a good gift!

Tuesday, August 04, 2020

St John Vianney

Readings: Jer 30:1-2, 12-15, 18-22; Ps 101[102]: 16-23, 29; Mt 15:1-2, 10-14

Focus: “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat” (Mt 15:2)

In the days of the Covid-19 pandemic, we would have criticized anyone who did not wash their hands on entering the house, or before meals, and perhaps even insisted that they do so. This was for hygienic reasons and not a meaningless ritual.

The Pharisees though were puzzled that the disciples of Jesus did not follow the ritual of washing their hands before meals, as was “the tradition of the elders” (Focus). The important and real reason for washing seemed to have been forgotten.

For the Jews being clean was a state in which they worshipped God; uncleanness precluded them from doing so. Sadly, they misinterpreted it to mean ritualistic, external practices. Jesus challenged them on this and strongly suggested that one has to be spiritually clean to commune with God (Gospel).

We Catholics are privileged to have the Sacrament of Reconciliation – a cleansing of the soul – so as to approach and worship God worthily.

St John Vianney sat for hours together to offer this sacrament to people who came to him from far and near. He averaged 20,000 penitents a year! Obviously, they experienced the healing of soul and body that a well prepared, good confession brings.

Fruit: Let us resolve to frequent the Sacrament of Reconciliation that we may be cleansed from within.

Wednesday, August 05, 2020

Dedication of Basilica of St Mary Major

Readings: Jer 31:1-7; Ps Jer 31:10-13; Mt 15:21-28

Focus: “Woman, great is your faith!” (Mt 15:28)

Faith is the key for God to work miracles. I heard a mother recount how her daughter had discovered a small lump under her arm, and the doctor fixed a date for a biopsy. The mother, a truly spiritual woman, stormed heaven. The next morning, the doctor could not find the lump! The doctor (not a Christian) knew the ardent faith of the mother and told the daughter smilingly that her mother prayed so fervently that the lump disappeared.

This is the type of faith we should have – an expectant faith that moves mountains.

A more sustained kind of faith was required of the Jews who were taken into captivity and exiled. For them, having faith meant believing that the Lord would see them through, and remaining faithful to him. This must have been extremely difficult in their wretchedness, but those who believed were indeed rewarded although many years later. They were returned to Israel and the Lord renewed his promise to them: ‘I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people’ (Jer 31:1).

The Canaanite woman, an ‘outsider’, had the required kind of faith (Gospel). Despite being humiliated, her faith did not waver, and Jesus rewarded her. He also commended her for her faith (Focus).

What would Jesus say about my faith?

Fruit: This kind of unshakeable faith is a gift of God. Let me ask God to grant it to me.


**Thursday, August 06, 2020**

Transfiguration of the Lord

**Readings:** Dan 7:9-10, 13-14 or 2 Pet 1:16-19; Ps 96[97]:1-2, 5-6, 9; Mt 17:1-9

**Focus:** “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” (Mt 17:5)

Today’s Gospel episode occurs soon after Jesus has explained to his disciples why he must undergo suffering and death—a concept that Peter simply could not understand.

Most of us too grow up with this same attitude of yearning for a life free of suffering. We are resentful of the trials we have to undergo and ask God, “Why me?” It is also why people flock to retreat centres in search of healings and miracles. However this approach undergoes a radical change when a ‘God experience’ happens and God makes his presence felt to us in a very individual and personal way.

Today’s readings tell of Peter’s life changing experience and also of God’s clear revelation that obedience to his will, as Jesus showed, is the only way to glorify the Father.

In the Transfiguration of Jesus, the Father gives us a glimpse of the life that is in store for us, filled with the splendour of holiness (Gospel). Following Jesus is the only way to glorify the Father.

That is why we see a more enlightened Peter exhorting us to be attentive to the important aspect of being obedient to the will of God in our lives (2 Pet 1:19).

**Fruit:** I will accept suffering as the will of God in order that I may receive honour and glory from God in the life to come.

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**Friday, August 07, 2020**

Sts Xystus II & Companions, St Cajetan

**Readings:** Nah 2:1, 3, 3:1-3, 6-7; Ps Deut 32:35-36, 39, 41; Mt 16:24-28

**Focus:** “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mt 16:24)

The abrupt imposition of the Covid-19 lockdown was a time of introspection for many. With TV channels reporting a growing death toll, surely the thought that a lavish lifestyle and accumulated wealth was useless if we were to die, may have crossed many a mind. It is no surprise then that we started turning a lot more to God in our time of anguish and in the hope of being saved.

We have heard the Gospel of today countless times – Jesus asking us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him (Focus). But after years of toil and gathering riches could we even think of walking away from it all and following him?

Well, Jesus does not force us to abandon everything for him. He is not against us being successful or even wealthy. But what he asks is that we should not accumulate or hoard more than we need. We should live a life that he recommends—a life of sacrifice and self-denial. To gain eternal happiness he tells us to detach ourselves from worldly possessions, follow him, and live as he lived—frugally, shunning luxury, and putting others first.

**Fruit:** Worldly pursuits have blinded me and filled me with wrong values. I will seek the Lord’s help to correct my course, embrace my cross, and follow in his footsteps.

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**Saturday, August 08, 2020**

St Dominic

**Readings:** Hab 1:12 – 2:4; Ps 9:8-13; Mt 17:14-20

**Focus:** “Nothing will be impossible for you” (Mt 17:20)

Years ago, in the midst of a difficult situation, I sensed God saying that he has given his children a heart to have faith in him. His words took root in me and, as my faith grew and blossomed, so too did my understanding of that profound truth.

Today’s Gospel reveals Jesus’ frustration at the disciples’ “little faith” and his appeal to have “faith the size of a mustard seed” (v. 20). So, what’s the difference? In addition to the self-doubt that the disciples had, Jesus was indicating the smugness of their faith. Faith cannot remain static but must grow and produce fruit for the Church and the world. Just as a mustard seed has life within it causing it to grow, faith too should pulsate with life.

In contrast with the disciples’ attitude, Habakkuk, although dismayed at the blatant wrongdoing of the wicked, still waited for and trusted God’s promises (First Reading). That’s the power of faith—a willingness to wait on God.

St Dominic effected a tremendous spiritual renewal through faith in Christ. His spirit of moderation, clarity of thought and burning zeal for souls are the heritage of the Dominican Order.

Eventually the disciples did the “impossible” (Focus). They took Christ to the ends of the world and to us who are reaping the benefits to this day.

**Fruit:** By nourishing my faith with prayer and good works, I can overcome mountain-like trials.
Is the Death Penalty Christian?

When a heinous murder or a monstrous rape is committed there is instant outrage, often followed by a vociferous demand to apprehend the criminal and impose the death penalty. However, is the desire for the culprit’s death a Christian sentiment?

From the Fifth Commandment “You shall not murder” (Ex 20:13) stems the Christian’s basic respect for human life. God himself created us which makes him the absolute Lord of life and renders human life sacred. The right to take away life rests exclusively with God and under no circumstances can anyone appropriate this right (CCC 2258-2262). Cain murdered his brother Abel and God punished him for it. But, despite Cain’s grave sin, the Lord upheld Cain’s own right to life and protected him from being killed (Gen 4:15).

Jesus himself taught against retaliation and preached love even for the enemy (Mt 5:38-39, 44). He ordered Peter to put his sword back in its place when Peter sought to defend him from those who came to arrest him (Mt 26:52). He declared that he had come “to seek out and to save the lost” (Lk 19:10), not to condemn the world, “but in order that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3:17, 8:11). A moment of repentance on the cross next to Jesus won the criminal a pardon for all his sins and an assurance of Paradise that very day (Lk 23:43).

In the past the death penalty was considered just and appropriate, if preceded by a fair trial. But today there is growing awareness that the perpetrator’s dignity is not lost despite the crime. Consequently, the Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that “the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person”.

and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide’ (revision of CCC 2267).

Some decades ago, a mother and child were murdered in Goa. When the murderer was tried and sentenced to death, the then Bishop made an appeal that he be spared the death penalty. Many including Catholics did not appreciate this stand and the then Chief Minister even voiced criticism of it. But the Bishop was already speaking the mind of the Church which has become official only recently.

Sr Rani Maria was murdered by Samundra Singh in 1995 at Udainagar, Madhya Pradesh. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. Sr Rani’s younger sister, Sr Selmy Paul, visited Singh in prison in 2002 and, in a sisterly gesture, tied a rakhi to his hand. This sign of forgiveness led to Singh’s repentance and a total change of heart. He was released in 2006 at the request of Sr Rani’s family and Catholic leaders.

Much of the western world has thankfully abolished the death penalty in tune with its Christian ethos even if it is otherwise lacking in Christian fervour. Christians do not encourage or condone murder, rape or crimes of any kind. We are justified in seeking their prevention and punishment of the criminal. But not in demanding the death of the offender. The stance of the Bishop and Sr Rani’s family in the above situations exemplifies what should be our Christian approach. Reformation and not elimination of the wrongdoer is in harmony with Jesus’ teachings and with an enlightened world.

- Eurico Noronha

Sunday, August 09, 2020

19th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Day of Prison Ministry

Readings: 1 Kings 19:9, 11-13; Ps 84[85]:9-14; Rom 9:1-5, Mt 14:22-33

Focus: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid” (Mt 14:27)

While on a mission in the Philippines, walking to church when a volcano erupted, we were greeted by ash blown by winds 40 km away! We needed a visa extension but the offices were closed due to the ash fall. All flights were cancelled. While packing the only briefcase we were allowed, and moving to the evacuation centre, we prayed Ps 90[91] and praised God knowing he was in control. And we heard him say, “Take heart… do not be afraid” (Focus).

Miraculously we reached safety. Two days later the immigration offices reopened, our visas were extended, and we attended the remaining mission. Although chaos was everywhere and thousands were stranded at the airport, we managed to leave the Philippines on schedule. God is indeed faithful!

Back in India, the storm was different. It was a pandemic. Our only possible response was faith.

Like Elijah we encounter God personally as he reveals himself to us (First Reading). With Peter we cry out “Lord, save me!” (Mt 14:30). And heeding Paul, we must do all it takes to help the faith of those around us (Second Reading). Jesus taught us to make prayer our refuge, so we must ‘hear what God the Lord will speak’ (Ps 84[85]:9) even when beset by confusion and distress.

Fruit: Let us “take heart” in times of trouble. Prayer, scripture and the Eucharist all help build our faith.
Monday, August 10, 2020
St Lawrence
Readings: 2 Cor 9:6-10; Ps 111[112]:1-2, 5-9; Jn 12:24-26
Focus: "If it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn 12:24)

Various films on the life of Christ make his suffering and death very vivid. It is difficult to grasp what was in the mind of Jesus as he contemplated his imminent death. We hear his cry: "Father, if it is possible let this cup pass from me" (Mt 26:39).

Jesus was not keen to die. However, he was determined to complete what he was sent for.

Jesus also perceived the confusion of his disciples who realised that the opposition from the authorities was growing scary. Yet he 'knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father' (Jn 13:1).

In today's Gospel, he prepares them for his death in his usual way of presenting them with images: a seed that dies is the one that bears fruit.

A compelling image: take a seed from its safety in the granary, push it underground; it decomposes in darkness and dies... then sprouts to yield "much fruit" (Focus).

If we could ask the seed if it wanted to die, it would think we were crazy. Do we want to die?

Jesus died to fulfil his mission, so did St Lawrence. And so must we – each day a new death to selfishness, eventually taking the last breath that ushers us into the presence of God.

Fruit: Knowing that my suffering can give God an opportunity to make me fruitful, can I face it with a prayer of faith?

Tuesday, August 11, 2020
St Clare
Readings: Ezek 2:8 – 3:4; Ps 118[119]:14, 24, 72, 103, 111, 131; Mt 18:1-5, 10, 12-14
Focus: "It is not the will of your Father… that one of these little ones should be lost" (Mt 18:14)

Between God and human beings, attitude is everything. The right attitude will see us through, the wrong one draws us unto condemnation.

It is by attitude that we view God as "Father" (Focus). Jesus seeks to inculcate in us the right attitude by reversing the impulses of the flesh. His call is not to be great but to decrease, that he might increase. This, St Clare manifested so well.

'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble' (1 Pet 5:5). He does not take pleasure in our humiliation. He wants us to empty ourselves only to make more room without obstacles for his grace (St Josemaría Escrivá).

The devil put the wrong attitude in the hearts of Adam and Eve by making them suspect the love of God. Everything else in the Bible and salvation history shows God's tireless attempts to reveal the truth about himself and restore his relationship with us. His love is so deep that he leaves ninety-nine sheep on the mountain and goes in search of the lost sheep, and he rejoices on finding it more than over the ninety-nine that never strayed (Gospel).

Christianity is often not about learning new things, but about unlearning wrong notions that we have acquired from the world around us.

Fruit: Let us change and become like children that we may enter the kingdom of heaven.

Wednesday, August 12, 2020
St Jane Frances de Chantal
Readings: Ezek 9:1-7, 10:18-22; Ps 112[113]:1-6; Mt 18:15-20
Focus: "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Mt 18:18)

Today's Gospel covers two aspects of Church discipline: one, the source of the authority to impose such discipline, and the other, the manner in which the Church leaders are to exercise that authority.

At Mt 16:19, Jesus specifically invests Peter with the authority of being the visible head of the Church. A derivative is now vested in the apostles (Focus). The authority that Jesus imparts is directed towards upholding Church discipline. It is also a sacramental authority to forgive sins (CCC 553, 1444).

Regarding the practical exercise of this grave authority, Jesus advises a three-step process in which he places emphasis on reconciliation first (Mt 18:15-17). Yet, if a member of the Church still resists correction, the Church leaders may exercise the authority Christ himself has given them to severely discipline the impenitent person (CCC 1463).

The process of linking the imposition of discipline in the Church with the forgiveness of sin is, despite the criticism it often attracts, a humane and equitable process that reflects the merciful nature of God. All the more reason for us Catholics to avail of the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a means of maintaining our peace with God!

Fruit: I will avail of the forgiveness of a merciful Father by sincere and regular confession.
Thursday, August 13, 2020
Sts Pontian & Hippolytus

Readings: Ezek 12:1-12; Ps 77[78]:56-59, 61-62; Mt 18:21 -19:1

Focus: “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Mt 18:35)

Why does Jesus insist that we must forgive from the heart (today’s Gospel)? The ‘heart’ is the symbolic centre of our being. All our ambitions, dreams, decisions; all we do and say has its origin in the heart. True forgiveness flows from a heart that has itself experienced forgiveness and values it.

We normally speak about the importance of giving and seeking forgiveness to bring healing to a broken relationship. Words can help to begin the process, but the fruit of forgiveness is in the action. When forgiveness begins and flows from the heart, it has an impact on the one who is forgiven as well as on the one forgiving.

Reflecting on the two men who went to the temple to pray (Lk 18:9-14) we can surmise that the Pharisee did not experience forgiveness because he did not think he needed it, whereas the tax collector “went down to his home justified” because he had experienced forgiveness. Which of these two would be most likely to forgive from the heart?

We see a reflection of the words of Jesus (Focus) in the prayer he taught us, the Our Father. Do we realise that we can ask the Lord to forgive us only to the extent (“as”) we forgive others?

Fruit: What hidden fears obstruct my desire to forgive from the heart?

Friday, August 14, 2020
St Maximilian Kolbe

Readings: Ezek 16:1-15, 60, 63 or Ezek 16:59-63; Ps Isa 12:2-6; Mt 19:3-12

Focus: “So, they are no longer two, but one flesh” (Mt 19:6)

No occasion is celebrated with greater joy, expense and splendour than a wedding. There is a good reason for this: the sacrament of marriage is a one-time event that marks the beginning of a new life for the couple, who make solemn vows of lifelong commitment to each other (Focus) before God and the community. Jesus himself blessed marriage (Gospel). Alas, there is a huge and growing pile of applications for divorce and annulment. The reasons may or may not be valid, but one casualty is the death of the ideal of self-giving and commitment.

We would do well to examine our own marriages. Marriage is intended by God to be a relationship of equals that enriches both partners. Each must find in the other a friend, companion, confidante, supporter and lover. Such intimacy can produce the fruit of fulfillment through the mental and emotional wellbeing of both. Spouses who respect each other’s differences, and are willing to serve one another, make good and successful marriages. If we have fallen short of this ideal, we can still seek to restore what is missing. Let us start by reconnecting through conversation, look for opportunities to show care and concern, take genuine interest in the other, and stop taking each other for granted.

Fruit: Let me thank God for my spouse and ask God to bless us as we strive to please him in all things.

Saturday, August 15, 2020
Assumption of B.V. Mary, Independence Day

Readings: Rev 11:19, 12:1-6, 10; Ps 44[45]:10-12, 16; 1 Cor 15:20-27; Lk 1:39-56. Independence Day: Jdt 13:18-20, 14:9; Ps 1 Sam 2:1, 4-7; Gal 5:13-17; Lk 1:46-55

Focus: “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord” (Lk 1:45)

What made Mary “blessed”? Elizabeth says it was because she believed what God had told her (Focus). This belief makes Mary the woman full of grace ‘with the moon under her feet’ (Rev 12:1). The Almighty does great things for her, and she does not take the credit but magnifies his name (Lk 1:49).

‘She, by an entirely unique privilege, completely overcame sin by her Immaculate Conception, and as a result she was not subject to the law of remaining in the corruption of the grave, and she did not have to wait until the end of time for the redemption of her body’ (Munificentissimus Deus, 5). Her Assumption into heaven body and soul logically follows (MD, 44).

In this moment of history the world feels helpless in the wake of the coronavirus attack. But our faith in God’s mighty power is renewed. I wonder what Mary would have done in our situation. For one thing she would have obeyed the law and looked for ways to help others, just as she went to assist Elizabeth in her late pregnancy. As with Mary, our hearts will be telling us to look after each other, protect each other and benefit each other.

Fruit: In what way can I help to make our sick world more healthy and God-focused? Like Mary I will believe, praise God and serve others.
Wings in a Wheelchair

‘He is not far from each one of us’ (Acts 17:27). Touched by this scripture verse, retracing my life in prayer and with sorrowful heart, I retire to bed. And before dawn breaks I awake, turning my eyes to my Lord. Sometimes I echo the psalmist: ‘Out of my distress I called on the Lord.’ (Ps 117[118]:5). God reminds me time and again through his word, ‘I have called you by name, you are mine’ (Isa 43:1). It is an invitation to be his feet, to walk in his footsteps, and to be a voice that speaks his message. My life testifies that God doesn’t make junk out of anyone. He uses broken things beautifully for his glory.

The word of God takes me to the heart of faith: ‘In their distress they will beg my favour’ (Hos 5:15). So I throw myself at the Lord’s feet. The things that I enjoyed in my life then seemed of little value. But now confined to the four walls of my bedroom I realise how good they were. Just lying in bed seemed blissful then but now it seems like I’m in prison, slowly dying with eyes wide open. Indeed a sick bed is the most exclusive bed as nobody can use it except the victim. Yet I’m looking not for what I’ve lost but to what I’ve gained. It’s painful but I believe that my most painful memories will fade in the heavenly light of God’s awesome love.

The thought of a wheelchair used to disgust me. But I realise that without it I would be stuck in one place. God wants me to step out of my discomfort zone (wheelchair) and do small things with great love. Today, I see my wheelchair gratefully – it takes me where I need to go. It’s like sitting on Jesus’ shoulder, and I know he will carry me through. Nothing ahead of me is greater than his power.

It is also immensely comforting to know that Jesus understands exactly what I’m going through because he has been through much more than this – physical as well as mental torture we can’t fathom. He recognises the heaviness of my grief and sees my troubled heart. He will restore my lost life and I will walk for his glory someday.

A physical healing is temporary but the healing of faith lasts for eternity. God’s word encourages me and brings hope, and creates a vision for my life. So I look forward expectantly to the future – not counting my years of immobility and suffering but the blessings that continue to overwhelm me. I want to be faithful to my Lord by not complaining but being a walking sermon. I know he will strengthen me even to ‘mount up with wings like eagles’ (Isa 40:31).

- Iris Fernandes

Sunday, August 16, 2020

20th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Day for Justice & Peace

Readings: Isa 56:1, 6-7; Ps 66(67):2-3, 5-6, 8; Rom 11:13-15, 29-32; Mt 15:21-28

Focus: “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table” (Mt 15:27)

Today’s Gospel can be summed up by the message of restoring human dignity. It seems to me that by using the metaphor of dogs, Jesus is not so much devaluing the woman’s people (Gentiles) as separating them – to test her. When the woman replies also using the dog metaphor (Focus) she shows she does not take offence and still claims to be part of society, regardless of her outsider status.

In fact, the First Reading tells us that even foreigners who love the Lord will be brought to God’s ‘holy mountain’ (Isa 56:6-7). So the Canaanite was on solid ground, though she may not have known it. But her faith pulled her through. There is much to learn from her.

Many times, I get so overpowered by the things I am supposed to achieve that I feel I am not only not important but not even existing. It becomes more about achieving even at the cost of self-respect and dignity. Bogged down by my insignificant status I become powerless and voiceless.

This woman, however, though aware she is an outsider, replies with humility and quiet dignity. And Jesus recognises her dignity – and her faith – by healing the outsider and scandalising the Jews.

Fruit: Do I view people as ‘our type’ versus ‘outsiders’? Let me resolve to see and treat everyone without prejudice as equal children of God.
Monday, August 17, 2020
Readings: Ezek 24:15-24; Ps Deut 32:18-21; Mt 19:16-22
Focus: “What good deed must I do?” (Mt 19:16)
Time and again Israel’s idolatry provokes God’s anger. ‘I will hide my face from them,’ God warns his sinful people, ‘for they are a perverse generation, children in whom there is no faithfulness’ (Deut 32:20). As priest and prophet of his wayward community, Ezekiel has not only to convey to them God’s terrible words, but he has to lead from the front as a role model.

In today’s First Reading, God commands him not even to mourn the death of his beloved wife! This is to show the community that they must not mourn the destruction of the place and people they love, because God’s purpose is to clear the way for the Holy Spirit. His plan is to cleanse them and start afresh, creating a recognisably holy people (Ezek 20:40-41) for himself: ‘I am the Lord God’ (Ezek 24:24). Ezekiel’s task is to show that radical personal holiness, including self-sacrifice, is needed before the community can be made holy.

Life in the Spirit demands detachment from everything – not only from evil things, but from the persons, places and possessions we hold dear. Such holiness or perfection is not possible by human effort or willpower alone (Focus), as the law-abiding young man in the Gospel realised. ‘He went away grieving’ (Mt 19:22) having made the heart-breaking decision not to follow Jesus.

Fruit: When I find Jesus is asking for what I am holding on to, do I turn away from him?

Tuesday, August 18, 2020
Readings: Ezek 28:1-10; Ps Deut 32:26-28, 30, 35-36; Mt 19:23-30
Focus: “What then will we have?” (Mt 19:27)
The desire to acquire riches can be strong. We think respect and power are earned by the amount of wealth we display. Looking around at blatant examples, we too want to jump on the bandwagon. This becomes an obsession and all our time is spent in trying to get rich quick. We even presume that we will live for many years to enjoy our wealth.

However, Jesus teaches his disciples a valuable lesson today – amassing wealth is a big hindrance to salvation (Gospel). Yet, with God’s help, even the wealthy can be saved (v 25-26).

The disciples don’t quite understand this – they request a clarification. Without hesitation they have given everything, including Peter’s lucrative fishing business, to follow Jesus blindly. And they perhaps naturally expect something in return (Focus)! Their attitude mirrors our idea of ‘we deserve God’s reward’. But Jesus hints at such reward being in the next world (Mt 19:28).

When we dedicate ourselves fully to the work of God, the satisfaction, joy and peace we earn cannot be measured. God’s reward far surpasses – “a hundredfold… inherit eternal life” (Mt 19:29) – our sacrifices and letting go of earthly possessions. We have the glorious examples of Sts Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, Francis Xavier, and many others.

Fruit: I will not grudge giving up anything for the Lord’s sake. Instead, I will consider my offering to him to be in line with his plan for my salvation.

Wednesday, August 19, 2020
St John Eudes
Readings: Ezek 34:1-11; Ps 22:23:1-6; Mt 20:1-16
Focus: “Or are you envious because I am generous?” (Mt 20:15)
Envy makes us want to obtain a quality, possession or other desirable thing belonging to another, while generosity prompts us to freely give to others without expecting anything in return.

In today’s Gospel, the workers receive the right wages and they are happy until they make comparisons with the others. And then they grumble (Mt 20:11). They have not been cheated in any way – they have been paid exactly the pre-set rate. But they are envious of the generous treatment the others receive from the landowner (Focus).

Envy is one of the deadliest sins. It not only makes us loathe others for what they have, but may even make us despise ourselves for not having it.

What is my reaction when I see other people who I think are blessed more than I am and don’t deserve it? Are there times when I self-righteously consider myself more deserving than others and grumble secretly?

Generosity is a quality which defines God. None of us loses out when God is equally or more generous to those “undeserving” folks next door. And who are we to judge who is “deserving” and who isn’t? As we are made in God’s image, we too are called to be generous in everyday life.

Fruit: I will count my blessings and thank God for them, and not turn my attention to what others have lest I notice what I lack and get envious.
Thursday, August 20, 2020
St Bernard
Readings: Ezek 36:23-28; Ps 50[51]:12-15, 18-19; Mt 22:1-14
Focus: “You shall be my people, and I will be your God” (Ezek 36:28)

God made rich promises to the people of Israel – to show his holiness through them, to bring them into their own land, to make them clean from all their uncleanness, to give them a new heart and a new spirit, to make them follow his statutes, to be their God (First Reading). The ultimate fulfilment of these promises was sending his Son to save them. But the chosen people rejected him just as they had ignored the prophets. In today’s Gospel, the invited guests spurn the king’s invitation and the wedding banquet is then thrown open to all and sundry. But among the fresh guests is one who comes unworthy dressed and is dealt with severely.

Whom do we invite for a marriage ceremony or a family occasion? Those whose friendship we cherish isn’t it? As guests, can we imagine the host’s reaction if we make flimsy excuses and decline to participate in the joyous occasion?

Jesus extends this same wonderful invitation to each one of us. Merely accepting his invitation isn’t sufficient. We must put aside the attractions of the world and make Jesus the heart of our life so that, when we finally meet the Lord, our garments will be spotless and fit for him.

Fruit: I will seek to get rid of my heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh (Ezek 36:26) – a heart that beats only for Jesus.

Friday, August 21, 2020
St Plus X
Readings: Ezek 37:1-14; Ps 106[107]:2-9; Mt 22:34-40
Focus: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart…” (Mt 22:37)

They say absence makes the heart grow fonder. With the coronavirus restrictions in place, one thing many of us greatly miss is daily Holy Communion. Today we remember St Plus X who actively encouraged frequent reception of it. He gave us the opportunity to show our love for God daily.

Even as news of suffering, sickness and death due to the pandemic abounds (and I might be the next victim) I realise that this is the moment of truth – do I love God with all my heart, soul and mind (Focus)? In the Gospel, Jesus follows it up with the second part – love of my neighbour. Does “love your neighbour as yourself” (Mt 22:39) take me beyond my family and those nearest me to the people in need or even in great distress?

Today ‘locked down’, I have a better opportunity to ponder and discern. What does my mind seek? What is my purpose in life? Whom does my heart love the most? The world which used to entice me to hanker after power, wealth and health, might ask me to blame the crisis on certain nationalities and communities and selfishly hoard resources. But Jesus teaches me to reach out and share because God is in those who suffer.

Fruit: Can the love of God transform me to reach out to those afflicted, whether victims or health workers and their families, and so find life?

Saturday, August 22, 2020
Queenship of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Readings: Isa 9:1-6; Ps 112[113]:1-8; Lk 1:26-38
Focus: “Let it be with me according to your word” (Lk 1:38)

Mindfulness is non-judgmental listening with awareness from moment to moment. It is the heart of ‘centering prayer’ or contemplative prayer. Mary’s serene response (Focus) seems to come from a similar deep meditative state. It shows her as a very spiritual person who treasured and pondered in her heart the things she could not understood (Lk 2:19).

The Magnificat, as we know, also reveals that Mary was well versed with the Jewish scriptures and saw her situation as similar to that of Hannah’s (1 Sam 2:1-10, today’s Psalm).

Mary’s clear ‘Yes’ (Gospel), that made the Incarnation possible, is remembered and contrasted with the uncertain response of Zechariah. Although the penalty for Mary’s unwed pregnancy was severe, she trusted and never questioned. She only sought clarification. In other words, her question (Lk 1:34) came from a calm mindful state, with faith and openness like that of a child who is trying to understand. On the other hand, Zechariah seemed to want a sign (Lk 1:18) probably out of scepticism and shame similar to Sarah’s (Gen 18:12).

Today as we celebrate the Queenship of Mary, it is good to remember that she was also the first disciple of our Lord. She was ever ready to trust him, as at the miracle at Cana.

Fruit: How can I be a disciple of Jesus like Mary – open, discerning and acting always on God’s will?
Sunday, August 23, 2020
21st Sunday of Ordinary Time
Readings: Isa 22:19-23; Ps 137[138]:1-3, 6, 8; Rom 11:33-36; Mt 16:13-20
Focus: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven...” (Mt 16:19)

Reflecting on today’s readings, I am struck by the power of God over human beings and creation. The Lord gives faithful Eliakim ‘the key of the house of David’ (Isa 22:22). St Paul reminds the Romans that God’s ways are inscrutable and no one can understand his judgments (Rom 11:33). And Jesus tells Simon, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” (Mt 16:18).

These readings help us realise that we are only caretakers of God’s kingdom and subject to his power in all things, as the sudden onset of the Covid-19 pandemic reminded us. The world struck by anxiety and tension, the rapid and scary spread of the virus, painful but essential social distancing, the many sick and dying people, no vaccines... We experienced strong emotions of frustration, anger, resentment, fear and helplessness till we learned to appreciate God’s love and place our faith in him.

And like the prophets, St Paul, and the apostles, Pope Francis from St Peter’s Square helped us to repent and return to the Lord, united in prayer. He gave us a glimpse of what it means to be entrusted with “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Focus) – always trying to lead his wayward flock back to the Lord. I felt strongly the power of God.

Fruit: By praying and reaching out to the needy I too can manifest to them “the kingdom of heaven”.

Monday, August 24, 2020
St Bartholomew
Readings: Rev 21:9-14; Ps 144[145]:10-13, 17-18; Jn 1:45-51
Focus: “Come and see” (Jn 1:46)

At a certain parish retreat, after a stirring session of praise and worship, the speaker began to announce healings. The consensus was that there was a great preacher in their midst.

Often we invite, or are invited, to a retreat with the words: "Fr X is giving the retreat; he has a powerful gift of healing and deliverance!" And so the church or hall is packed to overflowing. But the retreat over, a follow-up call to continue with ongoing formation draws little or no response. Where did the teeming crowds go? Was there any surge in the involvement of those present in parish life, SCCs, Mass and other services, or prayer groups?

“Come and see” (Focus). What? Something sensational? Do we get hooked on the messenger instead of the message? In today’s Gospel, Philip says these words to Nathanael (believed to be Bartholomew, one of the Twelve). They did the same words Jesus said to two others who became his disciples, as we read in Jn 1:39.

These words did not refer to a superficial ‘seeing’ of the spectacular, but rather to an encounter and deep experience of the person of Jesus. This meant being with him (living in his presence), listening to him, and dwelling in his word. And in both instances, those who ‘saw’ remained with Jesus and became his witnesses.

Fruit: I will seek Jesus in his word and act on it daily.

Tuesday, August 25, 2020
St Louis, St Joseph Calasanz
Readings: 2 Thess 2:1-3, 14-17; Ps 95[96]:10-13; Mt 23:23-26
Focus: “It is these you ought to have practised without neglecting the others” (Mt 23:23)

Nobody likes being called a hypocrite as Jesus did the scribes and Pharisees (Gospel). We hear of ‘street angels and house devils’. They are kind and obliging in public but very different with spouses, children or domestic helpers. This is probably the most common and subtle form of hypocrisy. It stems from taking people and situations for granted.

The power and prestige King David enjoyed blinded him to the grave injustice of committing adultery with Uriah’s wife, then having him killed.

It would be salutary to take a look at how we treat our family members – whether or not we say “please” and “thank you” for small daily services. Do we spend quality time with our family? Many of us found it a strain to be confined to home during the pandemic. In some cases, domestic workers and daily wagers received no wages when unable to come to work through no fault of their own.

People know we are Christian by our love, by how we care for our families and for others in need.

Am I particular about observing customs, protocols and conventions in keeping with Church laws and social norms, while neglecting love of neighbour? This is what Jesus found the scribes and Pharisees to be guilty of. And he said so (Focus).

Fruit: Let me honestly look at ways in which I am a hypocrite. Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.
Wednesday, August 26, 2020
Readings: 2 Thess 3:6-10, 16-18; Ps 127[128]:1-2, 4-5; Mt 23:27-32
Focus: “You also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Mt 23:28)
Jesus today denounces hypocrisy in the strongest possible terms (Gospel). His biting comments (Focus) are directed not only at the scribes and the Pharisees, but towards each one of us who may have cultivated this ‘art’ of pretence.
I may smile amiably at my colleagues at work and make polite conversation, because it is important for me to appear to be on good terms with everyone. But what if someone’s son has a better job and earns much more than my son? If she mentions her son’s professional success with natural delight, how do I feel? Do I genuinely rejoice with her? Or do I feel a surge of envy?
Of course, I will be shrewd enough to conceal my feelings and pretend to be happy for her son, while inwardly perhaps seething with resentment. I may even give vent to my frustration by criticising my own son for his ‘lowly’ job.
We need to heed Jesus’ firm condemnation of the sin of hypocrisy. On the outside, we may appear righteous. No one would ever suspect our inner pride, superiority complex, disdain for others, jealousy or greed for money. We may have become proficient in deceiving society with the masks we wear, but God sees though the façade. And to him we must render account.
Fruit: Am I a hypocrite? Let me check…

Thursday, August 27, 2020
St Monica
Readings: 1 Cor 1:1-9; Ps 144[145]:2-7; Mt 24:42-51
Focus: ‘God is faithful…’ (1 Cor 1:9)
If we want an outstanding example of someone who believed in God’s constancy and faithfulness (Focus) none better than St Monica. She asked God every day to save her son from his wayward ways and she did this for years together. She never gave up hope, believing her prayers would be answered. They were.

Today we know Monica’s son as St Augustine, one of the great doctors of the Church. Incidentally she also brought about the conversion of her pagan husband and his mother after praying for this too for many years. This is the power of prayer and of believing in God’s faithfulness.

Christ is faithful but it does not mean he mollycoddles us. We must do our bit. He does not tell us when he will come – we must be prepared for his return “at an unexpected hour” (Mt 24:44).

How to be prepared? Perhaps the easiest and most tension-free way is to be always doing God’s will and being ever mindful of others (Gospel) – at any point of the day or our lives.

In other words if we were asked what we would do if we knew Christ were going to come in ten minutes our answer should be that we would carry on doing whatever it was we were engaged in.
Fruit: God is always faithful. In turn, I can be true to him by believing in his faithfulness and reaching out to his children in loving kindness.

Friday, August 28, 2020
St Augustine
Readings: 1 Cor 1:17-25; Ps 32[33]:1-2, 4-5, 10-11; Mt 25:1-13
Focus: “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Mt 25:13)
Who would have thought that the world would one day be brought to its knees by a disease which ironically treats everyone equally?
Before the tiny coronavirus made a mockery of the ‘who-needs-God-no-one-can-touch-me’ attitude of our world, there were many doomsday preachers. One such person came to my office and declared that the world was going to end later that year. I didn’t react with horror because I believe that the day I die will be the end of the world for me. I would rather know what I ought to do now, for only the Father knows the hour of my death.

“Keep awake therefore…” (Focus) is the best advice for any of us.

Keeping awake means keeping ourselves nourished not just with food for the body, but food for the soul. Keeping awake is keeping our spiritual flame burning, fed by oil – that is the fruit of the Spirit – in the form of ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness…’ (Gal 5:22). Keeping awake is doing what we were sent to do: ‘Proclaim the gospel… so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power’ (1 Cor 1:17).

Do we have enough of this fruit to sustain us as we await our personal encounter with the Lord?
Fruit: I will “keep awake” by reading the word of God daily and practising the seven works of mercy.
Saturday, August 29, 2020
Passion of St John the Baptist
Readings: Jer 1:17-19; Ps 70[71]:1-6, 15, 17; Mk 6:17-29
Focus: ‘He went and beheaded (John) in the prison’ (Mk 6:27)

To trust completely in God, to see everything in our lives as God’s will, and to seek to do only his will is a rare gift. Herod ‘heard’ John the Baptist but failed to ‘listen’ to him (today’s Gospel).

If John was courageous enough to accept death for challenging Herod (Focus), it is because he resolved to speak the truth in God’s name and to trust that God would see him through. Today is also the death anniversary of Blessed Edmund Rice, founder of the Irish Christian Brothers and Presentation Brothers. His story too is one of utter trust in God. He was a wealthy Irish businessman whose life was turned upside down when his young wife died in an accident, leaving behind a disabled new-born. It was the destruction of his dreams and the loss of everything he loved. God’s will is the grace that allowed Blessed Edmund to dedicate the rest of his life to the education of poor children in the Ireland of his time.

The cruel execution of John the Baptist, the sudden death of a young mother – God’s decisions often do not make sense to us. They do not need to. Sometimes, God asks us to give up everything and accept the emptiness of the tomb – which is simply to trust him even unto death.

Fruit: Lord, guide me to do your will even when it seems very difficult.

Sunday, August 30, 2020
22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time
Readings: Jer 20:7-9; Ps 62[63]:2-6, 8-9; Rom 12:1-2; Mt 16:21-27
Focus: “What will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?” (Mt 16:26)

We toil all our lives to accumulate savings and assets that we consider essential for a comfortable and secure life. Is this wrong? Not really, except if we are self-centred and never satisfied.

What about the times when we are overcome by greed? The lure of money and luxury has been the downfall of many. The recent banking scams show how the unscrupulous actions of a few can disrupt the lives of so many. Unmindful, we too aspire to get rich quickly.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus leads us in a different direction – one of “great suffering” and sacrifice (Mt 16:21). He challenges us to abandon our desire to “gain the whole world” (Focus) and instead lose our lives for his sake (Mt 16:25). It means going beyond ourselves, giving up selfishness, and sharing what we have with the less fortunate.

Let us pause to count our blessings, be aware of the purpose of life, of the existence of our soul, and reflect on what we can give in return for all that we have been bestowed with.

We would do well to share our money, resources and time with the less fortunate. In this way we will live meaningful and fruitful lives and take up our cross to follow Jesus (Mt 16:24).

Fruit: I will reach out and share the good things I have received and my time with the less privileged.

Monday, August 31, 2020
Readings: 1 Cor 2:1-5; Ps 118[119]:97-102; Lk 4:16-30
Focus: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me…” (Lk 4:18)

Former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once said, “All the great things are simple and many can be expressed in single words: freedom, justice, honour, duty, mercy, hope.” Paul knew this 2,000 years earlier: ‘I did not come proclaiming… in lofty words or wisdom’ (1 Cor 2:1)

Christ’s whole life was a mystery. Not only by his words and deeds but also in his silence and suffering did he manifest the mystery of God. He made the mysterious God look simple because, though God, he humbled himself and became man.

Jesus also revealed his mission to the people in simple words: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me…” (Focus). They knew the words well since he was quoting from Isa 61:1-2. But his next words stunned them: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21). This was because, sadly, their faith rested ‘on human wisdom’ and not ‘on the power of God’ (1 Cor 2:5). They thought Jesus was being arrogant enough to proclaim he was the Messiah when they well knew him to be a mere carpenter’s son. He deserved to be lynched!

The mystery of God lies in the simplest of things. Is my heart simple enough to rest solely ‘on the power of God’?

Fruit: I am to continue Christ’s mission: proclaim the Good News, bring relief to the needy, stand for social justice. What will I do toward this today?
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