

10th - 16th Sundays of Ordinary Time

Having completed our celebrations of Lent and Easter, and the Feasts of Trinity Sunday and Corpus Christi, we turn once again to a period of "Ordinary Time". In fact from June until the end of November our Gospels in this Year C all come from St Luke's account of Jesus' Public Ministry.

Once again, the homilies that follow were all preached to congregations in various parishes, warts and all! Where no homily exists for a particular year we may still have been celebrating Trinity Sunday or Corpus Christi, there may have been a pastoral letter that year, or I may have been away on holiday!

10th Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Kings 17:17-24, Gal. 1:11-19, Lk. 7:11-17

10th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2013

It goes against the natural order of things for a parent to have to buy a daughter or a son. That's as true of the animal kingdom as it is for humans. It just doesn't seem right. It is tragic when it happens at any age but especially so for a parent to lose a baby or a young child – and everybody in the community is affected.

The son of the widow in today's Gospel was a bit older, perhaps a young adult. We are not told how he died – either by disease or as the result of a tragic accident. Of course the incidence of early mortality was much more prevalent in Jesus' time than ours, but it does not diminish the awfulness of the situation, witnessed also by what we are told is "*a considerable number of townspeople*".

The death of her only child was a particular devastation for this widow. In a time without widow's pensions or social security she is now destitute – no husband or family to support her as was the norm in those days. There was no opportunity for paid women's work in the rural communities of Galilee. Now she would have to rely on charity meted out by other townsfolk. Humiliation along with destitution.

This is what Jesus in his great compassion is addressing when he reaches out to her in her need and restores her son to her.

This week we revert (more or less for the rest of the year) to readings for Sundays in Ordinary Time. This year, as you know, we are making our way through St. Luke's account of Jesus' Public Ministry and at the moment we are still in the early stages of this ministry tucked away in Galilee. Through the account of what Jesus does and says, St. Luke is building up for his listeners/readers, a picture of who Jesus is.

Above all else for St. Luke, Jesus is a great Prophet – a teacher, someone who does God's will and who shows others how to do likewise. Although unique, Jesus follows in the great and venerable tradition of the ancient prophets of Israel – here doing something very much like what the first of the great prophets, Elijah did in his time, as we heard in our First Reading.

Here is something at the same time rooted in the great tradition of the past and yet refreshingly new. The crowds are enthralled and intrigued by this and we are told that his fame now spreads down into Judea as well. At this stage Jesus' ministry is on the up – a huge success, it would appear.

As we reflect on this Gospel perhaps it is our opportunity for us to give thanks for the great strides in medicine and social care that we have benefitted from, and to pray for parents who, in our own time, suffer loss of a child

- In our own communities through illness, or accident, or violence;
- And through illness, accident, warfare and famine in communities across the world.

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

2 Sam. 12:7-10, 13, Gal. 2:16, 19-21, Lk. 7:36-8:3

11th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2004

Two assumptions have often been made which are based on reading things into this Gospel passage that are not there. It is assumed that we know why this woman had *“a bad reputation in the town”* – but St. Luke doesn’t actually tell us. She would have been a prostitute – as it has been assumed – or she might have been a notorious gossip, sharp tongued, dishonest as a trader – any of these things would have given her a bad reputation.

The second wrong assumption is that this woman is Mary Magdalene. There is no connection between the woman who is a sinner in that passage and the list of women disciples that follows, in which Mary Magdalene’s name is the first mentioned. People make assumptions – wrong assumptions all too quickly.

What we have here is a woman who is truly repentant of her sins, and a man, in Jesus, who allows himself to be made unclean in the eyes of the Pharisees, to show that God’s forgiveness cuts across petty ritualistic laws.

Whatever it is that this woman is repentant of, she is profoundly moved – weeping, kissing Jesus’ feet in an act both of tenderness and subjection. She is not earning forgiveness by her actions of tears, of wiping, of kissing, or of anointing. |Jesus tells his host Simon,

*“I tell you that her sins, how many sins, must have been forgiven her,
or she would not have shown such great love.”*

Repentance is itself a gift of God’s love that leads to healing and wholeness. We do not earn God’s forgiveness any more that we earn God’s love. It is completely and utterly free.

In her freedom the woman can truly go in peace – she is whole, at peace with herself and her God. It is her faith in God, her trust, not her actions that show this.

Instead of slinking in quietly, trying not to be noticed because she knows she would not be welcome in the house of a Pharisee, she is able to walk out with her head held high – that is what forgiveness can do.

There’s a lot more to this story, and to that list of women disciples, but this isn’t the place to go into it further. We are now firmly back in the Sundays of Ordinary Time and for most of the Sundays between now and the end of November we will be steadily going through St. Luke’s account of Jesus’ Public Ministry.

We all have copies of St. Luke’s Gospel at home. Reading it, or at least reading and reflecting on the passages coming up in the Sunday Gospels, will help us get deeper into what Jesus is saying and understanding what his message is about.

There are great riches to be found here, but only if we take the time to dig for them.

11TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2007

Between our three readings this weekend we have three people who know what it means to be forgiven in the depth of their being, and one poor soul who ought to know better hasn't got a clue!

Looking at our First Reading and knowing just how despicable was David's sin in regard to Uriah should put to rest any ideas that the God portrayed in the Old Testament is a vengeful, bloodthirsty God. If anyone deserved severe punishment for what they did, it was David – having a man bumped off in order to be free to take his wife. It is one of the most blatant misuses of power we could imagine, but David repents, and God forgives – as easily as that – far too easily I suspect for most of us, who might well think that a bit of revenge is in order here. No, God forgives and David is acknowledged as one of the greatest saints of Old Testament times – a writer of the great prayers of the Psalms, and so on.

Paul had once been the bitterest persecutor of the early church. No-one was more eager to track down and kill suspected followers of Jesus than Paul, and yet he becomes the young church's most intrepid missionary, preaching the message of Jesus wherever he travelled, and being persecuted himself for his trouble. As he writes here in our Second Reading, *"We had to become believers in Christ Jesus no less that you had, and now we hold that faith in Christ rather than fidelity to the Law is what justifies us, and that no one can be justified by keeping the Law."* That is a huge turn around in Paul's attitude, and it comes about because he knows in the depth of his being that in Jesus he is forgiven – something he never experienced by keeping the Law of Moses.

The woman in the Gospel also knows that she is forgiven. That is a superb line of Jesus' when he tells Simon, *"I tell you that here sins, her many sins, must have been forgiven her, or she would not have shown such great love."* It is **because** her sins are forgiven that she can show this love, it is not, and never could be, that she is somehow earning her forgiveness by showing love. Forgiveness doesn't work like that. It is and never can be earned. It is freely and lavishly given away by this God of ours.

The one sad person who does not know this, because he has never experienced that forgiveness – not because it has not been offered to him, but because he has no awareness of ever needing to be forgiven – is Simon. This becomes clear in his response to Jesus' little parable. The man who owes fifty denarii owes about two months' worth of all his wages – a labourer received one denarius a day in wages, just enough to keep himself and his family. Clearing such a debt is daunting, but doable. Someone forgiven such a debt is very grateful. The man who owed five hundred denarii owes two full years' work of his total pay. That is not doable. Being forgiven such a debt is new life. It is as simple as that.

Simon shows just how out of touch he is with this forgiveness stuff when he replies to Jesus' question by saying, *"the one who was pardoned more, I suppose."* **"I suppose!"** He hasn't got a clue what forgiveness is about. It is not part of his experience. It is not that it has not been offered to him. He is simply unaware that he ever needed such forgiveness. *"Me, doing wrong? I am a Pharisee. I uphold and observe the Law. I don't seek forgiveness. I earn righteousness and God's love by keeping this Law."* Therein lies the sadness of his position, and why unlike the woman who goes away in peace, he will never experience peace.

We are not told why Simon invited Jesus for a meal at his house. On other occasions we are told that Pharisees invited him to observe him, to try to trip him up in what he said or did. Perhaps Simon is not so mischievous, perhaps he is genuinely curious and wants to know more about Jesus and how he operates,

but he will never understand the first thing about Jesus and his message until he opens himself up to new possibilities and realises his need of God's forgiveness and mercy and just how readily available it is.

The same holds true for ourselves. If we are not open to realising our need of God's forgiveness but think that we are doing well under our own steam, we are like Simon who can only answer rather lamely, "*I suppose.*" It is when we realise our total need of God's abundant love and forgiveness that great things become possible – terrible sinners like David can become saints, persecutors become missionaries like St. Paul, and public sinners go away at peace with God and within themselves.

11th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2010

A good detective story will give you enough clues to allow you, if you read them correctly, to solve the problem of "*Whodunit?*" Read them incorrectly and you go off on a wild goose chase. The same thing can happen in our reading and understanding of the Gospels. Run the story of the Woman at Simon's House into that list of women disciples and you might end up naming the woman as Mary Magdalene, because hers is the first name mentioned. If you further assume that the woman had "*a bad reputation in the town*" because of sexual misconduct, you could come up with the idea that Mary Magdalene is a reformed prostitute. This is, of course, exactly what people did in the past, but the actual text of the Gospel does not confirm such an assumption. There are, in fact, other more important lessons to be learned from what is **actually** said.

The first lesson is that Jesus is very innovative in accepting women amongst his disciples. No Jewish Rabbi would have been so bold at that time and sadly, the followers of Jesus in the Church have not been so bold down through the ages. And yet we are told some important details about the discipleship of women in the Gospel stories. With the exception of St. John, the Beloved Disciple, it is only the women who stay with Jesus at his hour of greatest need as he hangs upon the Cross. The apostles and others had all fled in fear. We also know that it was Mary Magdalene who was the first witness to the Resurrection. It was she who told the apostles that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Another lesson we need to take on board from this Gospel story is the fact that we do not, and cannot **earn** forgiveness. It is because the woman has been forgiven that she is able to show Jesus such love.

"For this reason, I tell you, her sins, her many sins must have been forgiven her, or she would not have shown such great love."

She doesn't **earn** forgiveness by what she does, rather she can do what she does **because** she is forgiven.

This is the same lesson that St. Paul had to learn and which he passes on to the Galatians in our Second Reading, "*... we hold that faith in Christ rather than fidelity to the Law is what justifies us and that no-one can be justified by keeping the Law.*" We don't earn brownie points by being good, by keeping rules and regulations. We are enabled to be good and loving people because God loves us first and shares love and goodness with us.

In sinning, in falling short of what God wants of us in relation to both God and other people, we are in some way shunning, shutting out God's love for us. Once we allow that love to penetrate our lives all kinds of incredible things can happen in our lives.

And that is the main lesson that this story of the woman in the Gospel can tell us. It is not about names and reputations, but freedom and hope for the future.

11TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2013

That story of the Woman at the House of Simon the Pharisee, lends itself beautifully to what is sometimes called *"Imaginative Contemplation"*, and sometimes called *"Ignatius Meditation"*. It is a very vivid story which has everything you need to fire the imagination – interesting characters, a strong atmosphere, and very symbolic words and actions. When St. Ignatius and other saints talk about this form of meditation or contemplation (the terms are inter-changeable), they use some strong language about what to do – *"firing the imagination"*, *"drinking in the atmosphere"*, *"savouring"* the words and actions.

It is something which clearly takes more time and attention than we can spend in a few minutes at Mass each Sunday. It is an exercise in which we are all invited to engage at other times during the week. Doing this will help us to both broaden and deepen our understanding of what Jesus does, of what he is about.

As you imagine being Simon in that story, for example, what does it **feel** like when that woman of ill-repute walks into your home, your dining room in the middle of a meal with some important guests? What does it feel like to be one of the other guests at the table?

Or perhaps you might imagine you are the woman in the story: - what does it feel like to kneel at Jesus' feet weeping, washing and drying his feet, anointing them. What does it feel like to hear him speak those words of forgiveness directly to you, NOW, TODAY?

And what might all of this have to tell you about who is in and who is out, who is acceptable to Jesus and who is not? Can I identify within my own way of being some of that judge mentalism of Simon?

The questions keep on coming and because we move on and change and develop over time, whenever we come back to a Gospel story after a year or two perhaps there is another aspect of our lives which it helps to address.

Each week in the front of the Newsletter we publish some reflections of a great and venerable Scripture scholar of our own day, Dom Henry Wansbrough, – using his reflections and the questions he poses at the end of each piece will also help us to deepen our understanding and appreciation of these words –

BUT ONLY IF WE PRAY THEM FOR OURSELVES – ONLY IF WE SPEND TIME / WASTE TIME, WITH THEM.

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Zech. 12:10-11; 13:1, Gal. 3:26-29, Lk. 9:18-24

12TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2010

One of the lessons that our Christian faith is persistently trying to tell us is that there is always MORE to life and that **more** is possible. This is why, after Peter has confessed that Jesus before is, *"The Christ of God"* – *"Anointed One"*, *"the Messiah"*, **Jesus** makes that curious comment, *"He gave them strict orders not to tell anyone anything about this."*

The trouble was that at that time the Jewish people had very narrow, very low expectations about what the Messiah was supposed to do – but with Jesus there is always more, much greater and higher expectations, more possibilities. Slowly but surely in his time with his disciples he is introducing them to the **'more'**, the higher expectations for the Messiah. From Peter's confession of faith it is clear that the

teaching is working, but Jesus has more to teach them and it is far too much for the crowd to understand at the moment

What has happened immediately before this in St. Luke's Gospel is that Jesus has fed the 5,000 and they want more, but on **their** terms, not Jesus'. So they need a dose of reality and so Jesus says to the crowd, *"If anyone wants to be a follower of mine he must renounce himself."* This is not what the crowd want to hear. Basically what they want is for Jesus to be their King, to kick out the Romans and to keep on giving them free meals at no effort on their part. But Jesus is about more than this, and this will ultimately only be seen in his Death on the Cross and in the Resurrection.

What all this means for the followers of Jesus is what St. Paul tried to share with the communities he founded on his various missionary journeys and in the letters he writes back to these communities. We have a very simple, but actually mind-boggling example of this in today's Second Reading. *"All baptised in Christ, you have all clothed yourself in Christ."* For centuries the Church has made that a very visible symbolic act in the Baptismal Service when the newly baptised is clothed in the white garments – Alb, christening robe, shawl.

*"Jim/Mary, you have become a new creation and have clothed yourself in Christ.
See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity."*

It is from this remark in today's reading that the symbol derives – but look at the **MORE** that this being clothed in Christ is about – *"No more distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ."*

We are still, 2000 years later trying to come to terms with that statement, with what it means. It took quite some arguments and tensions in the Early Church Community to get over the distinction between Jew and Greek, to realise that **all** people are able to be members of the Body of Christ, not just Jews. Even then however, racial discrimination has been endemic in Christian communities down through the ages. To our eternal shame it took 1900 years before the Catholic Christian Community condemned slavery. And we are still to this day coming to terms with the idea of there being no distinction between male and female in the community.

In terms of understanding this message of Christ and what it means for our lives we are still very much work in progress – but we can be assured that whatever it means it is about being **MORE** and offering greater possibilities and hope to people.

12th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2013

One of the lessons we need to learn in life is not to take everything at its face value – appearances can be deceptive. We need to learn to sift and to discern what is life-giving and worthy of pursuing.

So Ignatius Loyola learnt this lesson when he was recuperating for several months confined to bed after being injured as a soldier in battle. All that was available to him to read were a book about the heroic deeds of some medieval knights and a book with stories about Jesus' life and the life of some of the great saints of the past. After a while he began to notice something which was to change his life.

Being a soldier of fortune the heroic deeds of the medieval knights were particularly attractive to him. This was the ideal which he strived for – up to that point in his life. But although stirred up initially by these stories he realised how quickly that feeling dissipated and it wasn't long before he felt empty and depressed. By contrast reading stories about Jesus and about St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic, initially

he wasn't terribly moved by them but then he notices how they lingered with him and in his reflections, feelings of hope and contentment stayed with him for a long time. This was the beginning of what would ultimately become his rule for discerning good and rejecting evil.

Some things which appear superficially very attractive are actually soon found to be unsatisfying and even destructive. Those troubled by an addiction of one kind or another know this well enough – just one more drink, one more bet, one more fix (whatever it might be) looks inviting but is incredibly destructive.

By contrast some things which appear at first to be unattractive and off-putting, end up being life-giving and hugely satisfying.

Above all people we Christians should know that lesson well-enough. At the very centre of our faith we have one of the ugliest and most terrible images of a human person nailed to a cross; There is simply no by-passing its awfulness, and yet, we believe that there is nothing like it for offering life and hope to us and to all people.

The Cross shows God's love for us in Christ ultimately overcoming the evil which ended up killing him. Love triumphs over evil in the Resurrection.

"If anyone wants to be a follower of mine..."

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Kings 19:16, 19-21, Gal. 5:1, 13-18, Lk. 9:51-62

13th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2004

I'm sure I have mentioned before that when faced with a passage of Scripture where verses have been missed out when they are presented as a reading at Mass, I get a bit suspicious – wondering if perhaps some censorship or bias is going on. This time, however, with that Second Reading from St. Paul to the Galatians, my suspicion is unfounded – and what we are given is the essence of a fundamental part not only of St. Paul's teaching, but of Christian teaching as a whole.

Christ has freed us. We are meant to remain free and being free we are meant to do what is right. Freedom is about the ability to do the right thing.

The problem in Galatia – and this is what the missing verses are about – is that some of the former Jewish community are slipping back into saying that both they, and even Gentile converts, have to observe the structures of Jewish Law. St. Paul writes:

"When Christ freed us, he meant us to remain free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery."

The yoke of slavery from Paul is the Law of Moses. In contrast to the Law, they came under the freedom of the Spirit – Liberty – yes, but not Libertarian. The Spirit of God does not lead to self-indulgence – but to love and service of others.

American politicians keep banging on about Freedom. According to George Bush, Al Qaeda cannot stand American Freedom. What he seems to forget in this is that in Christian teaching freedom is not about the ability to do what you want, where you want and when you want. That is what St. Paul calls self-indulgence. Freedom is about the ability to do the right thing.

British politicians keep banging on about CHOICE – freedom of choice in health care and education. Of course what people usually want is not so much **choice** but the best educational and health-care provision near them, when they want them. And that idea of the **best**, is much closer to what the freedom to choose under the Spirit is about.

If in our culture fundamental values like freedom and choice are symbolised by the fact that in Tesco, Asda and so on, there are available to us to choose from 70 odd different types of breakfast cereal, 10 different varieties of cola drinks, 15 varieties on a loaf of bread and so on – then freedom and choice has become other words for self-indulgence.

Christ freed us, and wants us to remain free in order to do what is right, to choose the best way of doing things.

No-one was freer throughout his life than Jesus, even when he was nailed to the Cross. That freedom was not then used to indulge himself, but to serve and to free others. It is this Spirit that we are given in Baptism and invited to follow in the way we live.

*“If you are led by the Spirit,” writes St. Paul “no law can touch you.
Why – because you will do what is right”.*

Or as St. Augustine once wrote –

*“Love and do what you will – if you are immersed in love you will do the right thing.
That is where true freedom lies”.*

13TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2007

This photograph is from the centre pages of my newspaper today *The Guardian, Saturday 30th June 2007*). It shows a young girl at a wall in a shopping mall in Tokyo and she is faced with a choice of over 500 disposable mobile phones. It reminded me of my first visit to Berlin 25 years ago when it was still divided between East and West. Going through Checkpoint Charlie to the East you had to change 1 for 1 a certain number of Deutsche Marks for East German Marks (looked like Monopoly money). Even in the best of what Eastern Europe had to offer it was difficult to find things to buy as a day tourist in the East. Going back through Checkpoint Charlie again to the West the first thing you come across was a huge shop window with 200 different types of telephones you could buy in the West – in full view of the East German Watchtowers. *“This is freedom!”* it was screaming out to anyone looking over from the East. *““Look what we’ve got!”*

Now there is no doubt about which side of the Berlin Wall I preferred to be on, and there is no doubt about my preference for living in an affluent democratic country but is this what freedom means? 500 different types of disposable mobile phones; 36 varieties of breads, 45 of breakfast cereals; 32 of coffees on the shelves of Asda or Sainsbury’s. Many, many people are under the illusion that freedom is about freedom of choice – and the more choice you have, the better and the **HAPPIER??** No evidence for this. That is a very cheap and debased understanding of freedom, and not what Christian freedom is about – as we see in that Second Reading from St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians.

“When Christ freed us, he meant us to remain free. Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery. My brothers and sisters, you were called, as you know, to liberty; but be careful, or this liberty will provide an opening for self-indulgence.”

Freedom is not about having as many choices as possible. Freedom is about the ability to do the right thing. To be free enough in oneself to choose the right thing to do.

In our Christian understanding of the human person Jesus is the most-free person we could imagine, yet rarely did he have a choice over what to do. He did not have a choice over whether or not to cure the paralytic, or the blind man, or whether or not to forgive the woman who bathed his feet with her tears – and yet when he did things he was completely free, because in himself he was free from every constraint that would stop him or tempt him from doing what was right.

This is what Christian freedom is about – being free from anything that would prevent us from doing the right thing, *“If you are led by the Spirit (the Spirit of Freedom), no law can touch you.”* No law can touch you because you do the right thing as a matter of course.

This is another of the great paradoxes that lie at the heart of our Christian faith. Does true freedom and happiness lie in this picture taken in Tokyo a few days ago? Or in that Cross hanging over there?

I ask the question only because of Jesus’ urgent words in today’s Gospel, ***“Follow me”***. The call to discipleship.

13th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2010

As many of you know last Thursday evening a group of young people from our parish community received the Sacrament of Confirmation. At the end of the Mass, each of them was gifted with a copy of one of the Gospels. Before distributing the gifts, Fr. Jackson suggested to those he had just confirmed that they set aside some time in the next couple of days to read their Gospel from cover to cover in one sitting. I want to suggest this exercise for everyone: - to read St. Luke’s Gospel (*the Gospel of our Sunday Readings this year*) from cover to cover in one sitting.

By doing this exercise hopefully you will get a sense of the full story – the pattern of Jesus’ story as it unfolds. The problem with the bite-size chunks that we get each week at Mass is that we can lose sense of that overall pattern and become confused with some of the things Jesus says and does – now heard out of context.

Take, for example, today’s Gospel and those rather harsh responses Jesus makes to the people who want to follow him. One not being allowed to go and bury his father, another one not being allowed to call in at home to say goodbye to his parents. This seems a tough regime that Jesus is operating. It is tough, for sure but we need to see this in the overall context of the whole Gospel.

The pattern of Luke’s story of Jesus’ Public Ministry is one of a journey – a journey around the Galilee region and then on up to Jerusalem where the main events central to our faith will take place. Today’s Gospel is a significant turning point in St. Luke’s story. Notice how it opens, *“As the time drew near for him to be taken up into heaven, Jesus resolutely took the road to Jerusalem.”*

Jesus’ ministry in Galilee is now over. At first he attracted great crowds who came to listen to him, but they were soon perplexed and disturbed by what he said. A few days before taking this road to Jerusalem he had fed 5,000 people who came to hear him, but he had then dismissed any idea of being a Messiah who would simply make life easy for them. He had told them that each day they must take up their Cross and follow him. They didn’t like this one little bit. From now on in the story as it unfolds Jesus spends more and more time with his band of disciples preparing them for a mission they will have to take up in due course.

But time is limited and hence the urgency of the call to discipleship. There is no time for anything else now – burying the dead, turning back to say farewells – the disciple accompanying Jesus on the road to Jerusalem needs to be completely focused on the words his Master is giving him.

Perhaps what this is saying to us today, as we try to see where Jesus' life story touches our own life stories, is that there are times when we need to reflect on what our priorities in life are, and whether they are the right ones. What is consuming our energies, our attention? Where does Jesus' call to follow his ways fit into my life at this time?

But we will only come to see the connections between Jesus' story and mine properly when we see it unfolding as a whole.

Why not read St. Luke's Gospel from beginning to end?

13th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2016

I suspect that for many people "freedom" is about the ability to make choices. At its lowest level freedom is about the ability to choose between getting up or staying in bed for an extra hour in the morning. Freedom at this level is about having a wide variety of tea and coffee to choose from on the supermarket shelf – the more choices, according to this view, the greater the freedom enjoyed. For many Americans, freedom seems to be the ability of anyone, no matter how crazy or dangerous they might be, to buy any kind of gun or assault rifle they choose, with as much ammunition as they want.

At a higher level, but still concerning the freedom to choose, is our freedom to vote in an election or in the Referendum that we have just endured. Whatever happens with these votes at least we actually have a vote, a freedom that many people across the world do not have. But this is still a very superficial understanding and falls a long way short of the kind of freedom Jesus and St Paul are talking about in our Readings today.

If you were to reflect on the question, "Could Jesus have said 'No' to doing the Father's will and living and dying on the Cross for us? Was he "free" to say 'No'?", you come up with the simple answer that Jesus did NOT have that choice. He *had* to do the will of his Father. In terms of his freedom to choose between options he was limited to only one thing to do... he had no choice. Having said that there was no one freer than Jesus. His example shows us what true freedom is about. True freedom is not about freedom to have as many choices as possible, it is rather freedom from constraints that keep us from making the *right* choice.

We could reflect on a similar choice of Mary to the Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation. If freedom simply means the freedom to choose between two or more options, she could indeed have said "No" to God's will. On the other hand if freedom is the ability to make the correct decision, the freedom to do the most loving thing possible, then there was only one answer that Mary could give, "Let it be done unto me according to your word." She was so free from sin and selfishness that she was able to make this momentous choice.

St Paul tells us that Jesus has freed us from slavery to sin and he means us to remain free. We are not, then, "free to sin". Freedom is about being free from slavery to self, from an overwhelming desire to make wrong choices, to do wrong things. So it is not about "self-indulgence" as St Paul says. It is about freedom to do the most loving thing possible. Jesus was free because he was able

not be a slave to his own safety, to his own best interests, rather he was free to do the most loving thing possible – to lay down his life for us. This is life lived to the full.

Complete freedom of choice is simply a path to total self-indulgence. The freedom from things that lead us to do wrong things is freedom from slavery to sin and to self. It is the ability to carry out our best intentions. This is where those seemingly very harsh responses of Jesus in today's Gospel come in. Those who look back to their past life, and its demands, are not free to be disciples. Discipleship, following Jesus, is about making a decision to say, "Yes" to God and whatever God demands of us. True freedom is not about the choice to say "No", rather it is about being free enough to be able to say "Yes".

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Is. 66:10-14, Gal. 6:14-18, Lk. 10:1-12, 17-20.

14th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2004

There was a great sense of expectation down at the school on Friday morning. Not, thank God, about the SATS results that were due out then. There are rather more important things in education and in life as a whole than marks in tests. No, the anticipation was all about the visit of Mrs. Nesbitt – one of the teachers – who had a new baby three weeks ago.

As I was heading off on a visit, a car pulled up and out stepped the family, Mother, Father, two year old Joseph and the baby in her carrier. At the bottom of the steps was the welcoming party - Mrs. Nesbitt's Year 3 and Year 4 class. The girls at the front all excited, the boys standing a bit further back trying to look cool and nonchalant about all this. Culturally they don't have permission to show the same sort of excitement as the girls but it was obvious that they were.

A picture of a family at a moment of great joy.

Hopefully, in our own experience of family there will be similar moments of happiness and joy that we can recall, re-visit births, marriages, family gatherings and so on. We will also have, I guess, memories and experiences of times of sadness and distress – sickness, death, struggle and tension.

All of it is life as experienced by most people in our community today. And, if we really take our faith seriously, God is present in it all, because God is in all things – happy, sad, good, bad. Somewhere in each incident God is present helping us to celebrate in times of joy, supporting us in sadness and stress.

Put this side by side with the mission of those 72 disciples in our Gospel. Here is a trial run for the mission that will take off after Jesus' Ascension. The message they are given to share with people is a simple one, "*Peace to this house*" and, "*the Kingdom of God is very near.*" In other words God is very near – the God who is in all things. Live the values that speak of the presence of that God – love, respect, honesty, support for each other, and so on.

Sometimes, so the disciples are told, their message will be accepted and people will rejoice with them, but sometimes they will be rejected and sent away. St. Paul, in our Second Reading, had experience aplenty of both welcome and rejection "*bearing the marks of Jesus on my body*" as he says.

The Christian message that we have to offer people today as families, as individuals, is no different from that of the 72. It is a message of hope, and of challenge. Sometimes what people want is the buzz of the hope, without accepting the responsibility of the challenge. Sometimes, all people see in the message is

what seems to be an absurd challenge that does not offer any hope. We know different, because we experience it differently. It is both.

The call, the mission, is to share the fullness of the message with people in our own time- where most people live their lives – in a family setting. Today the Bishops ask us especially to pray for families in their joys and their struggles, and for those who work with families, sharing the many different ways in which God is present to them.

14TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2007

There is a very up-beat, and therefore up-lifting, tone about that Gospel. The seventy come back rejoicing. Their mission has been successful and they are in buoyant mood, as is Jesus with their success. The only thing he does to pull them back just a little bit is to warn them not to be too full of themselves, *“rejoice rather that your names are written in heaven.”* God is the one in charge here, folks, so be glad that you are down for God’s kingdom.

What the disciples have been doing is practising for the future. At some stage after this journey to Jerusalem that they have embarked on with Jesus, they will have to take over the mission completely, for now they have a little try out. The instructions Jesus gives them are a model of clarity and simplicity – qualities that always make a task much easier to perform, knowing what you have to do, and knowing that it is simplicity itself. In essence they are to pass on his message, actually they are to pass on Jesus, what he says and what he does. That is the task of every generation of Christ’s followers. It is called handing on, handing down the Tradition.

Perhaps we can picture quite literally this handing down the message when we think back to our own parents, who in all probability were the ones who in our early years literally took us by the hand and brought us to church, to school, to the Catholic faith. This having been done it is then our task to do the same for the coming generation, taking them by the hand, leading them to faith. This is Tradition.

I hope that it is not too much of a stretch to see a very physical, historical line going right back to those seventy-two disciples in the Gospel taking the hands of the people to whom they were sent and leading them to faith in Jesus, and this happening literally in each generation right down to ourselves.

It is a sacred and solemn duty of each generation to do this, if this had not happened in the past we would not be here today in this church. It is as simple as that. Of course calling it a *“sacred and solemn duty”* gives it possible overtones of heaviness, of ought’s and ‘have-to’s’, something that is seen as a burden rather than the joy experienced by those disciples in today’s Gospel. Perhaps the key to reclaiming the joy, the upbeat mood of the Gospel is to remember the Tradition, Faith is primarily a person, not a system. We are called to hand on in the first instance Jesus, not a set of dogmas and rules. The rules and the dogmas are the container – an important piece of kit without which the contents would not be safely delivered – but it is the contents, not the container that we worship because it is he, not they, who is our Saviour. The Tradition, the Faith, is the person of Jesus, and helping others meet him is upbeat, uplifting, a matter of rejoicing, not a burden.

I think it is especially important for us all to remember this in the coming months. It is great to be celebrating Fr. John’s 50th Jubilee in a couple of weeks’ time. It will be sad, but fitting to see him retire at the end of the summer. It will be a challenge for the three parish communities, for Fr. Mark and myself, to continue the Tradition in the new circumstances that face us in John’s retirement, and some of those circumstances are revealed this weekend in the proposed new Mass times. If we can keep in mind that the challenge is about handing down the message of the person who transforms our lives, rather than a

set of rules and regulations that burdens them, then the task, the challenge, though sacred and solemn, will also be a joy.

14th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2010

The world seems to be divided into those people who see a cup half full, and those who see it half empty. By temperament I am firmly in the latter group and it is perhaps especially to those of us inclined to a more pessimistic outlook on life that our Readings are directed this Sunday.

“Rejoicing”, “joy”, “comfort”, and “hope” are words that run through our readings. The 72 disciples who are sent out on their trial mission return full of enthusiasm, energised and upbeat after the success of their mission.

This seems in stark contrast to the mood of our present-day mission to preach the Good News in our own time. We are being called upon to review our situation in parishes across the diocese in the light of diminishing congregations and fewer priests whose age-profile is getting ever older. There is a growing sense of triumphalism among people – usually called secularists – who want to push the influence of the Christians churches to the margins of our society, and sometimes the response of church leaders to various scandals that have been emerging seem so crass and silly as to be helping these secularists with their agenda. The power and influence of the Church seems to be diminishing on a daily basis.

Now influence – having an effect on something is something to be lauded and welcomed. It would be disastrous if Christianity lost its ability to **influence** people and institutions in our society. But **power** is a different matter, especially the kind of power that tries to overcome and stifle other voices. There have certainly been times when the different churches have used **power** over people’s lives, and this has not helped the mission of spreading the Good News.

“Power tends to corrupt and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely.” Lord Acton

The original mission of those 72 disciples in the Gospel was a very simple one – with no trappings, nothing extra to weight them down, *“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Carry no purse, no haversack, and no sandals.”* This is long before institutions that have to be serviced and buildings that need to be cared for, and a professional caste of clergy that are set apart from the community.

Now, we **have** institutions (dioceses, parishes and the like). We **have** buildings (churches, halls, schools, presbyteries). We **have** a caste of clergy – albeit an ageing and diminishing one.

Perhaps we are being asked in this present time to review how best to use these things in the light of the very simple, essential message of the Good News, and of our current circumstances – to be renewed and re-energized like the 72 in the Gospel, who are clearly filled with enthusiasm.

Over the coming months we will be reviewing as a cluster of parishes, as a deanery, as a diocese, how best to respond to these demands. We need to do so remembering the joy, comfort, hope and enthusiasm of the earliest message we find in the Gospel.

14TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2013

In late September all the clergy (Priest and Deacons) of the Diocese have been invited to a Day of Reflection with Bishop Seamus. The day is called, *“Moving Forward Together in Hope.”* It is expected to be

the first part of a consultation process which will involve everyone in the diocese to reflect on our way forward.

In preparation for that meeting the priests and deacons of each deanery were invited together for a period of reflection based on today's Gospel. In our deanery the five priests and two of the deacons met a couple of weeks ago. We began with what is called Lectio Divina on that Gospel passage. Someone read it out aloud to us, we then reflected in silence together for 15 minutes, then the Gospel passage was read again. After this we all contributed what had struck us about the text. Seven people – albeit all men – listening to each other's diverse thoughts and reflections on this Gospel was a rich source of understanding the different ways the Gospel offers challenge and support in what we are about.

Among other things we noticed the invitation here to rely not on our own power but the power of God working on HIS harvest, not ours. We noticed the call to trust in God's presence and support, and how the disciples were not sent out **alone**, but in **pairs** to do this work – good relationships are key to the success of the mission. We also noticed that the primary message in about **PEACE** and we remembered what SHALOM means in all its depth – harmony within and without. We noticed the very limited resources the 72 were to take with them, and contrasted that with all the baggage we seem to be carrying. We noted that the mission was KINGDOM-centred, not church-centred and that in this mission of the 72 – going well beyond the inner group of the twelve apostles and their mission – is a pointer to how this task is for everyone in the community, not just clerics.

Surrounding all this is a sense of expectation and hope. The 72 came back rejoicing and enthused by what they had done and seen. We need to latch on to the positives, the signs of hope around us and not become mired in the problems and lack of success and enthusiasm, which can drag us down.

There is in all of this no magic formula – a panacea which, if only we latched on to it, everything would be smiles and success – **BUT** reflecting **TOGETHER** on the Word of God like this we are offered hope and given the assurance of the Lord's support in this journey of faith – adventure of faith – which we are engaged in **TOGETHER**.

14th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2019

After a few days of torrential rain in the hills villagers in a low-lying valley were told to evacuate their properties because the local river was about to burst its banks. The police called at one bungalow to be told by the resident, "Oh it's ok, Officer. I've been praying to God and God will save me." The police officer shrugged his shoulder and left. Three hours later the floodwaters were almost at the roof level of the bungalow, the owner was sat on the roof when a Fire Service dinghy came passed. The officers urged him to get on board and they would take him to safety. He declined the offer saying that he had prayed to God and that God would save him. They went on their way. Two hours later the waters had almost completely covered the roof and the owner was perched on the top of the chimneybreast. An Air-Sea rescue helicopter hovered above him and the pilot urged him to grab hold of the winch to be brought to safety. Once more he refused saying that God would save him. An hour later he was dead.

Brought before the Judgment Seat of God the man was beside himself with anger, "I prayed to you for you to rescue me and I was left to drown. What sort of God are you?" God answered, "I am the sort of God who sends police officers, fire service dinghies and air-sea helicopters to save you. What more did you want?" An old story, but still a good one, I think!

For as long as I can remember as a church community when we have heard those words of Jesus, "The harvest is rich, but the labourers are few, so ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers to his harvest," we have been urged to pray for vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. That has been the perennial take on those words. This year there are no ordinations to the priesthood in this diocese and I believe that we have only about three seminarians in training. Yesterday we had one ordination to the Permanent Diaconate, and there are five others in training. I do not know how many vocations to the religious life there are, but I suspect not many.

Now, it seems to me that there could be a number of reasons for the apparent failure of our prayers over many, many years for an increase in vocations. It could be that we are not praying well enough, or hard enough, or perhaps God is not listening to our prayers, or, I wonder if God has been answering our prayers – like those of the owner of the bungalow – and we have just not been hearing God's answers. There are married men, and women, who feel called by God to ministry, even priestly ministry, but we are not considering them. Some are even joining other churches to pursue their vocations with those church communities.

There are, of course, all kinds of complications, barriers and obstacles in the way of change, but the actual message that the Church is called on to preached is a very simple one. As Jesus tells the disciples, "Cure those who are sick and say, 'The kingdom of God is very near you.'" In other words, offer them hope and healing. Offer them the wonderful message of the Kingdom that God loves them, no matter what, and that life is indeed worth living. If only people would take seriously what Jesus has to teach about the way to live life to the full. That simple message is, in and of itself, healing and it truly offers hope.

The thing is, of course, that none of those seventy disciples called to preach that Good News in that Gospel was ordained as a bishop, or a priest or a deacon. There was no such thing as ordination at the time Jesus spoke those words. Yet, all were disciples and all were called to mission, just as we are: the disciples to whom Jesus addresses those self-same words today.

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dt. 30:10-14, Col. 1:15-20, Lk. 10:25-37

15th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2004

I can remember word for word a homily preached at my home parish in North Shields thirty years ago this weekend. The Readings were the ones we have just heard and we were anticipating the usual ten minutes, at least, of good stuff in the homily from our parish priest, Fr. John Loftus.

Having read the Gospel as we all sat down, John pulled himself up to his full height of about 5'4", draped himself over the Lectern, peered at us over his specs and said, "*Well, if you don't know what that Gospel is about, there's absolutely no point in me trying to explain it to you.*" At which point he walked back to his chair and started reciting the Creed, while we sat in stunned silence.

Looking back on what happened then it was clear that John was very tired. He was due to go on holiday that night. For over a year we had been having our Sunday Masses in the school hall because our 150 year old church had been condemned as unsafe. It would be another fifteen or sixteen months before the new one would be ready and between being parish priest and having to do a lot of work with architects and builders, John had reached his brick wall. He was badly in need of his break.

Whoever we are, we bring to our encounter with different Gospel Stories and other passages of Scripture, the person we are at this moment – with our preoccupancy, our moods and feelings, our experiences, our cares and concerns. Whether we are reflecting on certain words or phrases that strike us in this passage “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” “*Do this and life will be yours*”, “*Who is my neighbour?*” “*Go and do the same yourself*”.

Or else in imagining yourself as one of the characters in the story – the Scriptures, the Living Word of God, comes alive and speaks to us today across the centuries – and speaks to us as we are **now**.

Perhaps you feel like the Lawyer, a bit perverse and fed up at the moment and would like nothing better than to trip Jesus up over something. Perhaps you feel like the victim in the story – battered, and bruised and ignored by the very people you feel should be there to help you – even worse if the wounds are invisible to the eye and others aren’t aware of your pain. Perhaps you are feeling somewhat guilty for having acted like the Priest or the Levite and rushed passed someone, averting your eyes rather than stopping to help. Perhaps you feel like the Samaritan himself and feel justly proud of help you have given someone, or maybe even feeling fed up of having to be the Good Samaritan to others all the time.

Whoever we are, whatever our current experience and needs these stories speak God’s Word to us, offering comfort, challenge, chivvying up, smoothing over – whatever it might be. But this only happens, and can only happen when we spend time with these stories – read them, pray them. Sometimes, what might emerge from such time spent with them is that, like John Loftus 30 years ago, we need a rest. Sometimes it may indeed be a deeper explanation of what the story is actually about.

We have copies of Luke’s Gospel at home – even a New Testament or a Bible – gathering dust? Propping up a wonky table? Or used regularly? And if we can make something of the Good Samaritan this week – what about Martha and Mary next week?

15TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2013

The fact that I can remember the homily preached by my Parish Priest at home 39 years ago this weekend **verbatim** is no great feat of memory, as we shall see. But it was a homily that had a great deal of impact.

In 1971 we celebrated the 150th Anniversary of the opening of our parish church – St. Cuthbert’s, North Shields. Just a few months later it had to be closed down for good. It was in a very poor state of repair and too costly to repair. The new church did not open until December 1975, and for all the intervening 3½ years we had Mass in the hall of the primary school. Every Saturday morning the parish priest and curate, along with some volunteers, had to set out all the chairs and the alter for Sunday Mass, and on Sunday evening after the last Mass they all had to be stacked up again ready for use by the school the following morning. Week in, week out this was the routine and by July 1976, with no prospect any time soon of a new church opening, our parish priest, Fr. John Loftus, was fed up and tired. After a gruelling few months of endless meetings with planners, finance people and so on, he was due to go on holiday – and boy did he need it!

Now we were used to excellent homilies week in and week out by John. They would last about ten minutes and there was always some good food for thought in them. Anyway, on this Sunday in July 1974 John read that Gospel of the Good Samaritan at the end of which we sat down and settled ourselves for his homily. He paused, stretched to his full height of about 5’6”, leaned on the lectern, peered over his glasses and said, “*Well, if you don’t know what that is about, there’s absolutely no point in me trying to explain it to you!*” With that he made the Sign of the Cross and began the Creed. It was only about half way through that we, the congregation, recovered ourselves from this and caught up with him.

Of course he was right – the message of that Gospel is ‘*a no-brainer*’, as they say. And yet we have to keep coming back to it time and time again, because we need to be reminded of its core message.

Perhaps, at times, we can be rather like the Lawyer and wonder, “*Is this person really my neighbour?*” – an asylum seeker, 3 foreign sailors on a fishing trawler impounded recently at the Fish Quay in North Shields and hounded off to a detention centre without the ID papers and passports by some over-officious people from Homeland Security. Are these really my neighbour? The answer is obvious from that Gospel.

Or perhaps we can rightly celebrate – thank God for being able to work with the grace and strength God gives us, and have been a Good Samaritan.

Whatever our response to the Gospel – it is still as fresh as ever as well as being patently obvious what it means.

15th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2016

The fact that I can recall, verbatim, a homily given 42 years ago this very weekend by the Parish Priest of my home parish is not so much to do with any great capacity of memory on my part, as it has to do both with the brevity of what he said, and the way in which he said it. Fr John Loftus was, amongst other things, a very good homilist. People could sit and listen to him very easily and for a long time. He always had something worthwhile to say. At the time, however, our old parish church, opened in 1821, had been closed for 18 months because of safety concerns, and it would be another 18 months before our new one was completed.

In the meantime every weekend the school hall had to be turned into a church – chairs put out, platform and altar to be assembled, vestments and candles to be brought from the presbytery, and then everything dismantled ready for school use after the final Mass on the Sunday evening. No light could be seen at the end of what seemed an endless tunnel of trying to get a new church built and Fr Loftus was worn out, at the end of his tether, and was due to go on a much needed holiday the next day.

He read the Gospel of the Good Samaritan. We all sat down in anticipation of his homily. He pulled himself up to his full height of about 5’ 5”, leaned over the lectern, peered over the top of his glasses, looked around, and said, “Well, if you don’t know what all that is about there is absolutely no point in me trying to explain it to you!” At which point he moved back to the Chair and began to recite the Creed, while we sat there stunned and then tried then to catch up.

You may be disappointed to learn that I am not going to be quite so brief today, but the point he was making is an important one. The lesson, at least the main lesson of the parable, is a very straightforward and obvious one, “Go and do likewise.” Parables are, usually, contrast stories – an unpromising beginning, of a poor spreading of seed – followed ultimately by an overwhelming ending – a bumper harvest. Or, in this case a desperate situation in which, above all people a hated Samaritan comes to the rescue. But there is another angle that we might reflect on for a few moments.

When we are being told to, “Go and do likewise,” Jesus, in the first instance, is pointing out that this is the way God works – reaching out to help those in need. So we, as people who have experienced “being reached out to” by this God, are called upon to do the same with others, but

God also reaches out to ALL in need. This means that God also reaches out to the priest and the Levite who ignored the wounded traveller, and also, of course, the “brigands” who had robbed him and beaten him up in the first place. God loves them all. God reaches out to them, just as much as he reaches out to the victim.

God does not approve in any way what any of these people have done. They need to be corrected, shown the error of their ways, repent, punished if necessary, but they are still loved. Somehow the Church, we the Church, is called upon to imitate this example of our God. “Loving neighbour as oneself” is even more demanding than we might think!

15th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2019

We already know how well St Luke can craft a story to help bring out some of the finer points of Jesus’ teaching. On one of the Sundays during Lent we had as our Gospel what is arguably the most famous of Jesus’ parables that we find only in the Gospel of St Luke – the Prodigal Son. Today we have another such parable that is possibly equally as famous: The Parable of the Good Samaritan. Once again we find St Luke teasing out some of the finer points of Jesus’ teaching in this well-crafted exchange between Jesus and an unnamed lawyer.

In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark we find Jesus defining the same two commandments of the Law of Moses as the most important: love of God and love of neighbour. In those Gospels, however, this happens amongst one of the series of questions put to Jesus by various factions of the Jewish Establishment in the precincts of the Temple during what we call “Holy Week”. You will remember some of the other questions about paying taxes to Caesar and what happens in the Resurrection. Here, however, we find the same double commandment given just as Jesus is about to leave Galilee and journey up to Jerusalem to face what awaits him there.

The lawyer wants to catch Jesus out in a piece of heresy that could be used against him, but notice how deftly Jesus turns matters around 180 degrees. Whereas in the other two Gospels it is Jesus who outlines the double commandment of love of God and neighbour – putting together two commandments from different parts of the Law of Moses – here he teases the answer out of the lawyer himself so that the lawyer ends up answering his own question. But then the matter goes deeper. The lawyer is like a dog with a bone and still wants to try to catch Jesus out in a way that will incriminate him in the eyes of the Jewish authorities, “And who is my neighbour?” So now the stage is set for that wonderful parable.

The two Jewish officials in the story – the priest and the Levite – are caught in a dilemma. If the poor man is indeed dead then touching his corpse would make them ritually impure and unable to carry out their duties in the Temple, so they leave well alone. Already Jesus is drawing out a lesson on the relative priorities of religious ritual over basic human need. In the Samaritan the basic human need trumps everything, which is indeed part of what Jesus wants to emphasise. Love always outweighs laws about rituals.

Of course what Jesus has to say is quite shocking to his audience. It is bad enough that two of their own people who are held in great esteem “pass by on the other side”, what makes matters worse is that it is a hated Samaritan – in their eyes a ‘pretend’ and ultimately ‘fake’ Jew – who is seen to be the hero of the hour. Under no circumstances would an observant Jew have anything whatsoever to do with such a person, and much the same was true in reverse:- Samaritans would normally shun Jews. Notice that when Jesus asks the lawyer, “Who proved himself neighbour to

the man?”, he answers, “The one who helped him, I suppose.” He cannot even bring himself to name the man as a Samaritan.

This is where the teaching of Jesus, as presented here by St Luke, goes deeper. This is not just, “Go and do the same yourself.” It becomes, “Go and do the same yourself, even to the most despised person you can imagine.” Now I wonder who would come into that category for us today? A homeless beggar? A Muslim zealot? A member of the hate-filled English Defence League? God could never condone the actions of anyone who acts with violence and hatred, but God never stops loving anyone, ourselves included, and all people are invited to “Go and do the same yourself”.

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Gen. 18:1-10, Col. 1:24-28, Lk. 10:38-42

16th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2004

Like many of the incidents reported in our Gospels this story of Jesus at the home of Martha and Mary is something that operates at all kinds of levels – and each one has something to tell us about our call to be disciples – followers/apprentices – of Jesus.

In the first place this incident follows on immediately from last weekend’s story of the Good Samaritan. The placing is quite deliberate. The story of the Good Samaritan is about how our faith/our discipleship includes making ourselves ‘*neighbours*’ to those in need – going out of our way to help them. **This** story is telling us that discipleship is also about taking time to **listen** to Jesus – in prayer. Furious and constant activity in service of others misses out on an important other component to being one of Jesus’ followers – time for prayer, for listening to the Master.

At another level this story of Martha and Mary is also about Welcome and Hospitality. This is certainly what the people who put our Lectionary Readings together had in mind when they offered us that First Reading from Genesis – Abraham offering hospitality to the three visitors. Abraham recognized the visitors – or the main one at least – as his God. Welcoming God into our lives, our homes, and our selves is another message of our Gospel as well.

But there is also something quite subversive about this story of Martha and Mary that is characteristic of St. Luke’s portrayal of Jesus and his ministry.

In one of his speeches in the Acts of the Apostles St. Paul boasts of his Kosher Jewish credentials as a Pharisee. He tells how he “*sat at the feet*” of one of the great teachers of the Law – Gamaliel. “*Sitting at the feet of*” a Master, a Lord, is the positive of a disciple/an apprentice. Fair enough – but in Jewish society at that time this was definitely **not** the role of a woman. A woman was expected to do what Martha was doing – the serving. In no way was a woman expected to sit at the feet of a teacher like Mary.

We are told that Martha was ‘*distracted*’ with all her serving. This may be because she thinks that there is so much to be done that she forgets the primary point of hospitality – paying attention to the visitor and what the visitor actually wants – not what the host **thinks** that the visitor wants.

But perhaps Martha is also disturbed by what Mary is doing. This is cutting across accepted norms and boundaries. It’s uncomfortable territory, anything different, anything new always is uncomfortable and uneasy. In her dis-ease Martha herself transgresses conventional behaviour. Our translation is very polite. It has Martha saying to Jesus, “**Please** tell her to help me!” Actually all the text says is, “*Tell her to help*

me!” Now you never, ever demand of someone you address as “Lord” that they do what **you** want them to do. Martha has lost the plot.

“Martha, Martha you worry and fret about so many things yet few are needed. Indeed only one. It is Mary who has chosen the better part. It is not to be taken from her.”

Sitting at Jesus’ feet in the position of a disciple is open to Mary, just as we know from the list of Jesus’ disciples earlier in his Gospel other women were included as well. Something different – beyond the conventions of the time is going on here.

Yes, this story is about listening in prayer. Yes, it is also about hospitality, and yes, it is also subversion – thinking outside the box.

16TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2007

The reason for inviting people to read through St. Luke’s Gospel as a continuous story is precisely to see it as a continuous story, and not a series of isolated episodes that we get each week in our Gospel Readings. We can see the flow of the story much better that way. Last week, the Good Samaritan – action called for. This week, Martha and Mary – listening/reflection/contemplation called for. Next week, Jesus teaches the disciples the Our Father – holding these things together in prayer. This is indeed an unfolding story which bit by bit reveals more and more of what it is that Jesus is about, and what it is that he wants us to be about as well.

So in today’s piece we find Mary sitting at Jesus’ feet listening to him. A shocking thing for the original audience to hear. Sitting at someone’s feet is the posture of the disciple who is learning from the master so as to **DO** what the master does at some stage in the future. Disciple actually means ‘apprentice’. Mary is sitting in the way an apprentice sits, but she is not supposed to do that in the culture of her day. I am sure we are familiar with the terms ‘man’s work’ and ‘woman’s work’. There was a strict demarcation of tasks in Jesus’ time. Men were disciples who sat at the feet of a master, and women worked in the kitchen, and ne’er the twain shall meet. On the face of it Martha had right on her side when she complains to “the Lord” – and notice that throughout the story Jesus is referred to as “the Lord”. There is some important teaching afoot here.

Whatever task we are called on to do, whatever we are engaged in, we are invited to do it well. Martha, however, is ‘distracted’ in her work. She is preoccupied by her sister’s break with the normal conventions. I love to imagine this scene and see Martha seething about what is going on – slamming knives and forks down on the table, stirring the stew with extra vigour as she mutters to herself about the effrontery of her sister. Finally, after expending so much useless energy on the arguments going on in her head, she gets it all out into the open by demanding the Jesus do something about the situation. Today we might refer to what she is doing as ‘multi-tasking’, but in fact she has been ‘distracted’ and had not been doing her own job particularly well, and now she is intent on distracting everybody else, Jesus included.

We have a problem with the way in which our translation renders Jesus’ words. It talks of Mary having chosen “the better part”. Actually it simply means that she is doing her bit well, and is not distracted as Martha is. What we have in Jesus’ response is a call to be focused in anything that we are engaged in. We **are** called to action – look again at the parable of the Good Samaritan if you are not convinced about this – but our action is for a reason. It has a focus, and the focus is our being disciples/apprentices, of Jesus. We are called to do what he did. We are not to be distracted with our own personal agendas, preoccupied by why other people may do their bit – in our own interpretation of what “their bit” ought to be. We are also called to be reflective, prayerful people.

The way we might achieve that balance is by prayer – but we will have to wait until next week to read all about that. Unless, of course, you are reading St. Luke's Gospel and connecting the parts into its continuous story for yourself, as well as listening on a Sunday.

16TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2013

It strikes me that there are two words that are crucial in understanding both that passage from Luke's Gospel and how this visit to the House of Martha and Mary contributes to Luke's understanding of what Jesus and discipleship are about.

The first key word is *"distracted"*. Martha was *"distracted"* with all the service. Service – the original word here is *"Diakonos"*, from which we derive the word *"Deacon"* – is a good thing, but *"distracted"* service is not. As I imagine this scene I can see, and hear, Martha's disgruntled banging of pots and pans, muttering to herself, *"Just as always, I'm the one left to do all the skivvying. There she is, Lady Muck, sat around doing nothing to help as usual..."* Any merit in serving others is lost in her anger and martyr-complex.

If you are going to serve, then concentrate on the serving. Never mind what others are doing. At **this** moment, this is what I am called to do. There are, of course, other facets to this incident but I do not intend to go into them here.

The second word which is crucial in understanding this incident in the overall picture that Luke presents to us of Jesus' ministry of his call to discipleship is the word, *"AND"*. Let me explain.

Last week you may remember that our Gospel was the Parable of the Good Samaritan with its clear message of the absolute requirement for the disciple to reach out to others in their need whoever they are and in whatever circumstances we come across them. So how does this fit in with Jesus' criticism of Martha? I've already mentioned the key word *"distracted"* but beyond that I think it is rather telling that St. Luke places the story of Jesus' visit to Martha and Mary immediately after the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Jesus is about BOTH SERVICE AND PRAYER
Discipleship is about SERVICE AND PRAYER.

However good and important tending to the needs of others may be – and it is indeed GOOD – there would be no difference between ourselves and others who genuinely reach out to people in their need, but who have no concept, no place for the divine, for God in their lives without it being rooted in prayers. I don't like the phrase, *"glorified social workers"* (it demeans the work of social workers) but I think you know what it means. A foundation – a rooting – in prayer is an absolute must for the disciple.

I suppose it is inevitable because of my impending move that I have been reflecting of what I have been doing here in Washington over the last seven years. With the finish this week of the School Year I have been thinking about what it is I have been doing as Parish Priest and Governor of St. Bede's School. There is no doubt in my mind that my most satisfying achievement is the fact that I have helped to introduce the staff and children in the school to Christian Meditation – to the stillness of silent prayer. To me, and I am not being in any way blasphemous or sacrilegious in saying this – it is more important than any sacramental programme or preparation I have been involved in.

Sacraments are expressions of faith. They are expressions of who we are and where we are in life. Whether we are faith-filled people, or people who are struggling with faith – as long as we are engaged

with God, God is there for us. What God cannot do, is work with people who are only interested in peripherals like, nice photographs, dresses and parties – and nothing else.

Prayer, and especially silent meditation is the beginning, the awakening of faith, of a relationship with God – and if that meditation continues, faith in its fullest sense is awakened.

We are called to be BOTH ACTIVE AND PRAYERFUL and not to be distracted in either.

16th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2016

Whenever I try to imagine that scene in the Gospel as it unfolds, I picture Martha in the kitchen area of the house muttering to herself as she peels and cuts the vegetables, perhaps banging the pots down on the bench as her anger rises, almost slamming the things down as she sets the table, and still muttering away to herself under her breath. She is mad at her sister for not helping, for just sitting there.

I take the key word in the description given by St Luke in the Gospel to be “distracted”. The point is that she is not doing anything very well because she is becoming more and more het up and annoyed. Both Martha and Mary have something important to contribute to the scenario – in Jewish tradition providing hospitality AND sitting attentively listening to a houseguest are both important, because both things are ways of showing respect, and indeed affection. I think that Jesus’ remark about Mary taking the “better part” can be taken too far, so as to demean the importance of offering hospitality to a guest, and I do not think that this is what Jesus is actually suggesting.

The problem is the “distraction” of Martha’s mutterings and growing anger which detract from any idea of service she may be wanting to offer. The call is to do whatever we do with complete dedication to the task in hand.

This point becomes clear when we see how this incident fits into the flow of St Luke’s account of Jesus’ ministry. You will remember that last week we had the Parable of the Good Samaritan with its call to all of us to “go and do likewise” – be active in helping those in need. These are the verses that come immediately before today’s story. Next week, in the verses immediately after this story of Jesus visiting Martha and Mary, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, and he teaches them the “Our Father”. This story about Martha and Mary is, then, a kind of link – the middle of the sandwich, as it were - between a story about action and another about prayer – AND BOTH ARE EQUALLY IMPORTANT.

Whatever we do we are to do intentionally, fully committed to it, not “distracted” by other things.

During this last week I was sent a book of poetry which I am currently reading. The poems cover many topics, not only religious themes, but I think that one of them captures a picture of a French religious sister who has understood and who lives the message of today’s Gospel.

Marie Fidele i.m.

I, the reluctant boy pilgrim
Dragged by a mother to the holy shrines
Away from the French girls in souvenir shops
Met you sitting alone in a kitchen

Silently peeling the vegetables.
Your disciplined hands
Taught me to strip the potato
To its white soul.

In the chapel I knelt beside your profile
And listened to the only sound, your breathing,
Heavy with prayer
Crossing the silence to another world.

Your breathing disappeared and returned
Like bare feet
Walking on the sand,
Following the footprints
Made by one who had just left
An empty tomb.

Complete dedication to whatever she is doing, be it prayer or peeling potatoes. Both prayer and action are equally important.

16th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2019

Our attention in this incident of Martha and Mary tends towards making a comparison between the 'activity' of Martha and the 'inactivity', or 'contemplation', of Mary. In fact, however, St Luke is not into making that kind of comparison at all. Our translation noting that Mary had chosen the "better" part is a rather poor one. It ought to be that Mary chose the "good" part. Even so, on the face of it, this still seems like a terrible snub to Martha who is, after all, tending to Jesus' need for food and is offering hospitality – albeit a rather distracted hospitality - as she chunters on and on about Mary not playing her part in this important task.

There is, however, something else going on here, of even deeper significance...

Notice how we are told that Mary "sat down at the Lord's feet and listened to him speaking." Now, this is not some star-crossed lover gazing longingly into the eyes of their beloved, as some people seem to think. Sitting at the feet of the 'Lord', the 'Master', was the action of a disciple. St Paul tells us in one of his letters that he "sat at the feet of Gamaliel" – a famous Rabbi at the time – as his disciple. This is all well and good but you see being a disciple was something a man did, not a woman, and this is the point of the incident. Luke is portraying Jesus, once again, as turning convention on its head.

In Jewish households in Jesus' time – indeed in most Gentile homes as well – women had their area of the house, however, humble, and the men had their area. The kitchen was where the women did their work, but also gossiped with their friends – as they did in the area just outside the house with the children around them. The menfolk did their gossiping in the living and dining area of the house. The common territory was the sleeping area. For the rest each gender had its own space. Perhaps we should not judge such an arrangement too harshly by the standards of today. The situation was as it was and both men and women had the chance to have a bit of privacy in this way.

The shocking thing, however, is not so much Mary trespassing in a man's space in the house, it is the fact that she is trespassing into exclusively male territory by adopting the pose of a disciple .

We also know from other parts of St Luke's Gospel that there was a group of women disciples who accompanied Jesus during his public ministry. The most famous of these is, of course, another Mary, Mary Magdalene. She is described by St Luke as one who had earlier been healed by Jesus. She would also become the first witness to meet the Risen Christ on the morning of his Resurrection and to tell the male apostles about this. In the Early Church Mary was much revered and given the ancient title of "Apostola apostolorum" – "the Apostle of the Apostles".

Inevitably as time went on, as in all movements that have to become organised so as to grow and prepare for the handing on of their message to future generations, the church took on a more conventional guise and the radical actions of Jesus were often tempered so as to be more acceptable to the wider patterns of living in the culture of the time, especially in regard to gender roles.

The priority, however, is always the need to fulfil Jesus' final command to the disciples after the Resurrection, "Go out to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations..." The passing on of the core message – mission – is fundamental. If effective mission is the priority in the Church still today, and there is no doubt that it should be, then re-thinking roles of men and women, married and single, that will be most effective in today's culture, needs to be looked into, and this story of Martha and Mary may give us some ideas of ways forward.