

17th - 25th Sundays in Ordinary Time
Gen. 18:20-32, Col. 2:2-14, Lk. 11:1-13

17th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2004

Although these days we are plagued with so many acronyms for bugs and diseases, committees, job titles, reports and so on – along with the use of mnemonics they have often been used to help us grasp various fundamental points – the notes on lines of music, the order of colours in a rainbow, the order of planets from the Sun – the kind of thing. One of the acronyms I remember learning in Religious Education – R.I. at the time – was ACTS.

This represented the four elements of prayer – Adoration, Contrition, Thanksgiving and Supplication – offering worship, seeking forgiveness, giving thanks, and asking for our needs. The Mass and the Our Father – of today's Gospel – were offered as the exemplars of this.

We were also taught that prayer was, *"The raising of the mind and heart to God"*. Actually the full quotation from the Ancient Writer who wrote those words is, *"Prayer is the raising up of the mind and heart and asking good things of God."* (John Damascene)

Sadly, somehow from all this, many people **wrongly** seemed to come to the conclusion that praying was the same as **saying prayers**, when, of course, it is much broader than this.

I've been very fortunate this last week to have been away on retreat – a time for prayer and reflection, on the Island of Iona, following in the footsteps of Columba and Aidan. Whether the prayer was quiet times in the Chapel of the House, in the Abbey, or saying Mass, or taking part in the evening liturgies of the Iona Community along with 80 or 100 others, all on the island seeking the same thing – finding God in our lives – Prayer reflected all of these four dimensions – Adoration, Contrition, Thanksgiving and Supplication.

On Tuesdays, members of the Iona Community lead people on a Pilgrimage Walk round the island, stopping at various points to reflect on different aspects of life – in front of a cross, at a ruined convent, at a place where monks were slaughtered by invading Vikings, at a cross-roads, at a quarry, at the bay where Columba first landed on the island. 40 or 50 people of different nationalities and all kinds of Christian backgrounds as you discovered as you walked and talked along the way.

To be perfectly honest, last Tuesday after a while the prayer was mainly of the asking, supplication kind. God treated us to one of those days unique to the Scottish Islands that have no trees for shelter! Rain that was either vertical or horizontal, and every conceivable angle in between! God please get me to a dry place – please don't let my trainers sink or stick in the next piece of bog. And on getting back to the house – Thanksgiving – for Aga cookers, tumble dryers and electric showers!

Prayer is who and what we are at any particular time – our minds and hearts, ourselves, directed to God. Abraham is into begging and bargaining for others. The apostles are wanting to praise and to ask. Last week Mary was listening, Martha was doing – and all of this is potentially prayer.

Whether we are at this time preoccupied with our health, or that of someone close; of our own sinfulness or difficulties at work; feeling good to being on holiday; thankful that a difficult time seems to be passing; or thankful for some recent success – prayer is who we are now before our God. A God who always listens – even when it's just about wanting to be warm and dry again!

17th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2010

I'm sure we are all familiar with the saying, "*You are what you eat.*" I want to propose another saying in connection with our faith journey and that is, "*You pray who you are.*" And our aim is to become what we pray.

The easiest way to illustrate this is to take an extreme case – extreme, but not uncommon. You are anxious, even beside yourself, about your own health, or that of your partner, son, daughter, grandson/granddaughter. At such times prayer is frantically asking God for healing and help. This is your number one priority, your obsession at this time. You pray who you are. And we find an excellent, if rather drawn out, example of this in our First Reading with Abraham bargaining with God over the safety of his relatives in Sodom and Gomorrah. We have probably all bargained with God at some stage in life, "*If so-and-so gets well I promise never to smoke/drink/swear again.*" We pray who we are, because this consumes our very being, at times.

Hopefully if things work out well and there is healing and recovery for the person we have been praying for, we will be equally consumed with prayers of thanksgiving. Now, later on in the year we will hear the Gospel story of the lives of the Ten Lepers, only one of whom comes back to say thank you to Jesus for his healing. It is a salutary reminder to us of the fact that we **can** so easily forget God when our needs pass. But if we are thankful, grateful for what has happened, this is what we bring to prayer. We pray who we are.

As for the rest of the time when not in extreme need or gratitude there is always the danger that God gets side-lined. We forget God's presence in our lives and don't pray. We pray who we are and if we are not aware or not bothered about God's presence in our lives – then we may well not pray at all. That is a real danger point.

That story in today's Gospel of the disciple asking Jesus to teach the whole group how to pray is very instructive here. Note that no specific place is given for this, nor is a disciple named "*one of the disciples*". It could be any disciple, in any place, and at any time – and that is the point. It is for any disciple, anywhere at any time. It is for us here in Washington in 2010.

Another thing we should note is that these disciples had already been with Jesus for some time by now – probably for well over a year. Prayer was part of the normal culture in which they had grown up and lived – very different from our culture today, when praying is not part of the rhythm of ordinary life now. For the disciples as observant Jews a routine of prayers at various times of the day, at meals, or each Sabbath, at the various feasts was **NORMAL**, it was part of their everyday routine. They would know by heart quite a few of the psalms and other prayers of their faith.

BUT, they had noted something different about Jesus in prayer, something which attracted them, and something they wanted for themselves. AND this is the key to understanding Jesus' teaching. Prayer is actually about becoming more and more like Jesus. Jesus teaches them the Our Father (we are more familiar with the version given in St. Matthew's Gospel) in its opening lines of praise, followed by lines of petition we are given a model of prayer which is actually about becoming more and more like Jesus every day. Daily routine of prayer using and modelled on the Our Father, drawing us closer and closer to Jesus' way of being is what we aim for, so that we pray what we are and become what we pray.

17th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2013

Prayer has been the central focus of our Gospel Readings for the last couple of weeks. Last week is the story of Martha and Mary – the theme was of silent prayer, prayer without words – contemplation. For most of us this type of prayer was not part of our upbringing because it was a tradition of prayer that was all but lost, apart from a supposed elite of really holy people. Now, thank God, it is making a real come back and becoming once again part of our mainstream prayer.

Today the Gospel clearly focuses on something with which we are very familiar: - prayer with words. In fact one of the members of our little Scripture Reflection Group at St. Bede's reached back many decades in to her RE lessons at school and remembered that we were taught the acronym ACTS as a helpful mnemonic of the various types of prayer – Adoration, Contrition, Thanksgiving and Supplication.

Although we are much more familiar with the version of the Our Father in St. Matthew's Gospel, we can still recognise the structure of the prayer at the beginning of this Gospel Reading (St. Luke). In a few short sentences all four types or aspects of prayer are used. This is why Jesus gave his disciples this prayer as a model for all prayer.

But then, of course, the rest of this Gospel Passage focuses in on just one of these types of prayer – Supplication, Petition Prayers, asking God for favours or things. I suspect that most people associate prayer with asking God for things above anything else.

This may be a good opportunity for us to stop and reflect on what our own prayer consists of and to ask ourselves questions like:-

- Do we give time simply to adoration – to praise of God?
- Do we thank God specifically for answering prayers?

Are we sufficiently sorry in our prayers – realising that, whilst we do not do anything nasty in life, it may well be the case that we could be doing much more?

And just while we are in this business of reflecting on the various aspects of our prayer life, perhaps we might reflect on what it is we are praying for, what is the content of our prayers of petition. Are we spending our time asking God to change other people, rather than asking God to help us change ourselves. I suspect that this is the gift of the Holy Spirit Jesus talks about at the end of that Gospel Reading.

So there we have the complete picture of prayer.

Prayer without words/silent prayer – last week with Mary sitting at the feet of the Lord.

The Lord's Prayer – the model of all spoken prayer:

ACTS

- Adoration
- Contrition
- Thanksgiving
- Supplication.

17th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2016

During the autumn storms and floods last year a devout Christian prayed that the Lord would save him from the rising floodwaters. A policeman knocked at his door and said that he had to leave

because the water level was rising very quickly and it was coming up the street. The man refused to budge, saying that he had prayed and that the Lord would save him from the rising waters. An hour later the water had reached the level of the first floor of the house. The man had taken refuge in an upstairs room when firemen in a dinghy rowed past and urged him to get into the dinghy because the waters were still rising rapidly, but he refused saying that his Lord was going to save him. An hour later and by now he is clinging to a chimney pot on the roof, as the waters continued to rise, an air-sea rescue helicopter hovered over him and a rope ladder was passed down to him, but he refused to use it, "No, no, it's all right I have prayed to the Lord and he will save me." An hour later he had drowned.

On arriving at the Pearly Gates he was very angry indeed, and demanded to know of St Peter why he had not been saved. St Peter answered, "But we sent you the policeman, the dinghy, the rescue helicopter, what more did you want?"

It's an old, old story but it is one that connects rather well with our Gospel this weekend. As well as teaching the disciples the Our Father, with its mixture of praise and petition, as the model for all prayer, Jesus goes on to talk rather more about the prayer of petition (asking God for things). Part of his message is clearly about persistence, not giving up. We can feel very reassured by those words about how whoever seeks, finds; whoever asks, receives; and whoever knocks, has the door opened to them. Prayer is always answered, but perhaps not always in the way we might have expected or wanted. Just ask the man in our opening story about that!

Many years ago at school most of us were taught that the answer to the question, "What is prayer?" was, "Prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God." In other words prayer involves the whole of the person, not just our minds, or not just our feelings, rather the whole of us. What we did not know at the time, and which only became clear to most of us when the new Catechism of the Catholic Church was published a number of years ago is that that definition was part of a quotation from one of the ancient Fathers of the Church, St John Damascene. What St John actually said was, "Prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God, and asking good things from God."

In times of extreme desperation it is difficult to formulate prayers, difficult indeed to pray at all. At times we may question whether or not God is listening. More often than not it is only when we have time and space to look back, when things settle down a bit, only then do we realise that pray has been answered, but perhaps not in the way we had originally prayed for.

Something else to notice about Jesus' words on prayer... Notice how he describes prayer with ACTIVE verbs: asking, seeking, knocking. Prayer is not just sitting back and waiting for something to happen – as that man did in our floodwater story. Prayer is doing things, all of which are prompted by God's Spirit given to us, without fail, or so Jesus says in our Gospel. Persistence will have its rewards, of that there is no doubt.

17th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2019

A few weeks ago I said Mass at St Mary's High School with a group of pupils and some members of staff. The religious theme for that week in school was Prayer, and the Gospel chosen for the Mass was St Matthew's version of the Our Father. In preparing for the Mass I remembered how various mnemonics and acronyms were used in school – in my time anyway – to help remember various formulae. The one that came immediately to mind was the sentence, "Every Good Boy Deserves Football" – for the lines in musical notation.

I also remembered one from RE lessons: the word ACTS. Each of the letters stands for an aspect of prayer: Adoration, Contrition, Thanksgiving and Supplication. We were told that these four elements taken together gave a complete picture of what prayer was about. Apparently, mnemonics are still used in schools today but whether or not ACTS remained for long in the minds of those pupils I doubt.

The thing is, however, that the Our Father – especially when prayed in the context of our Eucharist (our greatest thanksgiving prayer) – is a perfect example of a complete prayer. It contains phrases of adoration, contrition and petition and is prayed in the context of thanksgiving. For people who rarely, if ever, pray I suspect that in their minds prayer is about petition – demanding things of God - and not much else. That strange story of Abraham bargaining with God in our First Reading is probably what comes to mind when non-religious people imagine what prayer is like. Of course prayer does consist in petitions especially when we are in urgent need of something – healing for a loved one, being brought to safety in a dangerous situation, that kind of thing. It is only natural that we pray like this in such circumstances but, as we are aware, prayer is much more than this.

In fact our Gospel today helps us put prayer into a fuller context when it offers the example of asking a friend for help. There is much more to friendship than asking for help in extreme situations, as we well know. Friends spend time together, talk to each other about all manner of things. Good friends laugh and cry together. They share their innermost thoughts and feelings, their anxieties and hopes. They exchange news about what is going on in their lives. Friends can also be comfortable simply being quiet in each other's company. Friendship is an active encounter between people... and this Gospel is saying that the same holds true for our relationship with the God made visible in Jesus. Our prayer is an active engagement with a close friend with whom we share our most intimate thoughts, feelings, anxieties and hopes.

Over recent weeks in our Gospel Readings we have seen the disciples go off on a trial mission, Jesus feeding a huge crowd with five loaves and two fishes. We have heard Jesus giving the Parable of the Good Samaritan and its call to help anyone in their need, and just last week we heard about his visit to the home of Martha and Mary. Slowly but surely a picture is being built for us of someone who is both active in reaching out to others in their need, who is active also in prayer to his Father and who calls his disciples – his friends to be the same: people active in both prayer and what are sometimes called 'good works'. It is all of a piece.

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Eccles. 1:2, 2:21-23, Col. 3:1-5, 9-11, Lk. 12:13-21

18th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2004

We usually associate St. Luke's Gospel with the most human portrayal of Jesus amongst the Gospels – and rightly so. We have more details about Jesus' early life in this Gospel than any of the others, and more details about his suffering as a truly human person in the account of the Passion. But there is also a no-nonsense, no half-measure aspect to St Luke's account of what is expected from a true disciple. For example the first disciples don't just "*leave their nets and follow him*" as in Matthew and Mark – they leave "*everything and follow him*".

Today we have a similar no-nonsense, no-compromise incident that is unique to Luke's Gospel. As he portrays this incident Jesus is walking along accompanied by a huge crowd. He is sharing with them some

important teaching about the Kingdom of God. Then, from out of nowhere, comes this lone, plaintiff voice asking Jesus, as he would any Rabbi, to help him sort out what is basically a domestic dispute.

Boy has he got it wrong? He has missed the point completely. He's not been listening to what Jesus has been saying at all, because he is so caught up in his own problem – a problem so pathetically unimportant when set alongside what Jesus is talking about, that you can feel him going red with embarrassment as Jesus responds with his Parable of the Rich Landowner.

What is really important in life? What is really valuable? In no uncertain terms Jesus points out that it is never, ever what we **possess** that should be held to be of most value. All that kind of thing is Vanity in the words of our First Reading. Apparently that word vanity comes from the same root in Hebrew as the word '*mist*' - *thin, temporary, of no real substance*.

Many of us will have had a time in our lives when something has happened to us, or to someone close to us, that puts things into perspective, showing us what is important in life. I think all of us will know someone whose life has been altered in this way. Sometimes such personal events are just too raw and immediate to look at – that is perfectly understandable. These things need time and space to deal with them adequately. And people in this congregation will have their own stories to remind them of this. This is too public an arena for such things.

To take a rather more remote example of getting things out of proportion – of deciding what is truly important in life – I was struck by a comment from a Lord Justice of the Appeal Court earlier this week. At least one full day of the time of the Court of Appeal with two Lord Justices and one Lady Justice, at least two Q.C.s' and all the paraphernalia that go with these hearings, going into thousands of pounds – all of this was taken up by one small part of a divorce settlement in which rent of a property (admittedly costing 10's of thousands of pounds in rent) was disputed. One of the Lord Justices called the proceedings "*insane*".

Proportionality – a sense of perspective – discerning what is **really** important in life is a crucial part of our discipleship.

18TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2007

Most difficult to get across – sense of urgency. Sadly only when tragedy strikes – focus the mind – bridge collapses under people driving home from work, home is flooded by torrential rainfall, sickness – what is truly/ultimately of value/importance.

This is what Jesus is trying to get across in that very simple and stark parable – sense of urgency, a need to recognise **now** what is truly important to us.

Over the past few weeks St. Luke has been putting together the various building blocks that go to make up true discipleship – action, helping anyone in need (Good Samaritan); focus on God's presence in daily life (Martha and Mary); holding these two things together in prayer (teaching the disciples to pray – Our Father) – now making a choice/decision to follow/live what is truly important.

Aren't we already doing that? Why else are we here? Surely our decision is clear for all to see? We are disciples.

Well, in fact, any congregation has within it quite a variety of people in different stages of discipleship. Certainly many who have made that conscious decision to follow in Jesus' footsteps. Many of us, of

course, slipped into this almost accidentally – parental choice. Some are in the process of making that choice their own (15, 25, 45 even 65).

The point is that we are called to make a conscious, intentional decision – a definite YES or NO for some people to Jesus' invitation to his life style.

It is the kind of decision that we can, and do make once and for all but for all kinds of reasons it can begin to become too routine, unconscious, unintentional and other awareness's, other desires can begin to creep in. Shall I build bigger barns.

I long since gave up using a prayer that we used every day at the start of school – The Morning Offering. I can't remember it now and for sure other things have taken its place. But the reason for using that prayer is an important one – Intentional, Conscious – TODAY aware of Jesus' presence in life, aware of call to discipleship, aware of what is truly important TODAY, EVERY DAY and TO SAY YES.

18th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2010

Three items from Friday's newspaper:-

1. It was reported by the FSA that more than 2,800 people were paid/earned over £1 million last year working in the Financial Sector of the City of London.
2. Photograph of two luxury cars clamped outside Harrods £220 parking charges – owned by the owners of Harrods's oil sheikh – probably not too bothered.

One car, a Koenigsegg CCXR £1.2m, the other - a Lamborghini Marcielago £350,000.

3. Sports Section problem over a £32.5m transfer deal for one football player.

“Vanity of vanity, says the Preacher, all is vanity.”
“I will build bigger barns”.

The Preacher in Ecclesiastes, and Jesus himself in the Gospel would not possibly have been able to imagine those three stories from today's news items (and there are plenty more like them...).

Our knowledge of what goes on in the world is vastly more than anyone has had available to them in the whole of history. We know about the excesses, we also know about desperation. So the plight of people in Haiti, months after the earthquake and millions of dollars of aid are still living in tents with no secure safe water supply, is reported – but it is not front page news any more. Nor is Darfur, nor is what is happening in the Eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Zaire).

Now, it may be that those people earning over £1m, the owners of Harrods, and top flight footballers, pay their proper taxes and may use their wealth to help people in desperate need. We cannot stand in judgment over others simply on what is reported in the Press.

We **can** question a culture in which excess flourishes and hold the mirror of our Readings at Mass today up to that culture. That is **truly** part of our task.

But another part of our task is to hold the mirror of these Readings up to ourselves and the various nooks and crannies of our own lives. Our vanities may not be cars costing £1.2m, our building of bigger barns

may not be based on salaries of £1m whilst neglecting the spiritual aspect of our lives, but vanities and obsession with material goods may still be present.

The challenge is to use the wake-up call of these Readings to see where 'idolatry' as St. Paul calls it – is affecting our lives today.

18th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2016

Our modern image of a farmer will vary from the sheep-farmer in the Cheviots, to larger dairy or arable farmers further South in the country, or even to various kinds of indigenous farmers in different parts of the world. The variety is enormous but none of them come close to the farmer that Jesus had in mind in that parable.

In Galilee, in Jesus' time, farmers were almost without exception rich, absentee landowners who lived very comfortably in one of the great cities of the area – Tiberias or Sepphoris. They leased out their land to tenant farmers, who in turn employed labourers on a day to day basis, as needed (an ancient version of zero hours contracts and minimum wages). We are familiar with these tenants and labourers from other parables that Jesus relates.

The absentee Galilean farmer was a very rich man indeed. He received the lion's share of any produce from his land, while the tenants and labourers who did all the hard graft, had to scabble about to earn some kind of living. The farmer lived in the luxury of the big town–cum–city, doing little else than making sure he received his due wealth each year from the tenants. Notice how the farmer in the parable refers to... "my crops", "my barns", "my grain" "my goods". There is not even a hint of a wife or family, everything is completely centred on himself. He is the very epitome of avarice. No-one else matters, no-one else comes in for any kind of consideration.

This obscene, yawning gap between a very few haves and countless have-nots is replicated today in many situations both in our own country and further afield. A sports goods retailer is accused by some MPs of treating his workers worse than a Victorian workhouse treated its inmates, while enjoying a very comfortable lifestyle for himself. Another retailer sells on part of his business at a huge profit, which very soon goes bust. In the meantime he buys himself "another" outrageously expensive yacht for himself. The price alone could make a significant contribution to the financial hole in the pension fund of his former employees. A political party calling for a more just distribution of wealth apparently acquires its t-shirts from sweatshops in Bangladesh, and so on.

Something is clearly wrong somewhere in all of this, and our Catholic social teaching has much to say about fairness and justice for all people, but that parable and the whole theme of avarice/greed in our readings today is not only directed at large corporations and super rich individuals, it is also directed very firmly at ourselves, as we can see from what St Paul writes in our Second Reading.

In the list of things to be "killed off" as belonging only to this life the key is "especially greed, which is the same as worshipping a false god." As we have seen the farmer in the Gospel parable is completely absorbed with himself, with no thought given to anyone else. He is his own "god".

A correct way of operating would be to think of the needs of others – family, friends, employees, people who have to go without the basics in life – on our own doorstep, as well as further afield – even the impact on the environment. All of this is part of any consideration of how to act with

openness and generosity, rather than avarice and greed. This is the challenge Jesus is putting before us in today's Gospel.

18th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2019

"Fool this very night the demand will be made for your soul."

A threat like that has little long-term effect, unless and until it comes close to home. Last weekend I had family visiting from Germany. They travelled back safely but then the next day received some dreadful news. My cousin's widow is a doctor – a paediatrician. A colleague of hers has just retired and had offered to help with much needed locum work so that Ursula can take some time off-duty from her practice. This doctor and his wife went off to America on their dream retirement holiday of a lifetime. One of their adventures was to go down a river in Alaska in a rubber dinghy by the side of a famous glacier. Without any warning, as they were passing, the glacier 'calved', a huge edge split away from the main glacier and toppled on top of their boat and all on board were killed – as simple and brutal as that – in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The only parallel I am drawing here is about the unpredictability of life, not the preparedness or otherwise of those involved. What the incident highlights, however, is the old adage, "You just don't know what lies around the corner." We are invited to reflect this weekend on what is ultimately important in life.

All of us are called upon to develop and use our talents to their best effect for ourselves and, crucially, for others. We encourage young people to strive for excellence in all that they do. We rightly celebrate their successes – always remembering that while for some success might be achieving high grades in exams or great sporting results, for others simply being able to smile and to get through the day might be an enormous achievement to be celebrated.

In early adulthood the focus turns towards jobs, careers, having somewhere to live, promotions, relationships, establishing a family, caring for and nurturing that family. External "achievement" is still the focus and measure of success put forward by society at large and, once again, there is merit in this: using our gifts and developing our talents to the best advantage for ourselves **and, of course, for others**. The lack of inclusion of the needs of others is the first mistake of the rich man who is the anti-hero of our parable. Everything is for himself alone.

Note that he is described as being 'rich'. In those times a few, a very few, privileged people who owned great tracts of land could make a fortune, at the expense of the people they exploited to work as labourers. The gap between the haves and the have-nots was enormous – even more than the scandalous divisions of today. As we can see from our First Reading, however, all of this is, in the end, "vanity". It is pointless and meaningless. What is the point of acquiring more and more of what we do not ultimately need, and can't take with us? Such dissatisfaction with life is evident today in all kinds of ways: levels of suicide and addiction being two of the most obvious. A yawning chasm in life of emptiness will always demand that it be filled: nature, we are told abhors a vacuum.

Amongst other things our Faith – the fact that we find ultimate meaning in Jesus Christ, in his teachings, in his call to a way of life that sees beyond the immediate – invites us to what St Paul, in our Second Reading today, calls, "being brought back to true life". Knowing, as he writes, that, "There is only Christ: he is everything and he is in everything," offers freedom from the ultimate emptiness and pointlessness of life.

Taking a moment or two in the coming days to reflect on and remember this will help reinforce our convictions. It will help us to show others where true satisfaction in life may be found. In its own way this is part of our call to be missionary disciples: people who follow Christ and who share their faith with others.

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wis. 18:6-9, Heb. 11:1-2, 8-19, Lk. 12:32-48

19th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2004

Last week in our Liturgy we were invited to reflect on What Really Matters in our Life – what is **really** important. This week, having decided what is really important, we are being asked to be patient, faithful and trusting in God's promises to us.

There are lots of different techniques, exercises and tests used to build up trust – in relationships in the home, among teams of people at work. One of the simplest exercises that is sometimes used is when one person stands behind another ready to catch them as they fall backwards, arms folded. As you get ready to fall back just how much do you **really** trust this person standing behind you to catch you and save you from cracking your skull?

Trust is something to be worked at constantly and it is not something that comes easily in a culture like ours which is riddled with mistrust and suspicion – where people have to keep proving that they are worthy and deserving of trust. Quite often the assumption today is that no-one – care worker, nurse, teacher, doctor, neighbour, spouse, is worthy of trust until they are investigated, tested and checked out. There is clearly a need for checking and testing, but there is also a balance to be made. The possibility of putting trust in another person has to be there otherwise everything breaks down around us and we retreat into the locked and barricaded safety of our own homes.

Building trust, building confidence is an essential part of our human development. And it is no accident that **TRUST and CONFIDENCE** are intimately connected with the core ideas of our Readings today – FAITH IN GOD, and FAITH IN GOD'S PROMISES – TRUST, CONFIDENCE, **FAITHFULNESS**.

The Letter to the Hebrews recalls the example of Abraham and Sarah trusting, in spite of all the signs to the contrary, that God would be faithful to the promises God made to them – and God was.

The writer in the Book of Wisdom recalling how the People of Israel enslaved in Egypt remained faithful – trusting that their God would rescue them from their plight, and God doing just that at the time of the Passover and the Exodus.

Then Jesus urging the disciples to stand ready, be faithful, the Master **will** return and reward those who are faithful.

The final sentences of that Gospel are rather disturbing, *“When someone has had a great deal given him, a great deal will be demanded of them, when someone has had a great deal given him on **trust**, even more will be expected of him.”*

As ever there is an uncompromising edge to what Jesus asks of his disciples in St. Luke's Gospel. We have been given much on trust and we are being asked to remain trusting and faithful that the God who has done all the things outlined for us in the Scriptures, that same God will be faithful to those promises in

our regard – but as I say trusting in not something that comes easily in our culture. It has to be worked at. At least this process, this journey of faith with all its ups and downs is a life-long one, and we are assured about all that God is patient with and faithful to, us.

19TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2007

There is some very poor psychology at work in the choice of our Gospel passage today. If I were to say to you, *“Don’t think about elephants, whatever you do in the next thirty seconds, I do not want you to think about elephants. You are forbidden to think about elephants.”* I suspect that everyone now has elephants on their mind, in spite of instructions. The mind has a tendency to latch on to the last thing that was said. This is why all those campaigns about ‘Stop Smoking’ turned out to be pretty futile. The smoker was left thinking about smoking – the last thing that was mentioned. More recently campaigns have focus on ‘Being Healthy’.

In that Gospel passage the last things we hear about are *“he will receive many strokes of the lash”* and *“even more will be expected of us”*. Those lines contrast rather starkly with the first line of that passage, *“There is no need to be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom.”* Because of the way our minds work we are much more likely to end up thinking about demands and punishments than not needing to be afraid and reflecting on what having been given the kingdom may mean. Both are equally part of Jesus’ words to his disciples and both need to be reflected on. The problem with focusing on the negative is that it has a tendency to paralyse. We try to avoid things that will lead us into trouble rather than going after things that seem to be good and which may lead to further good. It just does not get us very far.

The thing is, of course, it is precisely action, and putting into practice in our lives Jesus’ teaching that Jesus is calling on us to do in that Gospel, *“See that you are dressed for action...”* Positive encouragement is more likely to succeed than negative threats. Part of that encouragement comes in his advice, *“Sell your possessions and give alms. Get yourselves purses that do not wear out, treasure that will not fail you.”* Here I think is the reason for the choice of the First Reading to stand alongside these words. It recalls the Passover, *“That night”*. Here too the Israelites had been told to be dressed for action as they ate the Passover meal in haste ready to flee from Egypt. Everything done for them at that time, and in their forty years in the desert was entirely God’s gift – nothing was of their own achievement. They did not win any great battle with Pharaoh and his armies. God led them out and destroyed the Egyptians. In the desert they did not grow or raise their own food or collect water – everything was provided for them. It was all gift. It was also the time that the People of Israel were closest to their God – unhindered by land possessions, worries about invaders, whether crops would grow, goods would sell, and so on. Everything was dependent on God, and they knew this and rejoiced in it (most of the time).

Here is a way forward for us too when we realise that nothing we have in this life is truly our own. It is all gift, including life itself. St. Francis of Assisi once wrote that the only things we can truly call our own in life are our vices and sins, everything else is God’s gift to us. So it is as we reflect on being disciples of Jesus – everything we have in life, all that we have around us is not ultimately ours/mine, it is God’s and one day we will have to give it all up. In the meantime we are called upon to use what we have wisely and well, and for the benefit of those who need it – servants who will ultimately have to give an account of our stewardship. That is indeed the final threat, but it comes after realising the great giftedness that is our lives, and for which we can be truly thankful.

19th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2010

There was an item on the radio the other day about a petition being organised by the Girl Guides Association. They want all photographs in newspapers, magazines and especially magazines targeted at a teenager audience, to be labelled if they have been air-brushed in any way. Instead of seeing people/models even as they really are (warts and all, to borrow Cromwell's famous remark) – any perceived blemishes – a spot here, a wrinkle there – are touched up – air-brushed out so everything looks perfect, ideal. The effect on people and especially teenagers, looking at such apparent perfection is to see themselves in poor light, to feel imperfect, less than they should be – leading to low self-esteem and depression.

The tyranny of the perfect, the need for everything to be just so, to fit the ideal pervades our culture. But reality is not like that. It is full of things that we might wish were different, but aren't. We are who we are and God loves us as we are – the nasty bits just as much as the nice.

There is a temptation to extend this need to have perfection, for everything to be nice and neat and tidy to all areas of life, including our faith.

In such a situation the first line of our Gospel is perfect, *"There is no need to be afraid little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the Kingdom."* If only Jesus had stopped at that point and not bothered with the rest of what he had to say, everything would have been fine.

But then came those other things, *"Sell your possessions and give alms... You must stand ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect... When a man has had a great deal given him, a great deal will be demanded of him; when a man has had a great deal given him on trust, even more will be expected of him."*

Not so nice. Life would be a great deal easier if we could air-brush things like that out of the Gospel, but they are there just as much as the words of comfort and encouragement.

There are times of difficulty and desolation in our life when Gospel words of comfort offer the kind of healing and hope that we all need at times. But then when complacency and self-satisfaction rule our lives, a nudge, a kick, a blunt warning are in order.

The Gospel is capable of doing both. It is our task in reflecting on that Gospel to allow the words to do their stuff – comforting or cajoling – but never just sticking to the 'nice stuff' alone. Reality is more complicated than that and God is present in it all. The trick is for us to be present to that same God who is in all things.

19th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2013

I think it is important to get the context of what Jesus is saying in that Gospel right, then everything else will fit into place. Get it wrong, and what we are left with is a complete distortion of his message.

If we were to hone in on those warnings about the unknown hour at which the Lord will return, or about being cut off from the Lord and thrown away, or about receiving strokes from the lash – if these were to dominate our thoughts, fear would inevitably be the result. The kind of fear that is like that of a rabbit frozen in fear when picked out by a spotlight in the dark – a fear that paralyses. This is not a very healthy kind of fear but I suspect that many people still operate on this basis – fearful of what they think God might do to them, if they step out of line.

Now there is no shying away from the stern warnings of that parable and Jesus' explanation of it to Peter and the other disciples – but take a closer look at the context of what he says, how he introduces these warnings.

“Jesus said to his disciples, ‘There is no need to be afraid little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the Kingdom’. No need to fear... little flock... your Father... give you the Kingdom.

Being members of the Kingdom of God, being his sons and daughters is already a given. There is no need to fear about whether we are in or out. We are in and no doubt about it. Now, in this context, what are we to do about it? The answer is – always try to act according to what the Kingdom is about, its values and do that each day.

So, unlike other people in Jesus' time who preferred either to live in the past – like the Pharisees and Sadducees' – wanting things to be like they were in a glorious Golden Past Age – that never was (Just like most nostalgic fantasies). Nor are we to live in the moment, as did most servants and peasants in Jesus' time – not knowing if they were going to be able to feed their family that night, then the next, and so on – and enjoying a bit of respite when the Master is not around for a day or two.

No, unlike either of these groups, the *“little flock”* – the members of God's Kingdom – are to live each day as it comes, with an eye to the future when the Lord **will** return.

There is a proper fear that goes with this. This is not the kind of fear that paralyzes us from acting, it is a fear which motivates us to live up to the values and actions asked of us by one who loves us: - to live in faith, in trust and love.

I came across a sentence which might help us here:

“We cannot be afraid of what we love and of what truly loves us.”

If love is not at the heart of what Jesus is about.....

19th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2016

The opening sentence of our 2nd Reading today is one that had a huge impact on a few theologians just after the Second World War... and their work based on what they began to discover in that sentence is still having an impact today, “Only faith can guarantee the blessing that we hope for, or prove the existence of the realities that at present remain unseen.” So what was the big deal about this sentence?

Many of us were taught as youngsters that faith is almost exclusively focused on the mind. We were told that the gift of faith “enables us to believe, without doubting, whatever God has revealed.” As such it was mainly associated with our assent to, our agreement with, the statements in the Creed - about God being one and three, about the two natures of Jesus Christ, and so on. This was certainly part of what faith was about, but that writer of the Letter to the Hebrews pointed out another, equally important aspect: faith is about TRUST – trust which leads someone to action.

In the passage we heard he writes about the examples of Abraham and Sarah, and in the rest of the chapter from which our reading comes he goes through a whole list of the great names of

Jewish history, all of whom “trusted” in the promises made by God for them. In that trust they took an active role in what happened as a consequence of the promises made to them. They became active partners with God in what unfolded.

Another way of expressing this is a word with which we have become familiar in the last few years with in the writings of both Pope Benedict and Pope Francis. That word is “encounter”. Faith is an active meeting, it is a call to an encounter, between persons... Between the Person of the God made visible in Jesus and the person of the individual believer. Faith is a relationship and like all relationships it needs to be nurtured and cultivated. Without active engagement of some kind all relationships wither and die.

If ever there was a call to become more and more aware of this “encounter”, this call to active engagement with what it is that God is asking of us, it is the situation in which we find ourselves today. Notice how at the beginning of our Gospel today Jesus calls on his disciples to be, “dressed for action and have your lamps lit.” Our faith is not about sitting around waiting for things to happen, for someone else to do all the leading, for someone else to tell us what to do.

There have always been examples of lay people in our church in the past who took great initiatives in an active engagement with the faith. We might think of Frederic Ozanam in C19th France founding the Society of St Vincent de Paul – a society which spread all around the world and was in many parishes (and still is in some) actively involved in giving practical help for the poor on our own doorsteps. Then there is the example of Frank Duff in Ireland, seeing a great spiritual need in the Church and founding the Legion of Mary – again active in many parishes in the past (including this one).

There are many other examples we could cite. The point is, however, that there is an urgent need for a renewed, active response to our situation today in 2016. This is what we are being asked to reflect on and to be prepared to take an active part in the future with Forward Together in Hope.

When Jesus says, at the end of today’s Gospel, “You too must stand ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” He is, of course referring to the Second Coming. At the moment we are being asked in this diocese to prepare, not so much for the Second Coming, but for a future that has been staring us in the face for at least the past two decades, with regard to the number of our parishes and the availability of priests to serve in them. The future is right around the corner and only ACTIVE Engagement with what is to come is going to help. Only in this way will we be able to promote and nurture our faith into future generations.

19th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2019

“Where your treasure is there will your heart be.”

As I was saying last week, when we had that Gospel reading about the rich man who pulled down his barns to build bigger ones for his bumper crop, and neglected the spiritual aspect of his life, unless something drastic suddenly befalls us it is very difficult to sustain the sense of imminent call to judgement in this kind of passage. Yet we have a run of passages with this message in our Gospels at the moment. Perhaps, however, even if it is not feasible to keep that sense of urgency in our lives, at least reflecting on where our treasure in life lies may be a worthwhile exercise in which to engage.

“Where your treasure is there will your heart be.” Naturally for most people family would come top of the list here. Attachment to partner, to children (whatever their age and stage may be) would be of the highest priority in all loving relationships. Perhaps friendships might be next on the list, and possibly top of the list for those with no immediate family. Of course for some potentially dangerous people they are their own treasure. The narcissist, at the extreme, acts as if he or she is entitled to everything around them: attention, adulation, unquestioning acceptance that they are always right. There is something amusing and even endearing when we see this in the phase that some two year-olds go through, but in the grown man – and it is usually a man – it becomes quite terrifying. Unfortunately, as you look across the globe at the moment too many political leaders seem to come into this category

By contrast a person of faith is someone who acknowledges that at the core of their being there is something greater than them, or rather some **ONE** greater than them, who lies outside them. Faith centres on an encounter, a meeting, between persons in which mutual trust, love and interdependence is acknowledged. In this case it is our encounter with the God made visible in Jesus, in his life and his message.

In our Second Reading today we have part of the opening section of a whole passage in which the author – writing to a community of Jewish Christians who would have known their Old Testament very well – points to examples of people of faith from amongst their ancestors. Some of the characters are well known to us, others less so. We hear of the example of Abraham and Sarah but, in fact, the first person named in the list is Abel (as in Cain and Abel), then Enoch, then Noah, only then do we come to Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and seven others, along with the catch-all reference to ‘all the prophets’. Thankfully, we are spared all the details about what these people had done, but at the heart of everything was their faith, their trust in God’s promise that God would deliver. This is what the author is reminding his readers and inviting them to imitate.

“Only faith can guarantee the blessings we hope for, or prove the existence of realities that at present remain unseen.” Here we are given a classic definition of faith, faith that is about trust in the One who is both capable of and who actually does fulfil his promises.

Love of family and friends is a given. It is both laudable and necessary for our proper functioning as adult human persons, and indeed for the proper functioning of society, but for the Christian underpinning it all is that central act of faith in the One who creates and sustains us and all our relationships. Without this One, this God, we believe that we, and the others who are treasure in our lives, would not exist at all.

The invitation to reflect on where our treasure might lie is offered to us. Whether or not we take up that invitation is, like faith itself, up to us to respond to the God who is already and always at the heart of our lives.

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jer. 38:4-6, 8-10, Heb. 12:1-4, Lk. 12:49-53

20th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2007

If any of us were to be asked the question, “*Did Jesus preach a message of peace and reconciliation?*” we would reply truthfully that he did indeed preach peace and reconciliation. He not only preached it, he lived that message with every fibre of his being. At the moment of his birth the angels greeted his coming

with the words, *“Glory to God in the highest, and peace to all men and women of good will.”* Toward the end of his life he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey of peace rather than a horse of war. He wouldn't let his disciples defend him in the Garden of Gethsemane by using their swords. He was, through and through, someone who brought the good news of peace and reconciliation for all people.

So, how come Jesus denies bringing peace to the world in that Gospel? *“I have not come to bring peace but fire, and how I wish it were blazing already.”* Jesus is talking here not about his teaching, but the effect of his teaching. What he says in his message has consequences, and some of those consequences are things that we would rather not think about at times. In the ancient world a person had no stronger personal ties than to their family – it was paramount. Not now, says Jesus. The Kingdom of God takes precedence over even family ties, and sadly the message of the kingdom, Jesus' teaching, and people's reactions to it will divide families' right down the middle.

On the whole we would prefer always to listen to good news, to comforting news, to news that soothes us. One of the reasons why Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale of the Emperor's New Clothes resonates so much with us is that it rings true to our experience. Just like the king who is conned into thinking the non-existent clothes he is wearing are in fact beautiful, the most exquisite garments ever made, and like the sycophantic courtiers who just keep on flattering the king rather than risk telling him the truth, we would prefer to hear only good things about ourselves and how rosy is our future. Complacency always wins out over the effort needed to change and to be honest. Denial is a powerful force in life.

In the fairy tale it is one young boy who speaks and blurts out the truth, that the king is in fact naked. In the Hebrew Scriptures the part of the young boy telling the truth is taken by the figure of the prophet who speaks God's truth, welcome or unwelcome. Jeremiah has been doing that in our First Reading and he is thrown into a muddy pit for his pains. Even when everything was being destroyed around them people did not want to hear the truth. All they wanted were vapid, meaningless words of comfort and complacency.

Jesus is of course portrayed as **the** Prophet by St. Luke in his Gospel. He speaks God's message without fear or favour. He tells it as it is. He is uncompromising in his message of peace and reconciliation. He will have no truck with those who would foment war and urge destruction of others because they belong to different religious or ethnic groups, or just because their faces do not fit. In the words of that Second Reading from Hebrews, Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of the faith. He has already trod the road we now take, going ahead of us, accompanying us at each step. But we need to be in no doubt that his message is one that challenges us out of complacency and out of indifference.

It is a passionate message and Jesus is passionate about that message – so much so that he goes literally to his own passion and death to make the message a reality to which we are all called. It is ultimately a comforting message, but uncomfortable in some of its effects.

20TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2013

Whistle-blowers have been getting a great deal of attention in the media in recent times. Ranging from airline pilots - Ryanair warning about safety compromises, to the Wiki-Leaks from a soldier in the U.S. army, to a former analyst with the National Security Agency warning about illegal tracking of emails seeking asylum in Russia, to people working in the NHS warning about dangerous levels of manpower in some hospital wards - Whistle-blowers are very much news these days.

In all of these cases there is a dilemma between the expected loyalty of members or employees to organisations for whom they work. An expectation of not divulging secrets, but on the other hand if what

is happening is either or both illegal and downright dangerous, something has to be done about it, and if the organisation concerned won't do anything, whistle-blowing might be the only alternative.

Doing something wrong with the excuse that I was only following orders has always been **morally** wrong, and since 1945 it has been wrong in International Law as well.

What, you might well ask, has all this got to do with our Readings today? Well both whistle-blowers and prophets share one or two things in common. The prophet, of course, is much more than simply a whistle-blower about some wrong-doings, he/she is someone who without fear or favour is called upon to proclaim God's truth, whatever opposition they might face.

Take Jeramiah, in our First Reading for example, his opponents try to put him to death, not so much because what he was saying was wrong (it was actually right) but it was 'disheartening' people. Rather than face the truth they just wanted to feel good and were prepared to go to extreme lengths to silence the awkward, inconvenient prophet.

Jesus will face a similar fate as an awkward and inconvenient prophet who won't be silent. Now you may well ask, *"Well, that's fine. He has a message to give, but isn't that message about Peace. How does this Gospel about bringing division in families fit in with the message of Peace?"*

Firstly, it is quite correct that the fundamental message of Jesus **is** about peace. Now at the beginning of his Gospel, St. Luke tells us of how on the night that Jesus was born in Bethlehem the angels announced to the shepherds, *"Glory to God in the highest and peace to people on earth."* In some of the Resurrection appearances Jesus' greeting is, *"Peace be with you."*

So, peace is part and parcel of Jesus' message from beginning to end, but the peace that Jesus offers **is** not merely an absence of open warfare or violence, it is not turning a blind eye to things that are wrong and papering over the cracks. It is much more fundamental than this. It is being in harmony with God, with ourselves, between ourselves and with the whole of creation. For that to happen some disturbing challenges may have to be faced – even including division among families and loved ones. Denial and avoidance do not promote a message of Peace. Problems need to be owned up to and faced, and with God's help and grace we **can** do this.

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Is. 36:18-21, Heb. 12:5-7, 11-13, Lk. 13:22-30

21st SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2007

If it is not too much of a contradiction I think that our readings today are inviting us to see and to think wide, and to act narrow. Our vision of who is invited and included in God's Kingdom is to be as wide as possible, but our response to living the values of that Kingdom is to be narrow.

Our First Reading comes from the final chapters of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, and it has a bombshell in it for the people of Israel. For a long time the People of Israel had looked upon themselves exclusively as God's Chosen Race. Merely being ethnically Jewish was guarantee of God's favour. There had always been tension over the need to act in accordance with the Law laid down in their covenant with God, but there was a sense of exclusivity when it came to salvation – only the Jews were the Chosen People of God. Not any more, says God through his prophet Isaiah, *"I am going to gather the nations of every language."* The even bigger bombshell comes in the last sentence. From these foreigners – infidels, pagans, goyim, *"Some of them I will make priests and Levites."* The idea of such people being leaders was

absolutely unthinkable before, but not now. They are to look wide and act narrow, according to the Covenant.

Jesus is giving the same message to the Jewish people of his own time. The great patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the prophets will enter God's Kingdom, together with people from East and West, North and South, but those who presume they are entitled to be there simply because they belong to the right ethnic or religious group may well find themselves outside. Those words could equally be applied to ourselves today. There are some people who assume that simply being Catholic, or Christian is enough. Sadly, as we know there are some people who even think that **only** Catholics or Christians, or all Christians except Catholics, are going to be saved. We find similar attitudes in other faiths as well.

Recently in the Press there have been a number of stories about conversions. One man has gone into hiding with his family in Egypt having converted from Islam to Coptic Christianity for fear of his life. On the radio during the week a distinguished academic from Cairo University asserted that the Koran did not object to converts to other faiths, but that is scant solace for the man in fear of his life from extremists who do not hold to the niceties of the Islamic faith as outlined by the Professor. We also heard this week of a father in Billingham, a Sikh who was talking about having his daughter christened so that she could go to the local Catholic school. The story was a deal more complex than outlined on the TV and in the newspapers but on the one hand he talked about us all being the same, and on the other about having his daughter baptised to get higher up the Admissions criteria. Conversion to any faith is much more serious than that. Although for a long time we were rather narrow in our understanding of who is to be saved, for some time now, while we profess our belief in the fact that Jesus' Death and Resurrection is essential for the salvation of human kind, who is included in that salvation is up to God to decide, not for the church to decree. We are invited to look wide.

In ancient towns and cities walls were a great form of defence – as was a narrow gate through those walls where only one person at a time could pass through, without any baggage containing weaponry, or on animals that could cause further havoc in the city... *“Enter by the narrow gate”*, is a call to be ourselves, without any great baggage, without hidden extra weapons, or others to accompany us in an army. Be ourselves, follow Jesus' teaching and let God worry about the intricacies of who will be saved. Look wide and act narrow.

21st SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2010

Some people choose to go on a diet in preparation for a holiday either to fit into their summer clothes or else to look good on the beach. Others need to go on a diet as a result of a good holiday. It does not require more than a cursory glance to realise that I am very firmly in the latter group.

Facing a diet, however, poses some bewildering options: low fat, low carb, high protein – this combination of foods, that combination of foods.

Two things, however, are givens:

Starvation is not a good option and secondly, whatever system of diet you choose, healthy eating leading to a healthy life-style is the obvious goal.

We can easily transfer these ideas from physical aspects of life to the spiritual and to connect this with the picture of discipleship Jesus has been building up over the last few weeks in our extracts from St. Luke's account of his Public Ministry.

As with food diets we can be presented with a bewildering array of options for the spiritual life – reflecting on the Gospels, contemplative prayer, reaching out to others in need, prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, the Rosary and so on. How to get started? Which to choose? In fact, it doesn't much matter where you start. One contemporary spiritual writer has likened the various, true Christian spiritualities to ten-pin bowls all lined up. A different spirituality will order the pins differently from another but the labels on the pins will be exactly the same in each case. Overall the effect is the same and here the two givers of physical diets apply:

Firstly, starvation is not an option. The human body can exist (exist but not function very well) for quite some time without food – as can the soul exist, but not function very well. A starvation diet in the spiritual sense is taking no nourishment (prayer, reflection, Mass and so on) at all – or even just once a week, or once in a while – nourishment taken that way is not easily absorbed.

The other giver is the goal of healthy spirituality as a part of a healthy life-style. **Regular nourishment** in different forms helping to promote health and strength, and this is what Jesus has been advocating in the Gospels for the last few Sundays.

Notice how in today's extract Jesus does not give a direct answer to the abstract question put by the anonymous person, *"Sir, will there be only a few saved?"* a nice, safe, arms' length question to ask. But Jesus gives a provocative, personal answer, *"Try **your** best to enter through the narrow door, because I tell you, many will try to enter and not succeed."* And he goes on to talk about people who are resting on their laurels, basking in previous achievements. He did the same a few weeks' ago with the farmer who was ready to ignore present needs and simply build bigger barns, and the servants who lounge around while their master is away, only for him to return unexpectedly.

Now it the time to live a full, healthy spiritual life – **now** is the time to diet.

21st SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2013

Apparently, according to a Press report this morning, *"By 2017, an amount of data equivalent to all the films every produced will be transmitted over the internet in a 3-minute period"* – and every 3 minutes.

Now, I have no idea what that means, but I still find it scary. In fact, the whole piece was about potential data meltdown for large multi-national companies, even governments, who are over-reliant on computer back-up for all their systems. It sounds like a piece of Science Fiction, but it is real – and part of a feeling that is around that we have lost, or are losing, control of our lives.

Loss of control is a scary thought not only on a global scale, but also on a very much smaller, personal level. At the moment with my impending move, everything is out-of-kilter. I don't seem to be able to sit still to pray even for a minute without thoughts of what is about to happen, what might or might not happen and so on. This is an experience I think all of us go through at times of change in our lives. The death of a loved one, or finding out that we are poorly have the same, even more devastating effects on our ability to concentrate, on our ability to pray. Problems in a relationship, losing a job and many other things besides, have similar effects. The only thing to do is to be gentle with yourself and trust that all of this will pass, and in the end God always works things out for the good – a real act of trust/of faith.

I think something like this was going on for the people too when our Second Reading was originally addressed – a Christian community which consisted on converts from Judaism – the Hebrews. It seems that, at first, things had gone well for them in their conversion to Christ, but lately problems had crept in and they were wondering if, in some way, God was punishing them. So the writer tries to reassure them: -

They are called sons and daughters by God. He is their Father and perhaps like all parents, he is disciplining his children out of love (even though it doesn't much feel like it at times), and the stance he is seeking is peace and goodness.

Sometimes this simple acceptance – this act of trust is all we have to hold on to and to be reassured that we will be strong again.

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ecclus, 3:17-20, 28-29, Heb. 12:18-19, 22-24, Lk. 14:1, 7-14

22nd SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2007

I think that I have mentioned before that I become suspicious when I see that those who chose the readings in our Lectionary miss out verses in the readings. Take for example today's Gospel. We move straight from verse 1 to verse 7 in our extract. What has been missed out, I wonder? What has been missed out is the fact that there was a man with dropsy invited to the meal as well. He is a plant the other guests are just waiting to see if Jesus will cure him on the Sabbath, or not. Of course Jesus does cure him but before he does so he challenges the onlookers, *"Is it permitted to heal on the Sabbath or not?"* There is no reply. After the cure Jesus asks them again whether or not they would go to the aid of a child or a donkey in distress on a Sabbath, and once again the cowards that they are, remain silent. Now Jesus challenges them further with the extract we have just heard where they have obviously been trying to outdo each other to get the most important seats at the dinner. Finally, he goes as far as to suggest that his host should be inviting others, people who in the eyes of the rest of the world are nobodies to dinner, instead of these guests.

The Pharisees are suffering from very restricted vision. They meet and dine only with their own. They only talk with their own, and they are only concerned with their own agenda – keeping individual rules like Sabbath observance and missing the bigger picture. Jesus is trying to get them to see that bigger picture – the whole rather than little bits of it. We too can have rather restricted vision at times, seeing only our little patch and losing sight of the bigger picture.

That bigger picture is the subject of the expansive vision given us by the Second Reading, *"What you have come to is nothing known to the senses – Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem."* This is the vision of the Kingdom of Heaven of which we are all citizens – equally members of the huge crowd of people led by Jesus to the Father. This bigger picture – the communion of Saints – is what we are about, and part of, each time we gather to celebrate Mass.

That print by the baptismal font of John the Baptist baptising Jesus is taken from a tapestry that is actually about 40 feet high in the cathedral at Los Angeles. That tapestry is on the back wall of the cathedral above the baptistery. All down the side walls of the cathedral are huge tapestries 30 to 40 feet high in the same earth colours with about a hundred saints depicted on them all facing and walking towards the sanctuary where the Eucharist is celebrated. The saints are from all ages and include people from all the ethnic groups that have come to live in Los Angeles. There are apostles, early Christian martyrs, saints from Europe (St. Bede is there, as is John Fisher and Thomas More), from Africa, Latin America and the Far East. There are a couple of modern saints – John XXIII and Mother Teresa. There are also four or five people who are unnamed, in modern dress – a man in a business suit, a woman in modern dress, a teenager wearing jeans and trainers, all walking towards the table of the Eucharist – all walking towards Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.

It is a striking and magnificent pictorial representation of the big picture. This is who we are and what we are about – not nit-picking over breaking Sabbath regulations, not just concerned with our own agendas, and only interested in our own small little clique of friends and acquaintances – like-minded people with whom we feel comfortable. We are part, rather, of a huge enterprise that consists of all kinds of people. Altogether, all citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, members of God’s family.

22nd SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2010

A few years ago an English Jesuit priest, Fr. Nick King produced a very lively translation of the New Testament. He gives each section of a Gospel or a letter his own quirky title. The title he gives for this particular section of St. Luke’s Gospel is, “*A Fifth Disastrous Dinner Party*”! You would think by now that word would have gotten around about how Jesus was a very blunt and awkward dinner guest- but the invitations keep on coming.

This particular disastrous meal has four elements to it, of which we only hear two today. Firstly, after noting that the Pharisees were watching him closely, we are told that this meal took place on a Sabbath and he challenges the Pharisees about doing good on the Sabbath and cures a sick man in front of them. Then we have the section we have just heard – embarrassing the same Pharisees from vying with each for taking the best seats at the table.

Then, finally, he tells them about a Wedding Feast to which a \king invites people, but they turn the invitation down with some pretty lame excuses and other guests are then invited and take their place. Game, set and match! Both his host and all his fellow guests are thoroughly got at, and embarrassed – a total train wreck!

Behind much of the thinking of the Pharisees was a sense of superiority and even of ownership. They knew the Law better than anyone else, they owned it and used it. In response – especially in these middle stories that we have in today’s Gospel about not taking the seats of honour and inviting outcasts, not just like-minded people, Jesus is reminding his fellow guests that everything we have and are in life is Gift. We are **invited** in life, not hosts. In reality we actually own nothing by right – from the most powerful in life to the poorest – and we do well to remember that, says Jesus.

All this goes very much against the grain in a society in which people are pushing more and more for their rights, but not necessarily accepting the responsibilities that go with these rights. (Demanding free speech for example in print, on the Internet but then ignoring the hurt and harm that can be done to others by irresponsible entries in blogs, on things like Facebook and so on, where other people’s rights can easily be trampled on and their lives ruined.) A society in which competition seems to be valued over co-operation - more and more outrageous contests on TV, in league tables for schools and hospitals, and so on.

Jesus calls us to a very different, fundamental attitude to life – one that is characterised by gratitude and self-giving. It is a theme which has been taken up by spiritual writers down through the ages, including St. Ignatius Loyola who encourages people following his Spiritual Exercises (his ideas for living the Gospel in the midst of daily life) to say an offering prayer each day – a prayer which expresses the correct attitude to life,

“Take, Lord, and receive, all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my entire will.

All I have and possess you have given it all to me, Lord.

To you Lord I return it. Dispose of it wholly according to your will.

Give me only your love and your grace, for this is sufficient for me.”

We are invitees in this life and everything we have is gift.

22nd SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2013

As soon as we hear those opening words of the Gospel, *“On a Sabbath day Jesus had gone for a meal to the house of one of the leading Pharisees...”* we can be sure that all will **not** go smoothly, and sure enough it doesn't. In fact Fr. Nick King, an English Jesuit priest who has done a modern translation of the Gospels uses headings like, *“The First Disastrous Meal”* to introduce these incidents.

Jesus never holds back from confronting the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. They set themselves up as the religious elite, members of the higher echelons of the hierarchy in Judaism, but in Jesus' eyes they usually fail to give good example, to actually **live out** their faith in how they behave.

So they **talk** about humility, but then they assume the places of honour at the top table at a wedding feast. They **talk** about welcoming the poor, the stranger, but actually only ever invite the rich, the influential, their friends and relations to dine with them.

In both cases Jesus counsels the very opposite: - going to the lowest placed at a banquet, inviting those who have no influence, who are outcasts in the eyes of the Law – this is who is to be invited.

These are very stark words not just for the Pharisees, but for ourselves – Jesus' current crop of disciples – and it is a particularly timely warning to a priest who is beginning a new chapter of his ministry in new parishes. From time to time we can become rather too comfortable and complacent in our journey of discipleship and timely reminders of what we should be about are welcome jolts – like pebbles that get between the soles of your feet and the sole of your sandals.

I suppose that when the Bishop asked me to take on a new task – directing the formation and training of the Permanent Deacons in our Diocese – and as a consequence to move to new parishes, this was a timely reminder just in case I was getting too comfortable and complacent in Washington. (I didn't **think** I was but you never know.)

At any rate, here we are, and I am delighted to be here among you. The words not just of our Gospel, but of all three Readings today have reminders about what discipleship is about, and how we should go about it.

According to our Second Reading it is about nothing other than meeting God Himself. As for how to go about this meeting and leading other to it, our First Reading is equally very much to the point: -

*“My son, be gentle in carrying out your business...
The heart of a sensible person will reflect on parables, an attentive ear
is the sage's dream.”*

The agenda is set, and today we begin this collaboration together in prayer at the great meeting with God in our Eucharist. Let's enjoy the journey!

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wis. 9:13-18, Philemon 9-10, 12-17, Lk. 14: 25-33.

23rd SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2010

I may have missed something during the General Election Campaign a few months ago but although there were some warnings from politicians about difficult times to come, no-one addressing a rally talked about thousands of job cuts, lower wages, higher taxes, people losing their homes and so on. If any politician had done that any crowd would have melted away pretty rapidly.

Suppose, however, instead of a politician speaking to potential voters, we are listening to the leader of an expedition talking to the people accompanying him on the adventure that is about to begin. Dire warnings of dangerous times ahead, uncertainty and even the fact that some may not make it back become stirring words rallying companions for what is to come.

Seen in this way Jesus' words in today's Gospel are not those of a politician, but more of a leader of an expedition – which is precisely why we keep using the idea of a Journey of Faith – an adventure which can at times be pretty hairy as we go through life. What Jesus is doing, admittedly in fairly strong language, but language that is likely to grab people's attention, is both to warn people and to rally them to the task in hand.

Discipleship, following Jesus, is not a walk in the park. It is not something for the couch potato, the arm-chair theorist. It is about engagement, involvement. It is risky and demands an attitude of what is called detachment – the ultimate ability to let go of possessions, of people dear to us, and even of life itself in the end.

Down through the ages some Christians have taken Jesus' words quite literally and embraced discipleship in a way that meant giving up family and possessions to live in poverty. **Most** Christians have not responded in way. Most **have** loved ones, family, houses, cars, go on holidays, enjoy an evening out and so on – and that's fine. The disciple needs to know, however, what is of ultimate importance, of ultimate value in life.

The mention of the building of the tower and the king taking an army to battle are interesting here. There **was one** huge, on-going building project going on at the time: - the building or re-building of the Temple begun by Herod the Great. The project had begun over 40 years previously and was still not complete because they kept running out of money for the work. What is of ultimate importance the glorious **building** that is the Temple that would be destroyed before too long, or the glory of **God** that the building is meant to point to, and is the only reason ultimately for its importance?

Again the only battle likely to be engaged in by anyone listening that day to Jesus was with the Roman Army who were occupying the country. The Parable refers to a 2-to-1 advantage of the other king – try to rise up against the Roman Army and 2-to-1 would have been very good odds indeed. What is ultimately important? Is a peace deal possible in which you can still be true to your real selves and your faith? These are the questions Jesus is raising in that Gospel.

The Journey of Faith is an adventure, a challenge, and the disciple needs to have an attitude of detachment – to be able to let go of things, possessions that are not ultimately important.

23rd SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2013

Strong stuff from Jesus in that Gospel passage. It reminds us of two sides of St. Luke's account of Jesus' Public Ministry. On the one hand St. Luke portrays a very compassionate and forgiving Jesus in Parables like the Good Samaritan, and the Prodigal Son, and Jesus forgiving the Repentant Thief as he is dying on the Cross. The other side of the picture however, is that the response demanded by Jesus is absolute – **everything** is to be given up, as we hear today. How to understand this?

If people don't have any memories of moving house, I suspect everyone has been through the process of decorating a room, or having it done out. Everything has to be shifted into another place and then moved back again. In the process some things get mislaid and others keep popping up in unexpected places for weeks after the move.

A few days ago I came across a book lying on top of a chest of drawers. I hadn't placed it there, it must have been left aside when emptying one of my removal boxes. It is a book of poetry by the American Poet, Mary Oliver. Inside the book was a card acting like a Bookmark. The card comes from one of the saddest events of my time in the parishes at Washington. A baby boy, Oliver, was born and it was immediately obvious that he was not going to survive. In fact he struggled on for six whole weeks before finally dying. As you can imagine, the funeral a few days later was a very tearful affair. What can a priest say at a service like that in trying to offer some comfort? I cannot remember anything that I said, but I do remember, as part of the Service, reading out the poem by Mary Oliver that was still marked by the memorial card.

The poem is called "*Swans*" and it recounts the poet out for a walk by the sea-shore observing a magnificent flock of swans flying overhead and then out of sight over the dunes. The sight was so beautiful that she wanted to capture it forever.

*How could I help but wish
that one of them might drop
a white feather
that I should have
something in my hand
to tell me they were real?*

*Of course this was foolish.
What we love shapely and pure,
is not to be held,
but to be believed in.
And then they vanished into
the unreachable distance.*

I think that there is something like this going on behind today's Gospel. However much we rightly love and cherish people, even possession, at some point we will have to give them up. Spiritual writers talk about 'Letting Go'. They talk about Detachment, as something we need to realise and to practise in our lives.

The word disciple also means '**apprentice**'. In this life we are apprentices of Jesus the Master, and his way of life. Learning from him, just as he had to let go of even life itself on the Cross, so too we will have to let go of everything ultimately – and we need to practise that in small ways regularly. The reward is nothing less than the new life of the Resurrection, part of which we can experience even now.

***What we love shapely and pure,
is not to be held,
but to be believed in.***

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ex. 32:7-11, 13-14, 1 Tim. 1:12-17, Lk. 15:1-32.

24th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2013

I have chosen to go with the short Gospel today not because I want to ignore that great parable of the Prodigal Son – far from it. It is a wonderful story full of insights into the way God deals with us, and how we respond to that God. It is something we can come back to again and again and find fresh insights at each encounter. The reason for the short Gospel is two-fold: -

Firstly you can have too much of a good thing to digest. We rightly refer to our Eucharist as a meal where we are fed both by the Word of God and by Holy Communion – and sometimes, especially when we are offered three parables in one go we have too much of a first course.

The second reason is that these two parables give the core idea, the core lesson of all three parables that we can easily miss if we look only at the Prodigal Son. With the Prodigal Son we tend to hone in on either the Younger Son's return, or the reaction of the older son. We can easily overlook the critical role of the Father – who clearly is the God-figure in the story – but it is clear from these first two parables that, first and foremost, they tell us about a God who goes out of the way to bring things together, to find the lost, to accept the returning Prodigal. They are first and foremost about God's initiative not our response.

Of those first two parables we can most easily identify with the Widow and her lost coin. I mentioned last week about one of the traumas of moving house was losing things and finding them in strange places. This week I couldn't find something as mundane as some foot cream. I searched high and low in drawers and cupboards. I checked a few boxes in the garage that I had decided not to empty for the time being. I checked suitcases, in case I hadn't emptied them properly – but no sign of the foot cream. Unlike the Widow, I gave up and ordered some more on the Internet. The next day my eyes hit upon a cupboard in the bathroom I had forgotten about – the very place which is obvious for something like a tube of foot cream and, of course, there it was and had been all the time. I didn't rejoice, like the Widow, I just felt like a complete idiot. But the point is who takes the initiative in the story and in the case of the Parable, the Widow is the God-figure.

Now, on the face of it most, if not all of us here, will probably have no experience of shepherding, but we've all seen film-footage either of hill farms up in Northumberland, or sheep-herding in Palestine on the edge of desert where this story is set. The thing that strikes me about this shepherd leaving 99 behind and going after the 1 stray is that the shepherd is exposing those 99 to real danger. While he is off searching for that one sheep, others might wander off, or predators may strike. He might even return with the one sheep to find only 80 or 90 survivors. And yet the shepherd, the God-figure in this story, takes that risk for the sake of the one.

Our God is one who takes any and all initiatives to try to win back anyone who is lost, anyone who has strayed, and when found they are always welcomed back.

And there is the blueprint for how our Christian communities should behave – looking for the lost and welcoming back.

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Amos 8:4-7, 1 Tim. 2:1-8, Lk. 16:1-13.

25th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2004

It is a while now since I was involved in third-level education in a public, rather than a church, context. But for various reasons I was chairing a meeting during the week in which the subject of checking student essays and assignments cropped up. Apparently nowadays many colleges and universities insist that at the bottom of each piece of work the student signs a declaration that the work is theirs – not copied, or more likely, down-loaded from somewhere else. Universities are spending thousands of pounds developing technology to check that students aren't plagiarizing other work – that they aren't cheating. Such is the level of trust, or rather the growing level of distrust.

All of us will either have experienced directly or else the knock-on effects of growing levels of distrust in society – ever-more sophisticated burglar alarms, CCTV cameras everywhere. Checks and monitoring on teachers, doctors, social workers, priests, anyone working with children and so the list goes on. Of course there needs to be checks, especially where trust has been broken, but it almost looks as if we will soon be spending more money and energy on checking whether a job has been done than on actually providing resources for the job to be done.

Trust – the basic fabric of any relationship – from an individual couple, family, neighbourhood to society as a whole.

One of the key messages of the Prophets of the Old Testament is integrity – a basic value for trust. In the time of Amos, merchants and traders were paying lip-service to religious observance of Sabbaths and festivals, but really just wanting them over so that they could get back to the business of cheating on the customers by using dodgy scales and fixing exchange rates in their favour. No, says the prophets – God isn't interested in this kind of false religion. There should be a match, a continuum in each aspect of our lives – that is how trust is built.

In the Gospel Jesus is addressing his disciples. Jesus' audience, especially in St. Luke's Gospel, keeps flitting between the crowds as a whole, the scribes and the Pharisees, certain individuals at times – but quite often just the disciples – and when it is just to the disciples the words are usually quite uncompromising, *"The man who can be trusted in little things can be trusted in great; the man who is dishonest in little things will be dishonest in great."*

Trust, the basic virtue needed in the disciple. Would that disciples, at all levels of the church since Jesus spoke those words, had taken them on board and lived them – that really would be a powerful example of trust – a powerful witness.

As always the call to trust doesn't come in a vacuum. It began with Jesus, his trust in the Father's will, the Father's promises – fulfilled in his overcoming death in the resurrection. This is the basis of the trust that the disciple is invited to show.

When we come to make our profession of faith we say *"We believe" (I believe)*. In the ancient Latin version the word was Credo, which comes from Cor-Dare – Giving my heart to – trusting in someone (not a thing but a person). In our Creed we place our trust, our heart in God who has been revealed in Jesus' Life, Death and Resurrection (our belief, our trust in not in the Church, it is in God and in the Church insofar as the Church and the people that make up the Church live in God's ways).

This is our basic trust and what we are invited to renew and deepen today.

25th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2007

One way to try to help us understand that rather strange parable is to think of depression. I am not thinking here of clinical depression that is such a scourge for some people and which goes largely unnoticed by the rest of the world and which needs very specialist intervention to combat. I am thinking rather of the kind of depression we all suffer from, from time to time and in varying degrees. When we are depressed we are sapped of energy. Lethargy rules the roost. In the romcom film *When Harry Met Sally* the character played by Bill Crystal says about being depressed at his wife leaving him, *"At least when you are depressed you catch up on your sleep."* When we are depressed there is no direction, no sparkle, no spirit about our life – and it can be contagious. Depression rubs off on people around us.

The Dishonest Steward in the Gospel is anything but depressed. He is completely energised and focused about his situation. He is about to lose his job, his livelihood, and rather than being paralysed by depression, he comes up with an action plan to get out of his predicament. He knows exactly what he has to do, and how to go about it. Now, there are all kinds of ways of viewing how he goes about tackling his problem. One view is that he is being dishonest with his master's goods. Another is that he is merely deducting his own commission from what is owed to his master. One thing is certain and it is that in no way does Jesus prize and approve of dishonesty – that would be directly contradictory to the rest of his teaching. What Jesus prizes in the steward is his ASTUTENESS – the lengths to which he goes to sort out his life.

The message is a clear one in this regard. Jesus is telling his disciples that here is someone who uses his talents and energies to sort out his physical and social life. He makes sure that there will be people to welcome him when he loses his job, and friends to support him. The same kind of talent and energy should, says Jesus be used in the spiritual aspect of life as well. For Jesus the physical and social aspects of life are the *"little things"*, the *"great"* is the spiritual and we need to be astute here just as much as in other aspects of life.

I wonder sometimes whether in our own time many people do not suffer from a kind of depression in the spiritual life – there is no energy, no sparkle, and no spirit. Lethargy is all around. *"Why bother? What's so very important about this in any case?"* As in depression about the state of our relationships, or about our career, about this and about that, we slowly sink into lethargy, into not knowing really what to do or how to go about getting ourselves out of this state. In the end people go so far as to ask, *"Why bother at all?"* And they stop praying, stop coming to church, and drift away. There is, usually, no strongly positive reason for this drift away. It just gradually creeps up and we slip almost unconsciously into the inevitable results of this depressive state.

Remember, please, I am not talking here about clinical depression. That is something altogether more serious than this more common kind that, as I say, we all suffer from at times about some areas of our life. In this kind of depression the way out is to be aware of it, and to push gently, but persistently against what it is that is getting us down. Like the dishonest steward using all his willingness to make sure that he will be looked after when he loses his job, Jesus is inviting us to do the same whenever our spiritual selves are in danger of being lost. We need a plan, a direction. We need to take action lest we lose out on a very precious gift entrusted to us.

25th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2010

Well now, what can we make of that Gospel? Think there were times when Jesus liked to stir things up a bit. Just as people were ready to switch off, *"Oh, there he goes again, banging on about the Sabbath / or about prayer, or whatever."* Suddenly he throws in something totally unexpected, *"Whoa! What did he say? He can't possibly mean what I think he means!"* And there he has the attention of the crowd back again. However, that still leaves us with some very puzzling thoughts to try to understand.

One way into the problem is to look at our First Reading. When after Vatican II our Lectionary – the choice of Scripture Readings for each day, each week, was put together – the people in charge of doing this first chose the Gospel passage for the Sunday and then they chose a First Reading from the Old Testament which they thought shed some light on the message of the Gospel. (Leave aside the Second Reading for now).

So, in our First Reading today we find Amos, the first of the prophets who left behind their writings, written accounts of what they said, is having a go at the hypocrisy of many people of his day. On the Sabbath day and on the first day of the month (New Moon) the people would gather in prayer, and were not allowed to engage in their normal business activity. Amos decries these people who make an outward show of their prayers, but who inwardly can't wait for all this religion to be over so they can get back to earning money – not only to earning money, but doing so dishonestly by tampering with the scales, fiddling the exchange rate, and adulterating the goods they were selling. For Amos faith/religion was something that was supposed to be consistent in every aspect of life – honesty in prayer, honesty in relationships, honesty in business and at work. It is all of a piece.

When we turn to the Gospel now we see Jesus praising the consistency of the dishonest steward – he cheats in every aspect of his life in order to gain more for himself. He is consistent – consistently wrong. What Jesus then goes on to say is that the disciple who opts for the kingdom – who says Yes to following him – needs to be just as consistent and single-minded across every aspect of life. It is no good appearing in church to say prayers from time to time and then be someone completely different at home, at work, with friends. The call is to be consistent, to be the same and act the same in whatever context we find ourselves. If we are guided by the Gospels in our prayer, so too should we be guided in our relationships in the family, with friends and at work. We look to be whole, we look to integrity.

Of course, we are as the saying goes, "*A work in progress*". We are on a journey to complete wholeness, to integrity and we fail at times in our relationships in the family, with friends, at work. God always offers the forgiveness we need and the support to move on on our journey but the more we practise this consistency in all that we are and do, the better we get at it.

25th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2013

On the face of it, it seems that Jesus is considering breaking the Commandment "*Thou shalt not steal*", but can this really be the case?

I'm sure that all of us have been in a situation where we are talking with someone else, apparently only to this person or to a group, when we become aware of people listening in. When that happens it is a neat trick to keep on talking to the people in front of you, but actually saying things you want heard by those who are eavesdropping? You have a message to get across to them and, without addressing them directly, you can do this very effectively as they are listening in.

This is what is happening here. Although we are told that Jesus is saying things to his disciples, it becomes clear that the Pharisees are eavesdropping. In the verse following this passage St Luke tells us, "*The Pharisees who loved money, heard all this and jeered at him.*" Now things begin to look a bit clearer. The disciples are not the wealthy people Jesus is addressing but the Pharisees and their wealthy supporters.

In Galilee in Jesus' time most people lived in grinding poverty, barely subsisting on poor pieces of land or else hiring themselves out each day as labourers to earn a single denarius to put food on the table for their family. The system in operation allowed for a number of fabulously wealthy landowners who hired

out their lands to tenant farmers, who had to give back to the wealthy landowner a huge percentage of the crops, which would be sold to the Romans. Some of these landowners were pagans, but some were Jews who exploited their fellow Jews and whom the Pharisees loved to cultivate in order to share in their wealth.

These landowners lived in huge villas in a city like Sephoris, near Jesus' home town of Nazareth. They had servants and slaves. They employed stewards to look after their affairs. They would not demean themselves to such grubby work as dealing with the tenant farmers. These stewards made their living by raking off a percentage of what was due to their master. This was normal, accepted practice. The problem with the steward in the parable is that he was raking off too much and his master is to sack him. Rather than end up completely destitute he gets on the side of some of the tenant farmers whom he hopes will employ him once he is sacked.

It is his craftiness, his astuteness which Jesus is holding up as an example of how all disciples are called to be equally dedicated and careful in our way of following Jesus' teaching in our lives.

Jesus ends the story by giving a further side-swipe to the eavesdropping Pharisees and their wealthy supporters: - wealth is all well and good and it can be used for good and proper purposes, but ultimately it will fail. You cannot buy everything. Some things are beyond money and material things and it is this that the wise disciple realises and tries to pursue as much as possible.