

## Homilies for the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus and the Early Section of Ordinary Time

Once again, these homilies are based on the Readings for Year C. There is not a complete set for all for of the Year C recorded here. This is for a variety of reasons. In some years there was a pastoral letter to be read out. In others I was away on holiday. In others still, Ordinary Time lasted only for four or five weeks, rather than seven or eight, before the Season of Lent began.

### The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

Is. 40: 1 - 5, 9 - 11

Titus 2: 11 - 14. 3: 4 - 7

Lk. 3: 15 - 16, 21 - 22

### The Baptism of the Lord 2004

Last night I went over to St Mary's at Whickham to the Farewell-do the parish were putting on for Fr. Hickey. As you may know he is moving over to St. Robert's, Fenham, as parish priest there. What you may also know is that he is not being replaced - there are quite simply no priests left to be put into Whickham. As from next week Fr. Humble who already has responsibility for Dunston and Lobley Hill, will take over. It will mean, for a while, that he will have 5 Sunday Masses to say between the 3 parishes. There are no plans yet as to what is to happen, but I don't think that it is a situation that is sustainable. In my home area on North Tyneside in the six parishes from North Shields and round the coast where there were once twelve priests, there are now four, with two retired guys helping out as they are able. This is the situation in which we find ourselves today.

Before people get to wondering what is he about to say about further changes here, I should say that there are none – for the moment. But who knows what the future holds as the number of priests available to work in parishes gets fewer and fewer?

For the last few weeks we have been celebration God's gift to us of Jesus born in Bethlehem as one of us. Today we celebrate his Baptism and the beginning of his Public Ministry some 30 years after his birth. We are also invited to reflect on our own baptism and the ministry which flows from it. Baptism, like all of God's gifts to us including the gift of Jesus, comes with no strings attached. God is not going to withdraw his love from us if we don't respond to these gifts. They are always there available to us. But there is always, also an invitation to respond to these gifts.

The words spoken by the Father to Jesus in today's Gospel, *"You are my Son, the Beloved, my favour rest on you"* or better *"I delight in you"* are spoken to each of us in our own baptism – *"You are my daughter/my son; the Beloved I delight in you."* We are gifted, graced, loved by God – however difficult it might be sometimes to feel gifted, graceful and loved. But that is what we are...

We use these gifts – and by doing that bring God's presence to others – in all kinds of ways. For most people this is primarily in their relationships, in the family, at work, in the neighbourhood, in the home. For most people, for much of the time, that is both their priority and almost the total focus of their time and energy. But there will be times when it might be possible to offer gifts, talents and times in other contexts – like the parish. People already do in many different ways. Ministries in the parish seen and not seen.

But what other gifts and talents might these be yet to be used; yet to be called forth? Who knows, but what is for sure is that they will be needed more and more in the time ahead. At this time of year especially we celebrated the giving of gifts. We give thanks for these – and realise that many of them are for using and sharing with others.

## The Baptism of the Lord 2010

What St. Paul is trying to focus on – for Titus, for ourselves – is the Big Question. *“What is ultimately, finally of greatest importance to me, to us?”* He asks this in the light of something else he writes in that passage. God’s love, God’s kindness came about in his sending of his Son Jesus, *“not because of my righteous actions we may have done ourselves; it was for no reason except his own compassion that he saved us.”* God loves us not because we are good but because God is good – and God cannot be any other than good and compassionate. That is who God is.

The question is how we respond to this love and goodness that is always offered to us – present to us in our lives. There are times when we really can wonder where God is in all the things that can be going on in our life – and yet fundamentally the fact is that, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, we believe God is in everything, in every moment of our lives. What needs to happen is for us to become aware of this.

This is what prayer is all about – what **all** our prayer is about – ultimately.

Notice in the Gospel how Jesus is *“at prayer”* after his Baptism by John in the River Jordan. It is when he is at prayer that he becomes attuned to the presence of the Holy Spirit and the Father’s voice, *“You are my Son, the Beloved my favour rests on you.”* Now when we are told – here and on many other occasions, especially in St. Luke’s Gospel, that Jesus is at prayer – he is not saying Mass, he is not reciting the Rosary, or any Litanies, or doing a Novena. He is being **open** to God – becoming aware of the Father’s presence in his life and what the Father’s will is for him.

Our celebrating Mass, praying the Rosary, the Hail Mary, any of the great prayers that we might use are excellent ways in which we too can become aware of God’s presence in every aspect of our life – and being aware of God’s will for us in life. That is the whole point of any prayers we choose to use.

Prayer – whatever prayer we use – is about helping us get in touch, becoming aware, of the God who is always present in our lives. Sometimes that awareness can seem very easy, very obvious. At other times – especially when faced with difficulties and problems for ourselves or for those we love – it might seem that God is a long way off – not listening or available to us. But, to repeat, it is a basic fundamental facet of our faith that from Baptism God is always, always present to us.

Prayer is not trying to change God’s mind about us or about our loved ones – God loves us whatever... Prayer is about changing our minds about God (sometimes called *‘conversion’*) and about how it is that we can respond to this God in our lives – beginning to see the ultimate futility of worldly ambitions – and to see what is really real! Whilst in the meantime continuing to pray for our needs and the needs of others.

## The Baptism of the Lord 2013

In the last couple of years or so a new acronym has entered religious vocabulary in the English-speaking world – SBNR – Spiritual But Not Religious. It recognises the fact that many people are seeking to have their deepest longings, which clearly go beyond the merely material things of life, satisfied, not by anything that has the trappings of an organised religion, but on those things that address our deepest spiritual selves.

It’s almost as if Spirituality = Good  
Religion = Bad

A lot of the responsibility for this state of affairs lies at the door of religious people who fail to live up to the highest ideals of what their faith points to. In being self-righteous, smug and unforgiving, religious people bring religion into disrepute.

In fact all true religion is rooted in the Spirit and the spiritual as we can see in today's Gospel. Jesus is about to embark on his Public Ministry – offering healing, forgiveness and hope to all people and it begins in prayer and with the Spirit. We find St. Luke rooting not just Jesus' ministry in prayer and the Spirit at the beginning of his Gospel, he does the same thing in his Second Book – the Acts of the Apostles – where we find their ministry also beginning in prayer and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Without that Spirit religion quickly becomes self-serving and empty. By the same token a spirituality that is not embedded in religious structures of some kind is often rootless and very fragile.

In celebrating Jesus' Baptism we are reminded that our own Baptism needs also to be rooted in prayer and an awareness of the Spirit in our lives.

## The Baptism of the Lord 2016

When we refer to someone as being "spirited" we mean that there is a liveliness about them, a boldness, a passion. We describe someone as giving "a spirited performance" in an exciting sport's contest, or in an impassioned debate, or playing a lively piece of music. "Spirit" denotes passion, determination, commitment. There is something both exciting and attractive about "spirited" people.

Today we hear in our Gospel passage that Jesus became aware of the **Holy** Spirit in his life while praying after his baptism by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. This event marks the beginning of what we usually call his "Public Ministry". St Luke tells us, in the verse immediately after this passage, that Jesus was thirty years old when this happened.

The previous incident that St Luke reports of Jesus' life was when he was twelve years old. There, in the Gospel we heard just two weeks ago, he relates how Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem after he and his parents had gone up – along with thousands of others – to celebrate the Passover. Mary and Joseph had to search for three days before finding him sitting in the Temple, talking with all the learned men who taught there. When Mary tells him of her anxiety at losing him he replies by saying, "Did you not know I must be about my Father's business?" It took him another EIGHTEEN years before he was able and ready to come into the public domain doing this.

Just think about that for a moment. Twelve years growing up in Nazareth before we hear of him discussing great things in the Temple, then another eighteen years before his first public appearance. All the time growing and developing in the Jewish tradition of prayer, weekly worship in the synagogue at Nazareth, reading and hearing what we call the Old Testament, learning his trade as a carpenter (a joiner, or a jobbing builder, if you like). Finally, when he does appear on the public scene everything we know about what he did and said is packed into about two and a half years. Thirty years formation and preparation... two and a half years of action leading to his death and resurrection. It is this short period of his life that from now on we will be reflecting on for the rest of the year.

I wonder how long we imagine preparation, formation in our faith, and all that it means, might take

for us? A few months of classes before receiving First Holy Communion, and then it is done? A period of preparation before being confirmed, then we are formed for life? In truth, it takes a whole lifetime to really get to grips with all of this, but the journey involved in doing this can itself be a very “spirited” one. It need not be boring or dull.

The “Holy Spirit” is given to us in our baptism. St Paul talks about this in our Second Reading today. Like anything to do with “spirit” this gift is given to give us life and liveliness, determination and commitment. This is what made Jesus attractive, at least to begin with, when he began his preaching ministry. There is a liveliness, a determination, about his message and actions. With the exception of his ‘failure’ in the synagogue at Nazareth, he attracts huge crowds, as well as a band of close followers/disciples. He has grown in awareness of the Spirit and his own calling to proclaim the Good News.

It is the same Spirit that is given to us, and it is the same calling that we have – to preach, to live the Good News. Of course, individually, our own particular mission is much more limited than that of Jesus. We live out our discipleship in families, homes, workplaces, and among friends. I wonder whether people would refer to us as “spirited” in our faith. Perhaps we might be rather embarrassed at the very idea. Faith and Religion in our society are really only tolerated when they are kept as very private matters. As a private matter religion becomes neutered, emasculated, “un-spirited” if there is such a word. Something like that is both harmless, and completely irrelevant to the lives of most people. It goes either unnoticed or pitied as something rather weird and eccentric, something of a bygone, less sophisticated age.

Somewhere in all of this we need to recover something of the “spirited” nature of the Gospel message, and this is what we might aim to do in the coming weeks of this New Year, as once again we follow Jesus in his ministry of healing, preaching and teaching.

## **The Baptism of the Lord 2019**

New Year has never felt a good time to make resolutions for me. Amongst other distractions here in church our Christmas celebrations are still going on. A few days into the New Year we celebrate the Epiphany and, although the rest of society is wanting to put the whole Christmas thing behind it and to move on to the next commercial highpoint, we are encouraged to keep reflecting on the enormity of what we celebrate in Jesus’ birth for a few more days at least. In fact it is today’s feast that marks the transition from these celebrations to what we call “Ordinary Time”, until we begin to mark the season of Lent. Perhaps this movement from high celebration back to the ordinary rhythms of life might be a better moment to reflect on what resolutions might be appropriate, what might help to improve my life.

If we are going to do this – and it is always better to make important decisions when we are settled into a regular routine, rather than on the spur of the moment at a time of high emotion – then we first need to get the context of our resolutions sorted out. Part of our Second Reading today helps here,

When the kindness and love of God our Saviour were revealed, it was not because he was concerned by any righteous actions we might have done ourselves; it was for no other reason except his own compassion that he saved us...

Whatever we may decide to do it cannot be us doing a favour for God. That is absurd, and yet time and time again we can find ourselves thinking that if I do such and such God will be happy with me

and will reward me. We cannot earn God's love. As we have said many times before, "God does not love us because we are good; God loves us because God is good." It was for "no other reason than his own compassion that he saved us", as St Paul says.

Any resolutions that we might make need to be done knowing that we are loved by God and that love is what will help us to make any changes in our life that will benefit us, and quite probably the people around us. St Paul in that reading talks about the need to "be self-restrained and live good and religious lives", and patterns of behaviour are certainly what people usually associate with resolutions: exercise and dieting are two of the most popular focuses for New Year resolutions. As well as having the right underpinning for any resolution we also need to keep re-visiting this incredible idea – literally incredible, at times, because we find so hard to believe that anyone could love us unconditionally, no matter what...

Jesus himself needed to keep reminding himself of the context in which he was living and preaching and in a few simple words St Luke, in our Gospel today captures how he does this on a regular basis, "While Jesus after his own baptism was at prayer." On several occasions in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry we find him going off by himself to pray – to re-charge his batteries, as it were. Our need of doing the same is perhaps the key to any resolutions we might have. We need the mental strength to make any important changes to our life and prayer – time alone with our God, is key to this.

As well as prayer in church like this at Mass, and for the children at various times during the school day, there needs to be that discipline of prayer in private, in the quiet of our own hearts. This is what will help make and keep any resolutions we might want to make at this time of year.

## **The Second Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Is. 62: 1 - 5

I Cor. 12: 4 - 11

Jn. 2: 1 - 11

## **Second Sunday in Ordinary Time 2004**

I think it was a French philosopher who wrote, "*Sometimes when I point out of the window, all people look at is the end of my finger.*" It speaks of the disappointment and frustration of someone trying to show others a different way of seeing things. It could be the frustration of the preacher with his or her congregation, the teacher with a class of pupils, the leader of a work team with her co-workers, the parent of a teenager – and, of course, the teenager of a parent who can't see things differently. One way or another, I suspect we have all experienced what we perceive to be the short-sightedness of other people. Of course, the question as to who is actually at fault is quite another one.

In his Public Ministry Jesus was constantly faced with this inability – or unwillingness – of others to look beyond the end of his finger out of the window to what he was actually pointing to. This is especially a problem for him in the Miracle Stories – like today's Gospel of the Marriage Feast at Cana.

If there is one thing alone that is beyond doubt about Jesus' Public Ministry, it is that he was not a showman, a magician. Never did he gather people together to mesmerize them with his sleight-of-hand tricks, or grandstanding shows. More often than not the miracle stories are relatively quiet affairs, and almost always about restoring someone to health and their place in the family or

community.

Of course, the Marriage Feast of Cana is somewhat different – no one is being cured here. The whole incident is an odd one. The rather sharp exchange between Jesus and his mother does not sit easily with other portrayals of their relationship. There might be a temptation to stick with the simple idea of the water changed into wine and some of the jokes based on this – which might be funny the first few times you hear them – But no, that is to look at the end of the finger and not out of the window to see what it is pointed towards.

I think clues as to what all this might mean lie in the fact that we are told that this is the **first** of the signs that Jesus did (John always calls the miracles signs), and that the Church offers us this reading every year at this time as we begin our 'Ordinary Time' Sundays and the beginning of the Public Ministry. And what is being said here is that this is the start of something **radically** different. Jewish ritual represented by the six stone water jars set aside for ritual washings, is replaced by the Christian ritual of the wine for the Eucharist – for John's Gospel the change is radical and complete. The old is gone and something different has arrived – and we will see more of this as the Public Ministry unfolds in the weeks ahead.

But do **we want** to see something radically different? Perhaps we are happier to stick with the cosy stories, rather than see what they point to in our own lives? As long as religion is there on tap when we want it – when it is convenient for us – that's fine, but otherwise we hang up the sign DO NO DISTURB. If the Mass time suits, and the weather is OK, that's fine. If we're not too inconvenienced by time spent preparing for things like Baptism and Communion, Confirmation, Marriage and so on, that's OK; but don't ask of me anything that might break down my comfort zone with all of this that might invite me to look out of the window. But, you see, we **are** actually presented with something different, a story that is meant to make a radical difference in every age and our life.

The Gospel is not for taming.

## Second Sunday in Ordinary Time 2007

In a fit of frustration a French philosopher once wrote, *"Sometimes when I point to the stars people only look at the end of my finger."* People stay at one level when they are invited to go much further, beyond what is seen heard or what can be tasted, smelt or touched.

*"What you see is what you get,"* is a straightforward, honest and down-to-earth claim that is very appealing, but it doesn't help us interpret the 'signs' as the miracle stories in St John's Gospel are called. *"This was the first of the signs given by Jesus; it was given at Cana in Galilee."* And whether Jesus is helping people to celebrate a wedding, giving sight to a blind man, curing the sick son of an official, healing a man who is lame, feeding 5000 hungry people with loaves and fishes, or raising Lazarus to life, there is always more going on than what is seen or heard. The signs point to the divine at work in the human.

At the heart of his Gospel, John tells us that Jesus came *"so that we may have life and have it to the full."* And there is always an abundance of life in the stories John gives us of Jesus' life and ministry.

The stone water jars are filled to the brim, ready to flow over, they are so absolutely full. Full of the new life to be celebrated - because these stone water jars once used for the external ritual, purification rites of the Jewish religion are no longer needed for this old purpose. The new religion is an **internal** one with God wholly involved in our human life through Jesus' birth, death and

resurrection and celebrated in the wine used for the Eucharist.

This is not a piece of magic done to win the crowds. The fact that the water has become wine is hardly noticed in the story, and certainly not by the guests at the wedding. No, the story of the abundant life coming from Jesus' presence is what the story is pointing to, and we share that life NOW – in Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist and in any other sacraments that we celebrate.

We are, all of us in our different ways, "*gifted*" as St. Paul puts it in that Second Reading with a variety of gifts, but all from the same source, the same Spirit, the same God. And gifted for the same purpose to help ourselves and each other to be built up in the three greatest gifts of them all – Faith, Hope and Love.

The challenge laid before us today in realising this abundant life flowing in us, realising that we are gifted in different ways, is to know how best we can share this abundance, these gifts with others.

## **Second Sunday in Ordinary Time 2013**

On Sundays in Ordinary Time each year we work through the account of either Matthew, Mark or Luke of Jesus' Public Ministry. This Year it is the turn of St. Luke's Gospel but before we launch fully into his account we have this famous story at the beginning of St John's account of Jesus' ministry – his first miracle of the Marriage Feast at Cana. This story signals both that something new is going on and that it is all part of God's unimaginable love for us – water into wine and over a hundred gallons of the stuff, at that!

Likewise in Ordinary Time our First Reading from the Old Testament is chosen because of some link or other to the Gospel. Today obviously it is Isaiah's image of the Marriage of God to his People Israel. The Second Reading, however, may have no particular connection to the others at all. What happens in Ordinary Time is that over a period of 5, 6, 7 Sundays we have continuous extracts from one of the Letters of the New Testament. Today and for the next few Sundays we have extracts from perhaps St. Paul's most famous letter – I Corinthians.

In the First part of this letter St. Paul comes to grips with some nitty-gritty problems that are very specific to this community in Corinth – problems which can, and do, appear in all Christian communities at times down through the ages. The major problem here is division, factionalism, "*I am for Paul*" "*I am for Apollos*", "*I am for Christ*". To counteract this St. Paul emphasises the need for *UNITY* among the different members of the community.

Yes – each person is different but each person also belongs to one another through their connection with God. This week the message is "*There is a variety of gifts, but all from the one Spirit.*" Next week it will be the image of the one Body which has many parts – each of which is necessary for each other and the week after that we hear St. Paul go back to the theme of gifts and perhaps the most famous passage of this letter which is chosen by many, many couples for their wedding – the passage about the three greatest gifts of faith, hope and love – the greatest of which is love.

Today's theme of the variety of gifts but the same Spirit is as relevant now as it ever was. Each of us, in spite of what some people think of themselves, is gifted in some way or other and can use those gifts for the benefit of others.

Of course, using our gifts for the benefit of the parish community will vary according to people's

wider commitments with family and work. They will be times when health and infirmity play a major part in what we can and cannot do. In a couple of weeks' time Bishop Seamus will be here to say Mass with us and I'm sure he will talk about using gifts for the benefit of the parish community and will talk about how important the ministry of prayer is in the community for those who are not in the first flush of youth, or who may struggle even to get out to Mass. Their contribution is still vital.

I would like to invite people to think about what you might be able to offer to the parish community. It is already very impressive in all three parishes here in Washington to see so many people involved and offering their time and talents. The whole community – not just myself and Fr. Mark are very grateful for all that is done. It is not *'helping Father'*, so much as taking responsibility for doing your bit for the whole community. Finance, fund- raising, visiting the sick and housebound, cleaning the church, helping with catechising children and parents.

A variety of gifts, the same Spirit. May I invite you all to reflect on what you might be able to offer?

## **Second Sunday in Ordinary Time 2019**

Back in the autumn we held our annual One-World Shared Lunch. Before moving on to taste the delicious foods people had supplied we were given a short reflection, by Joel and Patrick Caragay about various issues to do with Climate Change and Food Poverty and during the lunch Natalie Esquejo invited us to make pledges about making a few small changes in our behaviour on a range of issues. One of the facts presented to us was the amount of water it takes to produce one kilo of beef. I cannot remember the details, but the figure was staggering. A couple of the pledges were about water usage. One simply said that I pledge turn off the water tap while brushing my teeth. That seemed an easy enough one to do – I am always looking for an easy option in these matters – so I signed up to the pledge.

At first when I started to turn off the tap it seemed silly. We have so much clean water, so readily available to us 24/7 that turning a tap off for a minute was hardly going to make a difference in the grand scheme of things across the globe. But then it gradually dawned on me about how privileged I am to be able to turn on a tap any time of the day or night and to have as much water for cleaning, cooking and drinking as I need. Realising how precious the smallest amount of clean water is to so many people across the globe, people who are not able to use water twice a day to clean their teeth, the point of the exercise began to get through to me.

In countries where sanitation is poor and even non-existent, or in countries where desert conditions prevail, water is a very precious commodity indeed. In fact, it is thought by some people that the next great wars to be fought among humans will not be about oil, but about water and access to it.

The land where Jesus was born and lived in is surrounded by seawater on one side and by arid desert, or semi-desert, on the other sides. Water is a very precious commodity. It was in Jesus' time and it still is today. In fact water is so precious that it came to symbolise the Jewish Law itself. Herein lies the symbolism of the stone water jars that are referred to in our Gospel. Cleansing rituals were used every day in Jewish households, precious though every drop of water was, still it was used to symbolise compliance with the Law of Moses. Returning from the market – cleansing ritual; before eating – cleansing ritual; before prayer – cleansing ritual. I am sure that you get the idea. However, in Jesus, all of that is about to come to an end. Something new, something different is around here.

This is the symbolism of the miracle of the water changed into wine: the old dispensation of Jewish

ritual washings at every turn is to be replaced by the wine used by Christians in the Eucharist – the new dispensation. At the very beginning of his public ministry Jesus is pointing to the fact that something very different, very new is on the scene, and just look at how much of it there is – between 120 and 180 gallons of the stuff! The new ritual is to be respected it is a celebration of Jesus’ Death and Resurrection, but there is more than enough to go around for anyone who seeks to be nourished by what is on offer.

The ritual of the Eucharist, the Mass, is about celebration. It is about the abundance of God’s grace freely given to those who need it. Like the water of the Jewish ritual, but even more so, it is be respected and valued, but there is always enough for everyone to go around.

### **Third Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Neh. 8: 2 - 6, 8 - 10

1Cor. 12: 12 - 30

Lk. 1: 1 - 4, 4: 14 - 21

### **Third Sunday in Ordinary Time 2004**

We will look at that incident with Jesus in the synagogue of his hometown next week when we hear the reaction of the congregation. For today we will look for a moment at the Second Reading: Paul writing to the people at Corinth. The city was a major seaport for Athens – for sea traffic going West or East in the Mediterranean. A large cosmopolitan city – multi-ethnic population – multi-racial – some people incredibly rich, others dirt poor – and many, many slaves keeping the economy going.

Paul had evangelised this community, but many others had followed him. There were deep divisions in the Christian community that was formed in this city – divisions along ethnic and racial grounds – Greeks, Jews – divisions on ideology – I am for Paul, Apollos, Cephas, Christ, – different theologies. Divisions on grounds of wealth – the well- to-do meeting for a splendid meal before celebrating the Eucharist, while others, slaves and poor people, couldn’t afford much of a meal at all – nonetheless then sitting down to celebrate the Eucharist as if they were one community!

Paul had a great deal to say about this. In fact, the various themes of this letter – different theologies, different factions, problematic sexual practices, divisions over Liturgy, divisions over different roles within the church – are all themes that are alive and well today – and make this letter above all – still very, very relevant to our situation today.

In the midst of all these divisions, Paul’s main theme that we see illustrated in today’s extract is to emphasis two things:-

1. Our unity in Christ and his Spirit.
2. Our interconnectedness with each other because of this.

Unity for Paul here does not mean **uniformity**. Everyone doing exactly the same thing, at the same time. The analogy with the parts of the body shows how illogical and stupid such an idea really is. We each have separate but equally valuable and important gifts, roles and functions. The church community would not exist were it not for these differences – this diversity. No-one is more important than anyone else and each is to be respected and valued for their different contributions – in administration, in music, in visiting the sick, in teaching, in praying and so on and so on.

***“Now you together are Christ’s body; but each of you is a different part of it.”***

Unity expressed in diverse ways and only in diverse ways – but there is always that mutuality, that interconnectedness.

**“If one part is hurt, all parts are hurt with it.  
If one part is given special honour, all parts enjoy it.”**

This is as true of a parish community as it is of a diocese, as it is of the Church as a whole. Hearing, respecting, valuing and working together with our differences is what being Christ’s Body is about – not mindless uniformity.

### **Third Sunday in Ordinary Time 2007**

There is a major and significant difference between a fanatic and an enthusiast. A fanatic is so completely focused/wrapped up in what obsesses them that the feelings and rights of others are thrown out of the window. The enthusiast, while eagerly focused on what fascinates them, **does** have regard for the feelings and rights of others. Fanatics are willing to bomb and maim others, including themselves, in complete disregard and complete disrespect of human life. Human life, even when embodied in a person whom we think may be wrong, even utterly evil, is still to be respected. That is our Christian, Catholic faith, and we share similar values with most of the mainstream world faiths in this – including Islam.

We can be enthusiastic Christians, without being fanatics who disregard the needs of others. And there is a sense of enthusiasm, eagerness and expectation in two of our Readings today.

Given our rushed lives and eagerness to be about other things as well it may be a bit of a stretch to think of all the people in the First Reading spending five or six hours listening to Ezra reading out the Law of Moses to them as enthusiasts – it sounds to us perhaps as fanatical. But these people are hungry for their faith. For more than 70 years, they and their forebears were in Exile in Babylon. Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed.

Now they are back in their homeland – a poor imitation of the glories of the old Temple and the old city are about them – but they are FREE and they are eager to hear again the Law which they believe is that of the God who first brought them out of slavery in Egypt, and who has now brought them back from Exile in Babylon. No wonder they are enthusiastic.

The crowd in the synagogue at Nazareth are also eager to hear Jesus speak. He has been speaking in other synagogues in Galilee and his reputation has spread. Now in his home town people are eager to hear him. To be fair, next week we will hear that many rejected him and what he had to say – but many others did not and became his enthusiastic followers.

By the time St. Luke is writing his Gospel there are new generations of enthusiastic followers eager to hear Jesus’ message. In the first part of our Gospel Luke tells his readers that it is to help these people, to feed them with the correct understanding of Jesus’ message that he has written his Gospel.

The person and the message of Jesus is critical. Jesus not only gets up to read, he unravels the scroll of the prophet Isaiah to the passage **he** wants to read – about Good News and liberty, freedom. To some degree a prophet writes about future events, but when Jesus sits down and begins to preach his words are, *“This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen.”* What was once future is NOW – no wonder there is eagerness and enthusiasm around.

Where does this leave us? We are rightly very wary of fanaticism in whatever form it comes. We witness the devastation caused by fanaticism. But eagerness and enthusiasm are of a different order. Whereas fanaticism is ugly and off-putting, eagerness and enthusiasm are attractive, infectious, welcoming. We have a message that is about our fundamental freedom from all kinds of slavery – to sin, evil, even death itself. It is Good News. It is there to be shared with others and it is best shared by people who are enthusiastic about it.

### Third Sunday in Ordinary Time 2010

We are now caught up in the interminably tedious process of a General Election Campaign. The phoney-phase is well underway, the real bit will begin when the Prime Minister names the day. Already posturing and sniping are being engaged in by all sides. The party leaders have made their opening pitches and now each day ideas on different policies are being drip-fed to the media.

I say this only to draw a kind of parallel with what Jesus is doing in today's Gospel. This sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth is his opening gambit in the long process of his Public Ministry. He has been baptised by John in the River Jordan. He spent 40 days in the desert struggling with his demons and now what we call his "Public Ministry" begins.

What Jesus offers to the people of Nazareth is not so much a manifesto – a series of pledges for his campaign – so much as a Mission Statement – a short, snappy image that relates to every aspect of the ministry that will now unfold.

It should be possible with any decent Mission Statement to relate every incident that happens in the life of a school, a hospital, any organisation that has gone to the trouble of working out such a statement – back to this core idea.

So it is that Jesus picks up the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah, notes the passage about being the anointed one of the Lord, sent to bring Good News to the poor, hope to the downhearted, freedom to those held captive and so on, and then says very simply, and very explicitly, *"This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen."* In fact the claim goes further and deeper than this, because what Jesus is saying is that everything he says and does – in his thoughts and prayer, in his parables about seeds growing, in the story of the Prodigal Son, in his curing of the ten lepers, the raising to life of the Widow's Son at Nain, in his calling of the disciples – even of Zacchaeus, the Tax Collector – every single one of these incidents is an example, an embodiment of, *"This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen."*

Right up to and including the Last Supper, his Passion, Death and Resurrection – everything is a way of fleshing out this basic Mission Statement – that is how good a statement it is. In the words of one theologian this is God seen *"inside out."*

Everything we believe that God is in God's inner workings is made visible in what Jesus does and says – God inside-out.

We believe that having completed his own mission – having lived out that Mission Statement of the Synagogue at Nazareth to the full, now, under the same Spirit, Jesus talks about from the writings of the prophet Isaiah, it is our turn to embody these same things. Each one of us in a different way – as St. Paul says in our Second Reading – *"all baptised in the one Spirit whatever nationality or background – together Christ's Body, but each in different parts."*

Different, but essential is continuing the Mission Statement – making God visible in all **we** do.

### **Third Sunday in Ordinary Time 2013**

Our Gospels at the beginning of what is called '*Ordinary Time*' offer us first impressions of what Jesus' Ministry is to be about. They are a kind of manifesto – laying out his programme for the future. Last week the first impression was given by his miracle at the Marriage Feast at Cana at the beginning of St John's account of his Public Ministry. It was a signal that something very different had come on the scene and that it was rooted in the abundance of God's love.

Today we have first impressions from the account of St Luke's Gospel – the Gospel from which most of our Sunday Readings will be taken this year. Here the account of ministry starts in his home town of Nazareth and among family and people who know him well. At first things go quite well, "*His reputation spread throughout the countryside. He taught in their synagogues and everybody praised him.*" Such praise was about to change, as we will hear in next week's Gospel Reading.

For now, though, we can stay with the scene described in today's extract. He is back home. People have been hearing about what he has been saying and doing. They are curious. Is this the same Jesus that they have known for so long? And they come in their droves to see him. There is a feeling of expectation when he stands up to read. He is given the scroll that contains the writings of Isaiah and we are told, "*He found the passage where the prophet talks about the Spirit of God being on God's Anointed One*". "*Anointed One*" in Hebrew, "*Messiah*" in Greek "*Christ*".

Now this is quite some bold claim he is making – presenting himself to these people among whom he has grown up as nothing less than the Messiah, the Christ. But notice what the agenda of the Messiah is to be. The priority is not going to be about observing all the correct niceties about worship, nor yet is it going to be a huge political or military campaign to throw out the Romans. No, it is to bring Good News to the poor, the down-trodden, to set people free, certainly but not in any violent, external revolution. No, it will be a revolution which takes place inside, in each person's heart, giving them hope.

In saying that "*This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen*" Jesus is making a bold claim, and he is throwing out a challenge, or if you ponder, an invitation to his audience, to accept him. The people in the synagogue in Nazareth were the original audience, but now **we** are now that audience and the challenge, the invitation is to each of us.

### **Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Jer. 1: 4 - 5, 17 - 19

1 Cor. 12: 31 – 13: 13,

Lk. 4: 21 - 30

### **Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2004**

This time last week all kinds of dire/existing predictions were being made. The Government was to be humiliated over the vote on university top-up fees and on the Hutton Report; Heating systems in homes and schools were not going to be able to cope with Arctic temperatures of minus17° by the middle of the week, and so on. The reality on all fronts has turned out to be rather different – but then Expectation and Reality make a habit of not coinciding – sometimes the Reality is much better

than expected, sometimes much worse.

Newspapers have to try to entice people to keep on reading them; and TV channels have to keep the punters entertained to keep them watching. It seems that hype in some form or other is needed to sell something.

I'm not entirely sure what the expectation was on the part of those people in the Synagogue at Nazareth. Jesus was on a return visit to his home town probably only a matter of weeks after he had left it behind after 30 years quietly living as the Carpenter's Son, then the town carpenter. Everyone there would have known him, and most would probably had been his blood-relatives. What would they have expected of this person whom they thought they knew, and about whom they were now having report of him performing miracles in towns and villages nearby?

Whether it was some cheap thrills from spectacular miracles, or confirmation that there was nothing to be learned from this man – *"He's the carpenter's son."* The Reality is very different.

Last week in the first part of this incident we heard how Jesus picked up the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah and read the section about bringing Good News to the poor, sight to the blind, liberty to captives and so on. We pick up today where we left off last week, *"Today this text is being fulfilled as you listen."* We are told that they were astonished at his gracious words and at first wins their approval, but not for long. The dawning reality of his words – Jesus' challenge to see beyond the carpenter's son, and some cheap miracles to entertain the crowd are too much and so he is hustled out of town – literally.

Reality does not live up to Expectation for these people. The hype has been too much. I wonder if Reality and Expectation are not similarly mis-matched for us at times in regard to the way we come across things to do with faith and religion in our own lives – priests or bishops not living up to our expectations, the 'church' not seeming to be all that it might be; liturgy and prayer not giving us the buzz, the boost we were expecting – or else taking us beyond what we were expecting into uncomfortable zones. Expectation and Reality mis-match in all kinds of ways, but if we expect to find our God **only** in set places, at particular times and with the usual message – the reality will be very different, because the God we see revealed in Jesus does not work like that. Sometimes we may feel let down – but at other times we may get more than we bargained for – just as those people did in the Synagogue at Nazareth.

### **Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2007**

One of the most important growth points we encounter in our development as human persons is coming to terms with failure, with not getting our own way in everything. There are fewer more embarrassing scenes than seeing an adult react like a two year-old spitting its dummy out of the pram when it doesn't get its own way. In different ways each of our readings today touch on this theme.

That reading from St Paul is a favourite for couples to choose for their wedding services, though I'm not sure that they really understand the full implications of Paul's words,

*"When I was a child, I used to talk like a child, and think like a child, and argue like a child, but now I am a man (an adult), all childish ways are put behind me."*

There is a world of difference between the childishness that St. Paul is asserting that

adults should put behind them, and the child-LIKE-ness that Jesus recommends to his followers in different parts of the Gospels. We are by dint of age Christian adults, and what we are called to be is to grow into Adult Christians – and one of the main areas of development into adulthood is coping with disappointment, failure, not always getting our own way.

Poor old Jeremiah rarely got his own way or saw any great degree of success in his 40-year ministry as a prophet. During that time, in spite of his constant urgings to the people to be faithful to their covenant with God he saw the eventual destruction of Jerusalem and the magnificent first Temple of Solomon. It is no wonder that at the beginning of his ministry, as we hear in our First Reading, God promises to make him

*“Into a fortified city, a pillar of iron, and a wall of bronze to confront all this land.”*

His will be a challenging ministry, but God promises to be at his side and Jeremiah does his best as an adult to engage in what he has to do.

Jesus also faces disappointment and rejection in our Gospel Reading today – and here right at the beginning of his Public Ministry. Although there will be many success stories in this ministry, there are also many failures – people opposing him, even disciples abandoning him because they can’t take what he has to say. Of course, at the end of his ministry there is what looks like abject failure – abandoned in his hour of greatest need by all but a few faithful followers at the foot of his Cross, he dies like a common criminal.

We know that his death was not the end. What looked like a tragedy is ultimately a triumph, but that is with the benefit of hindsight. Today in our Gospel Jesus gets his first taste of disappointment, of not getting his own way – of being run out of his own home town. We know how he reacted – putting it all behind him, re-grouping and getting on with his preaching and teaching – reacting as an adult human person should.

Our task, our life-long task is to grow as adult human persons into God and God’s ways. As I said earlier we are Christian adults simply by dint of age, but our calling is to be Adult Christians and coming to terms with disappointment, not getting our own way all the time is a particularly important growth point that we all have to encounter.

### **Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2010**

A key moment in any budding relationship is when people fall out of love for each other. The other person who, at first, appears as flawless as a god or a goddess is seen now to have certain flaws in their character, to be less than perfect. Here is the opportunity for infatuation to turn into love – for a mature relationship to begin – or else to end there and then. Maturing relationships between people are ones where the partners accept, live with and work with each other’s foibles and shortcomings. To expect all or nothing is a sign of immaturity.

When we look at what happens in that scene in the Synagogue at Nazareth we see a very childish, immature response from the congregation. Last week they were all agog at what Jesus had to say about himself. His reputation for healing had preceded him, but now when he cuts across their expectations and gives them a dose of reality, they turn completely the other way, *“This is Joseph’s son, surely! What on earth can he tell us? What right has he got to speak like this?”* It’s all or nothing and since Jesus does not fit into the narrow categories of their expectations it is nothing

and they hustle him out of town.

There is no compromise, no thought of trying to work things out, to talk things out. It's all over. The key moment, the opportunity is lost. The relationship will not develop.

Opportunities to grow and to develop – or not – come to us in the relationship which is our faith – our faith in the God made visible in Jesus. We might begin with some quite magical, childish expectations of this God of ours but in the joys, struggles and sadness's of life we come across opportunities to change our images, to understand this Person more deeply.

There may, of course, be occasions when things seem to go so awry in our lives that we can wonder where God is in it all, and wonder if it is worth the bother. Or, again, we may feel so unlovable, so unworthy that we might wonder why God would want to bother with us at all.

It is at times like these that these words of St. Paul in our Second Reading come to the fore. We are probably more used to hearing this reading at a Wedding Service, where a couple very much in love with each other choose this reading as an aspiration, a hope that the love they express for each other on that day **will** grow and develop in the good times and the difficult times that lie ahead for them.

Those words about what love really is, **are** aspirational for any couple but they are, of course, a very real description of the qualities that God shows us on God's side of the faith relationship.

God **is** love and so God is always patient and kind with us, with me – never jealous, rude or selfish, never taking offence no matter what we may do or say – never resentful, never delighting in any misfortune that comes our way – always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, to endure whatever comes. This is what God is for us – something we see in Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

This is the great attraction of our faith relationship. Here is someone who never gives up on us and who calls us to respond similarly – moving away from childish infatuation to a developing mature and realistic relationship of love.

### **Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2013**

Because of the scenes portrayed by St. Luke of things like the Annunciation, Jesus' Birth and the Visit of the Shepherds, the Presentation in the Temple and twelve years later the finding of Jesus in the Temple – a very human picture of Jesus is presented to us – but don't be deceived into thinking that this is a cosier or softer picture of Jesus than that presented by the other Gospel writers.

Whilst it is true that we see a very caring and loving Jesus in St. Luke's Gospel when he gives us things like the Parable of the Good Samaritan and the Parable of the Prodigal Son and so on, there is a certain steeliness about Jesus and a higher demand by him of those who follow him – a higher demand on his disciples.

Next week when we find Jesus calling the first disciples Peter and Andrew, James and John not only do they leave their fishing nets behind, St Luke tells us that they left **EVERYTHING** and followed him – no half measures there!

We see a similar steeliness, an uncompromising side to Jesus in today's Gospel. Notice how we are told at the beginning of that passage how, *"He won the approval of all and that they were*

*astonished at the gracious words that came from his lips.*” Yet within a few short sentences they are ready to run him out of the town and to pitch him over the cliff- top. And what has happened is that he has actually provoked their anger with his words.

Jesus almost taunts these people he knows in his home town – *“Remember Elijah didn’t feed any Jewish people in the famine and Elisha healed a foreigner, not a Jew, in his time – so there you go!”* He’s making an important point right at the start of his ministry – all that he does and says is not just for the so-called ‘*Chosen People*’ it’s for everyone – everyone, that is, who is open to trust and put their faith in him. But the way in which he puts this across is really provocative.

In acting in this way Jesus is clearly being portrayed as a Prophet – someone who proclaims the truth, who tells it as it is without fear or favour. He is, for example, like Jeremiah in our First Reading.

Notice here, in his calling he is told to brace himself for what is to come and how the Lord will make him a pillar of iron and a wall of bronze. This is because, of course, Jeremiah’s message to the people is a very unpopular one – one for which he will be vilified, imprisoned and in danger of losing his life. But this is the prophet’s calling – to speak the truth in season and out – without fear or favour.

In our understanding of what Jesus says and does, and of what Jesus asks of us as disciples it is important to keep before us a complete picture of who he is – as opposed to a partial one. Jesus is both a prophet who has high demands and expectations of his followers, but he is also a loving healer full of mercy and compassion.

In times when are rather comfortable, cosy and lackadaisical we need to listen to the prophet.

In times when we are at our wits end and full of self-loathing and self-doubt we need to listen to the compassionate healer.

Both are Jesus.

## **Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2019**

For obvious reasons that Hymn of Love that we heard from St Paul in our Second Reading today is a favourite for couples to choose for their wedding service. Whether they have actually listened deeply to what St Paul is saying, rather than just hearing nice words, I am not always sure. In fact these words about love come at the end of two chapters in the letter that we have been reading over the last three weeks. It is the climax of his argument about the need for harmony, for unity, in the community.

He began this section by pointing out that though there are a variety of gifts they all come from the same Spirit. Furthermore these different gifts are to be valued by everyone and to recognise that, although each of us is different, within the Body of Christ – the Church – we need and should value each other. Finally in today’s passage he writes about how this harmony can be achieved; through the gift of love that can overcome all things.

Although St Paul was the first Christian writer to use the analogy of the body to stress the importance of interconnectedness between people, others had used it in the Ancient World in describing the need for respect and harmony in all societies. It is, of course, an obvious analogy to

use. St Paul is saying that what is true of all communities and societies should be especially true of the Christian community, founded as it is on God's supreme example of love for humankind. The exercise of love, of respect, of promoting harmony is not, however, restricted simply to our own Christian community. It has much wider implications for our attitudes to the wider society.

On Tuesday evening I was at the annual Holocaust Memorial Service at St Mary's High School. We heard from one young woman about what happened to her family in Bosnia in the 1990's and remembered, once again, that genocide is not a thing of the distant past. Our main speaker was a 92 year-old lady who had been brought out of Nazi-occupied Europe on the Kindertransporte in 1939. This was the initiative of a number of people in this country to save as many children of Jewish background as possible from what was going on in Germany and Austria.

Gabriele was born in Vienna to a Christian mother and a Jewish father. Her mother died when she was very young and she was brought up by her mother's parents. Her father was murdered after that Nazis took over Austria in 1938 and destroyed Jewish run businesses. Under the Nuremberg Race Laws she was a "Mischling" – literally, a mongrel. As a 12 year-old she was forced to wear a yellow Star of David on the outside of her clothes all the time. She had to move schools and was unable to play in the same parks as her non-Jewish friends. When her father was murdered her grandparents could see what was happening and arranged for her to leave Vienna on one of the Kindertransporte trains.

The full story is too long to relate here. Suffice it to say that she reached this country, unable to speak a word of English, and received a good welcome by many people, but her troubles were not over. Because she was of German-origin in the eyes of some people she was not to be treated well at all once war had broken out. She was found refuge in a convent boarding school in Ramsgate, Kent. However, at the age of 16 she was forced to move again. This time because of British Laws. Because of where she came from she had to register as an "Enemy Alien", and such people were not allowed to live near the Channel ports in case they might help an invading German army. Gabriele told her story with great calm and serenity. She has enjoyed a good life since those times and is very grateful for the welcome she received from so many people 80 years ago. It saved her life.

Her story is a timely reminder of what so many people face in different parts of the world today. We are, as human beings, part of a single body. We need others and we need to respect all human life. The love of God, the love of which St Paul writes so eloquently in our Reading today is not to be restricted to fellow Christians, but belongs to all people – all people who are, after all, made in the image and likeness of God.

### **Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Is. 6: 1 - 8

1 Cor. 15: 1 - 11

Lk. 5: 1 - 11

### **Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2007**

A few years ago Pope John Paul II used the phrase from that Gospel passage, "*Put out into the deep...*" as the opening line of a letter on vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. It captures the spirit of mystery and adventure which is integral to dealing with others in a pastoral setting. As Christians we believe that everyone is created in the image and likeness of God, so in dealing with other people, their lives, their feelings, their hopes and dreams we are dealing with holy ground, with something sacred. We need therefore to tread carefully and with respect.

It is no accident that all three people called upon to share in God's work in our readings today do not feel themselves worthy of such work. Isaiah is already on holy ground in the sanctuary of the Temple but does not feel worthy to be God's messenger until he is cleansed.

St Paul reminds us that once he was the chief persecutor of the church, but through God's grace – God's love, forgiveness, strength and help – he was able to become the boldest preacher of God's message.

St Peter knows he is in the presence of someone quite extraordinary in Jesus and knows he is not worthy – *"Depart from me, Lord; I am a sinful man."* They are words that all of us could echo. Yet each one of us is forgiven when we seek God's mercy, and each one of us in some way is being invited to *"Put out into the deep..."* – whether as priest, parent, grandparent, teacher, friend, mentor, a companion. Whatever we are called to be with some other people in our lives, when we are in a position to influence the life of another we are dealing with holy ground, something sacred – and none of us is worthy.

It is a scary business having the privilege and possibility of influencing the life of another person. And that comes not just in the life of a priest or a teacher, but is also part of being a parent, a friend or a companion. We cannot be any of these things or do any of these things properly and well without God's guidance and help. That is why we are invited to pray frequently for priests, teachers and parents and so on.

Although there is a natural reluctance and hesitation to presume to take on such important roles in life, we also know the personal rewards coming from our dealings with others are immense. Once we are aware that we are on holy ground – that we are dealing with something sacred – we can also be aware of some other words of Jesus to Peter in that Gospel, *"Do not be afraid."* We are not out on our own in the deep when dealing with others. We are accompanied by the One who promised Peter that he would not be alone in his work.

Today we are asked to pray especially for those involved in Education, those involved in the sacred task of helping to inform, form and transform new generations of young people into the mysteries of life – of launching them out into the deep. We certainly do pray for them today, and for all of us in whatever ways we are called to put out into the deep that is involvement in the lives of others.

### **Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2010**

Growing up in North Shields with my Dad, although land-based himself, working for a fish trawler company, I was very aware of the tough life of a sea-going fisherman. The combination of sea and weather and the dangers of working on deck make it a challenging job. Many more people are aware of this now thanks to some of the documentary series which have been on television in the last few years.

The Sea of Galilee is puny in comparison to the North Sea but being fishermen 2000 years ago still had huge challenges. Rowing the fairly fragile boat in what could be rough seas, putting out the nets, then landing them in, was a tough old job. But as well as being tough there is also something romantic, something adventurous about *"Putting out into deep water"*, as Jesus tells Simon Peter to do in our Gospel today.

What Jesus offers these fishermen who leave everything to follow him is another kind of adventure;

joining him in preaching the Gospel and gathering new people as they go about their work. For too long now, far too many generations this idea of adventure of putting out the deep, the unknown, has either been lost in our church communities, or else it has become associated only with missionaries who ventured out into what was called “*Darkest Africa*” or who worked in exotic locations like the Amazon jungle or faraway Pacific Islands.

Meanwhile here at home the images were not about the adventures of fishermen, we were part of a flock – and like sheep we looked to others to care for us and to look after us. Rather than be natural doers, going out to take the Gospel to others, our congregations, our parishes become populated by people who were passive receivers – who came to church to have things done to them. That has to change, it has to change radically and it has to change quickly.

Today a number of children from the parish are signing up to the next stage of their adventure of the journey of faith – and it **is** an adventure. At their Baptism their parents accepted the responsibility of bringing their children up in the practice of the faith. The parish and the school are doing their bit in helping these parents with that responsibility as these children prepare to make their First Holy Communion. But the school and the parish do not and cannot take that responsibility away from these parents. Now “*responsibility*” sounds like a burden, something that has to be done but if that is what it seems then it comes from that passive culture that we have come to accept that we come along to church to have things provided for us, to have things done for us.

And yes things are provided and given to our in our worship in celebrating this great sacrament, but it is also a call to **do**, to be active. Handing on the faith to others, sharing the Gospel, the Good News of our salvation should be a pleasure, an adventure, something we really want to engage in because it is so important to us, so precious.

Perhaps a way to summarise this would be to adapt some famous words from President John F. Kennedy’s Inauguration Speech of 50 years ago, “*Ask not what your church can do for you, ask rather what you can do for your church.*”

We **are** the church and **we** are called to put out into the deep.

### **Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2016**

In our three readings this weekend we find three men, from very different backgrounds, all of whom feel that they are not worthy of what they are being tasked with, and yet all three will go on, with God’s help, to be three of the most important figures in the unfolding story of the Bible.

Isaiah seems to have been some sort of aristocrat in Jewish circles who, while praying in his native Jerusalem receives this vision of angels and the message that he is to proclaim. But he protests, “I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips...” “I cannot possibly do this huge task.” But the Lord, for his part insists that he can and gives him the wherewithal, such that ultimately he can say, “here I am, send me.”

Paul, as we know, was a Pharisee, an intellectual living and working in Jerusalem. As he points out in our Second Reading, he was also a great persecutor of the early Christian community and did not deserve the name of an apostle nonetheless, thanks to the grace of God, he has become one of the greatest of its missionaries and preachers.

In contrast to the first two, Peter is a simple, but skillful fisherman, a rural man, in a very precarious, and sometimes dangerous, occupation. He is sufficiently experienced to know that there is no point paying out your nets even in deep water when the sun is high in the sky. The fish are not feeding then and the chances of catching them are nil. And yet they actually catch an overwhelming amount – and he is frightened to his core. “Who is this man? Who is it that can do this kind of thing – preach to great crowds and then turn round and point to where there is an abundance of fish to be caught?” So he responds by saying, “Leave me for I am a sinful man.” In spite of these misgivings he too, is able finally to say yes – and so we have the first leader-in-making of the early church.

An aristocrat, an intellectual teacher of the Law, a simple fisherman – here we have three very different men. Now the major flaw in the argument I am about to make is that they were all men, women are not represented here. That is a function of the narrowness of the culture of the time, and there is little or nothing we can do about that (not that for one moment we need to be as narrow in the way we operate today). The point is that every single one of us is not worthy to be called to have any role in the community of God’s people. Not one of us is worthy. I am not worthy of priesthood, of leading the celebration of the Eucharist. The people preparing for baptism or for reception into the church are not worthy of such a move. The children preparing for their First Holy Communion are not worthy of receiving the Lord.

No-one here is worthy to be a disciple of Jesus, that is a given. Like the three men in our readings today we are invited to acknowledge that... and then get over it. Get over it and get on with it. We are not worthy but we ARE nonetheless disciples, and as such are called continuously to be encountering Jesus in all kinds of different ways, and having encountered him, then to share our Good News with others. Not one of us is worthy to do, and yet every single person here is, with God’s grace, called to do this.

This coming Wednesday we mark the beginning of Lent – one of the really special times of prayer and reflection during the Christian Year for all of God’s People. One of our tasks during the coming 40 days is to acknowledge our unworthiness to be disciples, and then to get over it and to get on with it.

## **Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Jer. 17: 5 - 8

1 Cor. 15: 12, 16 - 20

Lk. 6: 17, 20 - 26

### **SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME 2007**

*“Alas for you when the world speaks well of you!”*

There’s not much chance of ‘the world’ – of modern culture – speaking well of religion these days. To be fair various religions have often brought problems on themselves because some of the characters representing religion are extremists, intolerant bigots – that goes for Christians as much as any other world religion.

Having said that the way religion is portrayed in the various parts of the media is almost universally negative with no glimpse allowed of any good done by religious people. This last week I went to see a new Dutch film at the Tyneside Film Theatre about a young Jewish woman doing Word War 2. She was, like Ann Frank, one of the hidden children – hidden by largely Christian families from the Nazis. Rudd was hidden in the farmhouse of a Dutch Calvinist family and as portrayed in the film – the stern, Calvinist farmer, head of the family, only gave her food if she had learnt another couple

of verses of the New Testament. At the end of the war wrongly imprisoned as a collaborator – she is brought out of the filthy cell she is kept in with the other collaborators on a Sunday morning to be sung at by a hearty, Calvinist choir singing of God’s righteousness and our sinfulness – not a mention of any good done by anyone religious – a completely one-sided view of religion.

You only have to think of the Da Vinci Code, or Dot Cotton in EastEnders, and the portrayal of religion is much the same – bad, mad or worse. In the newspapers or on the TV news, any religious person not holding to the secular liberal norm is usually referred to as “*a devout Catholic*” or “*an evangelical Christian*.” However much many may not agree with everything that some people put forward as the Christian view, it is certainly not the case that the only option open is a secular, libertarian one.

A few years ago Eric Idle, one of the Monty Python team, was interviewed about the film, ‘The Life of Brian’ – a satire on religion. It was very revealing what he had to say. A suggestion was made that the next Python film should be a satire about Christ. OK so they started looking at the Gospels. He said that when they looked at what Jesus had to say there was nothing to base a satire on, because what he had to say was actually very good – the satire came at the way religious people then portrayed and interpreted his words.

Not the person and his message, but the way religious people then distorted and twisted the message.

In my view they made a very funny film.

Just look at today’s Gospel – eminently sensible. We are rather more familiar with St. Matthew’s account of what we usually call “*The Beatitudes*” – the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus addressed the whole crowd. Notice that here in St. Luke’s account we are told, “*He fixed his eyes on the disciples and said...*” These words of blessing and then of course, of woe, are addressed to the disciples alone (something that happens quite frequently in Luke’s Gospel). And if the words were addressed to the disciples then, they are equally addressed to the disciples now – to us.

In listening to what Jesus says to us here, we may not be too happy about embracing poverty, hunger, sadness and being the subject of hatred, but we need to be very wary of being comfortable, contented and well off – going along with what appears to be success in the eyes of the world. Jesus’ agenda, the Christian agenda, our agenda is different and whilst we might rightly complain about the biased way faith and religion are portrayed today, we would not want to go along uncritically with the agenda of ‘the world’ as Jesus calls it. That equals - False prophecy.

## **Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2019**

I apologise if people have heard me use this story before, but I think that it bears repetition in the light of our Readings today.

Once upon a time two sisters – Beauty and Ugly – lived in a town near the shore of a lake. One day Beauty came down to the lake for a swim. She undressed and placed her clothes in a neat pile at the water’s edge and dived into the lake for her swim. A short time later Ugly came down to the same spot, took off her clothes, placed them in a neat pile and dived into the lake for her swim. Being the stronger swimmer Ugly arrived back first but when she got out of the lake, by mistake, she put on her sister’s clothes, so that, when Beauty returned the only clothes left for her were those of Ugly.

Ever since then people have been confused when they meet either of the two sisters because what looks on first sight as though it is Ugly is, in fact, Beauty; and what looks like Beauty on further looking turns out to be Ugly.

Too often we are prone to looking no deeper than the surface of things. Superficially what looks very attractive – riches, comfort, apparent contentment, and so on – might, if we dug a little deeper, be based on something quite ugly; the exploitation of others, for example. Some of the benefits we enjoy in this country are because people elsewhere are being used either as slaves, or else as virtual slaves trapped in a system that works well for others (for us), but not for them.

Superficiality is a pandemic (not just epidemic, but pandemic. It is everywhere) in our society today. It is so easy for us to flit from one thing to another, barely touching the surface of anything. Pope Francis refers to this, in his recent letter on Holiness, as a culture of “zapping” (I’m not sure what is the Latin word for “zapping”!). We can switch from channel to channel in an instant on the tv, or move from one image on the tv to something on the ipad or the phone, without taking any real notice of what we are looking at. The Pope suggests that this is something that young people are particularly prone to, but it is something that affects all of us. The problem with such a culture is precisely the danger of thinking that we are seeing Beauty when it is, in fact, Ugly, and being turned off by something that appears to be Ugly but which, on if we looked at it more closely turns out to be the very Beauty that we most seek in life.

Our First Reading throws up the contrast between an arid wasteland producing no fruit because of a lack of depth of roots to find water and true nourishment, with the constant fruit produced by a tree planted by the water’s edge, whose roots can reach permanent nourishment. The call of the contrasts in the Gospel between blessings and curses point to the same need: to discern what is truly and lastingly good, from what might appear to be good and wholesome, but is in fact anything but wholesome.

Discernment is a truly God-given gift. By realising God’s presence in our lives, and the support God offers, we are enabled – when we take the time truly to reflect on what is in front of us – to see not simply what benefits me, gives me more and better in life. Discernment is about seeing the direction God is pointing out to me – a direction that may involve discomfort, even pain, but which nevertheless leads to true goodness and beauty.

If you think that is a bit harsh, take a look at the Cross sometime: superficially ugly, but truly something that brings about beauty in its fullest sense: freedom from sin and resurrection for us.

## **Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time**

1 Sam. 26: 2, 7 - 9, 12 - 13, 22 - 23

1 Cor. 15: 45 - 49

Lk. 6: 27 - 38

## **Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time 2004**

I think that we are all now familiar with what is called Ignatian Prayer. Using our imagination and senses we are invited to image a scene in the Gospels, to place ourselves in that scene, to imagine ourselves are one of the characters in the story and to see what happens as we replay the scene in our imagination. It can be a very powerful and effective form of prayer and a useful way into understanding our Scriptures.

The other day I came across a piece of writing where the author was suggesting we do the same kind of imaginative exercise – only in reverse. Instead of placing **ourselves** in the scene in the Gospel, we try to imagine Jesus present in our own lives here and now and saying the kinds of things he says, for example, in our Gospel today.

Try to imagine Jesus ringing at your doorbell. Of course, you invite him in and are delighted to see him. You invite him to be part of your family life – to be at home with you in your day-to-day routine.

As part of your family you say to him, *“Invite some of your own friends around for a meal.”* And, unfortunately he does. Remember the type of people he has for friends in the Gospels and they start coming to your house on a regular basis. The curtains soon twitch in the houses round about. There is talk about what will happen to property values if this kind of thing goes on. You invite Jesus along to speak at the parish church – and he says all of those things about loving enemies, giving even more to the person who robs you, doing good to those who harm you and so on. How does this feel – sharing this man among your family and friends? A man who actually said at one point, *“I have come to divide a household against itself, father against son, daughter against mother”* and so on. And this is exactly what he is doing – right in your own life – Now.

This imaginative exercise ends with the person preparing a safe, comfortable cupboard in the house, putting a strong lock on the door. You invite Jesus to step inside and lock the door. You put flowers and candles around the cupboard and make a reverential bow every time we pass it. You now have Jesus in the house and he doesn't interfere anymore.

The writer is Fr. Gerard Hughes, a very distinguished Jesuit priest and writer of much praised works on spirituality. He is not trying to be deliberately offensive to people's sensibilities here, but he is trying to stir up our imaginations to help us realise how easy it is to have a split spirituality – dividing our lives into neat and very separate compartments – as if each section – an hour at church on a Sunday here, an evening with friends there, doing my work here, observing the world around me there, and so on – as if each were completely discrete from one another - whereas, in fact, they are one whole reality – an integral part of each other. Our God made visible in Jesus is in each part of our lives.

On Wednesday we begin the Season of Lent – a time of particular focus on our Spirituality as we prepare to celebrate the central events of our faith in Holy Week – a time to review through prayer, fasting and acts of compassion towards others how God impacts on each area of our life. As we prepare to do that we are aware of how uncomfortable that might be but are reminded in today's Gospel that this God is above all else, a God of compassion. *“Be compassionate even as your heavenly Father is compassionate.”*

## **Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time 2007**

No-one, I think, comes to church on a Sunday so that after Mass has ended they go out feeling worse about themselves than when they come in! We come to church for all kinds of reasons and needs, and hopefully we leave with at least some of them healed, addressed and feeling the better for it. Of course, for this to happen properly we need to be living in the real world, the world as it is, and not some fantasy world that we have created. The great Protestant theologian, Karl Barth once said that, *“I preach the Gospel with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.”* The message we need is in the Gospel, but can only be helpful if it is related to the world as it is (as reported in the papers).

This last week the world has seemed a particularly ugly place – mere misery for people in Iraq and Darfar – random shootings of teenagers in South London, and an unimaginable murder of a two-year old baby girl.

*“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Give to everyone who asks. Treat others as you would like them to treat you. Be compassionate even as your heavenly Father is compassionate”.* – The Gospel.

How to relate these two??

I have to admit to an addiction – as addictions go it is not a particularly serious one, but it is an addiction nonetheless. I am a compulsive viewer of CSI on Channel Five. Every week I need my fix of the programme.

This last week the crime team were trying to solve a series of random, brutal, savage beatings of innocent strangers by a gang of hoodies. It was pretty horrific. In the end they caught a gang of teenagers who were not so much immoral as **amoral**. They did the beatings for no particular reason, just because they wanted to, just for the kicks and showed no remorse even when someone died of their injuries. At the end of the programme with the gang safely behind bars the team puzzle over what they have seen in the locker room at the end of their shift.

*“I blame the parents,”* says one. *“But I’m bringing up a teenage daughter,”* says another. *“But you’re doing a fine job,”* says a third. *“No matter how you’re brought up,”* says another, *“You always have a choice over your actions.”* Enter the Team Leader, Gill Grison, who in an earlier series we discover was brought up Catholic, but now no longer accepts the faith – but is always philosophical. *“A moral compass only shows you the way to go,”* he says. *“It cannot make you go there.”* He then goes on about how Las Vegas is built on the principle of pleasure seeking and instant gratification with no guilt and no responsibility attached – hence these teenagers and their crime.

Dangerous, violent people need to be locked up for the safety of others – that is a given – but unless people make some attempts to “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” of trying to reach beyond violence and hatred – evil wins.

Jesus’ words are difficult, and perhaps we have great difficulty in putting them into practice, and can only do so ourselves in small, incremental ways in our lives – but ultimately his words are the only things that make sense when violence threatens to overwhelm.

At times it may seem that being compassionate, not judging, not condemning, granting pardon may look dangerously weak, but that is from a human perspective. When we tap into the all and ever-loving and forgiving divine, however, experience shows us that far from being weak, we are given a full measure, pressed down and flowing over – we are given strength beyond our wildest imagination. And it is that strength and that forgiveness that we all tap into here, and are asked to take out with us at the end of Mass.

## **Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time 2019**

In the middle of that Gospel passage Jesus quotes something that 200 years ago would come to be called “The Golden Rule”; “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” It was dubbed “The Golden Rule” because, with some slight variations, it is a basic tenet of behaviour in almost all

religions. It is found in Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism; a version of the same rule is even found in the writings of Confucius. Treating others as you would have them treat you has a number of flaws in it, when examined very closely, but it is a reasonable starting point for human behaviour.

If people refuse to treat others as they would like themselves to be treated – if they do not respect the person or property of others (stealing, assaulting and so on), then society has a perfect right to protect itself from such people. Of course, if we truly believe in the dignity of all human persons, then however heinous a crime someone has committed, we are still called to respect the dignity of the perpetrator, even if we need to lock them away from society for a very long time.

In fact, Jesus goes much further than that simple “Golden Rule” in what he asks the people listening to him. Jesus points out that even the people he refers to as ‘sinners’ are capable of ordinary, decent behaviour towards those who are decent to them in return. He goes a step further in his demands: everyone, without exception, is to be treated like decent, human persons.

Perhaps, however, the most startling thing he has to say in this passage is his command to, “Be compassionate, even as your heavenly Father is compassionate.” That is a tall order, but perhaps more inviting than St Matthew’s way of reporting the same thing in his Gospel, “Be perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect.” What St Luke is presenting Jesus as saying is that we have been treated with great love, mercy and compassion by our God, and this call of Jesus is not just about saying “Thank you”, of celebrating a God who has done this for us, but actually to go and do likewise: to live the love, mercy and compassion that we have received with all others that we come across in our lives.

It seems likely that St Luke was writing his Gospel for a community that was rather wealthier than the communities for whom either St Mark or St Matthew were writing. From what we can glean from this Gospel they seemed to be living more settled, comfortable lives. Whereas St Mark’s community in Rome was suffering persecution and St Matthew’s was a poor, marginalised and misunderstood community of Jewish Christians. One of the characteristics of Luke’s Gospel is that he shows a more merciful and human picture of Jesus but then the corollary of this is that the Jesus he presents demands more of his listeners in return, “The amount you measure out is the amount you will be given back.”

If we identify ourselves as people who are more like those of the community of St Luke, than the poorer ones of Mark and Matthew then, as we approach the Season of Lent in ten days time, we might like to think of how we might use ‘the more’ that we have for the benefit of others during Lent. I am not so much thinking in monetary terms here as any spare time or energy we might have to help others. There is a lovely expression people sometimes use, they talk about, “Giving something back”; to the community, the society from which they have gained so much. Perhaps we might begin to think along the same lines for our forthcoming Lenten observances.

## **Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time 2019**

St Luke has almost come to the end of his account of Jesus’ first sermon to his disciples with the crowd listening in. As a parting shot notice how he homes in on the example of speech for discerning whether or not to take any notice of what someone is saying, “For a man’s words flow out of what fills his heart.” (With apologies for the use of exclusive language in our Readings today. What is being said here applies to men and women in equal measure.) There is a direct connection between what someone feels deeply in their heart and what that person says. Jesus’ own words show what lies

deep in his own heart – a love for all humankind without exception.

If we run together the second lines of each of the sayings in our First Reading we find the same sentiment coming across (again with apologies for the exclusive language),

... the defects of a man appear in his talk... the test of a man is his conversation... a man's words betray how he feels... Do not praise a man before he has spoken, since this is the test of men.

What a person says and, I would add how they say it, are vital indications of someone's character. As we are on the threshold of Lent and are, hopefully, thinking what we might take up as Lenten disciplines, one thing we might look at is what we say to people and how we say it to them. Whoever we are, but especially if we have some degree of authority over others – priest, teacher, parent, grandparent, supervisor, friend, and so on – what we say to people and how we say it to them can help build trust, respect, community, but it can also destroy trust, respect and community. Such is the power of our words.

Famously the American Constitution guarantees 'freedom of speech', but that guarantee is not an absolute. The classical example given in ethics classes is that freedom of speech does not give you permission to shout, "Fire!" in a crowded cinema when there is no fire. Saying something like that could easily cause injury to others and even death in the crush that would ensue. With freedom comes responsibility.

There are times when some political leaders seem to choose to ignore this responsibility when because of what and how they say something, people who already agitated and restless take what is said to be permission to violent, hateful behaviour towards minorities, for example. The minority could be another race, tribe, religion, another sect, or another political viewpoint. God knows the history of the last century is littered with tragic examples of how hateful speech can cause terrible tragedies, crimes against humanity.

All that may seem rather remote from anything for which we might be responsible, and it is. However, if we think of the little things we are asked to in our own lives in terms of preventing further climate catastrophe - using less plastic, turning off unused lights, not leaving the tap running while cleaning our teeth, and so on – there are things we can all do as individuals in what we say and how we say it in our criticism of others.

What we have to say about another person or group of people can enhance trust and respect. It can build up community. By the same token our words, and how we choose to use them, could destroy those very same things. As we think about what plank needs to be taken out of our own eyes before trying to offer any advice to others perhaps, as we get ready to take up our Lenten disciplines, we might reflect on what and how we say things to others.