

Trinity Sunday

June 11

GOSPEL

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Jesus said to Nicodemus,

'God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life.

For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world may be saved.

No-one who believes in him will be condemned; but whoever refuses to believe is condemned already, because he has refused to believe in the name of God's only Son.'

(John 3:16-18)

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DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- From earliest times the Church has pondered the relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Doctrine of the Trinity, most eloquently defined at the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) as three persons in one God, is the result of this.
- Theologians today continue to contemplate the mystery of the Trinity.
- 'The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith and of Christian life. God alone can make it known to us by revealing himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 261).
- St Patrick is reputed to have attempted to explain the mystery of the Trinity as God who is three-in-one by using the shamrock as a symbol. Another commonly used symbol of the Trinity is the triangle.
- The Trinity is sometimes described as the Lover (Father), the Beloved (Son) and the Love between (Spirit).
- Our God is relational. Humans, created in the image and likeness of God, are created to be in relationship with others.

EXPLORING THE WORD

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

Nicodemus, a member of the ruling elite of the Jewish people, wants to believe in Jesus but is afraid to do so publicly so he comes to Jesus at night (Jn 3:2). Darkness and night are often used in John as symbols of an inability to accept the truth of who Jesus is, but still Nicodemus is drawn. He is open to the truth but fears the consequences. One of those consequences is that belief in Jesus as Son of the Father leads to life, while rejecting that truth leads to condemnation.

In John, 'the world' is used as a symbol of unbelief or darkness but Jesus tells Nicodemus that the world is not to be condemned because the light has come into the world. It is now up to individuals to recognise that light and come to belief. Only thus can the world be saved. Jesus is also showing the relationship he has with the Father – that of the only Son.

- Do you empathise with Nicodemus at all? Is there a niggling fear or uncertainty about coming to believe in Jesus and learning more about him?
- Reflect on times when you have found light in the darkness.
- In what ways does Jesus give you a glimpse of God?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- Are there things that make 'belief' hard for you? What lead you to wanting to make this journey to belief? How do you understand 'eternal life'?
- This week, contemplate your own relationships with people. In what ways do our own relationships with others teach us something of the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit?
- John states his purpose in writing his gospel: *'so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name'* (Jn 20:31). John speaks of life on two levels – not just living in the world, but having eternal life with God. This text also makes clear the relationship between the Father and Son. In knowing the Son, one comes to know the Father.
- Recite this Trinitarian prayer often this week:
*Glory be to the Father,
and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit
As it was in the beginning, is now
and ever shall be, world without end.
Amen*

Body & Blood of Christ

June 18

GOSPEL

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Jesus said to the Jews: 'I am the living bread which has come down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world.'

Then the Jews started arguing with one another: 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' they said. Jesus replied:

'I tell you most solemnly, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will not have life in you. Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.'

For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in him.

As I, who am sent by the living Father, myself draw life from the Father, so whoever eats me will draw life from me.

This is the bread come down from heaven; not like the bread our ancestors ate: they are dead, but anyone who eats this bread will live forever.

(John 6:51-52)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Gathering together to break bread and share the cup is the most ancient practice of the Church. Paul wrote a description of 'The Lord's Supper' in 1 Corinthians 11:23 in about the year 56.
- This feast, which used to be known as 'Corpus Christi', originated in the Middle Ages as a celebration of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic bread.
- In John's Gospel, the Eucharist is instituted by Christ in the sharing of the loaves and fishes, not at the Last Supper which he had with his friends on the night before he died. For John, the central act of that Last Supper was the washing of the feet of the disciples – an act of service to others.

EXPLORING THE WORD

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ.

This passage comes after Jesus has fed the multitudes with five barley loaves and two fish but in his explanation of this sign, Jesus refers to himself as 'living bread', 'bread from heaven'

which gives eternal life. The ancestors who followed Moses out of Egypt had been sent manna from heaven to nourish them in the dessert, but they had still died. The food which Jesus offers, himself, will lead to eternal life!

As is typical in John's Gospel, this text can be read on two levels. The words spoken by Jesus would have been shocking to those who heard them. For the Jewish people, to eat flesh and drink blood was unthinkable; it was abhorrent. Jewish dietary laws forbade the eating of flesh with blood in it. Blood was the symbol of the life of the creature. At the end of the Flood story in Genesis, God gives to humans all the plants and animals of the Earth as food for them 'with this exception: you must not eat flesh with life, that is to say blood, in it' (Gen 9:4). Now here is Jesus saying that his followers must eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to have life. In the continuation of this gospel passage, many turned away from Jesus at hearing him say this. Jesus then asks the disciples if they too will leave him. Peter answers on their behalf with a wonderful acclamation of faith, 'Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life and we believe; we know that you are the Holy One of God.'

The giving of Jesus' flesh and blood for the life of the world is a reference to the salvific nature of his death and the inauguration of a new covenant through his sacrifice.

- What does it mean now for us to become 'the body of Christ' in the world?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What do you draw life from? What is it that sustains you on your journey and nourishes your search for faith?
- What significance does eating and drinking have in your life? Is it a pleasure, a chore, an addiction? When do you gather with others to share food and drink? Who are the people you gather with on these occasions? Tell others about a significant meal you have shared. What made it special?
- Each time you gather for a meal this week with family or friends, make a special blessing of the food which you will share. Sustain and nourish others this week.
- Read the story in Luke's Gospel of how the disciples recognised Jesus in the breaking of the bread (Lk 24:13-35). Spend time thinking about your journey towards sharing in this meal. Recite the Acclamation from the Eucharistic Prayer each day:

*When we eat this bread and drink this cup,
we proclaim your death, O Lord,
until you come again.*

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time June 25

GOSPEL

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Jesus instructed the Twelve as follows:

'Do not be afraid. For everything that is now covered will be uncovered, and everything now hidden will be made clear. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the daylight; what you hear in whispers, proclaim from the housetops.

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; fear him rather who can destroy both body and soul in hell. Can you not buy two sparrows for a penny? And yet not one falls to the ground without your Father knowing. Why, every hair on your head has been counted. So there is no need to be afraid; you are worth more than hundreds of sparrows.

So if anyone declares himself for me in the presence of men, I will declare myself for him in the presence of my Father in heaven. But the one who disowns me in the presence of men, I will disown in the presence of my Father in heaven.'

(Matthew 10:26-33)

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DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Sparrows were sold in market places as inexpensive food for the poor and were a symbol of something of minimal value.
- Members of the Church who have died rather than renounce their faith are called martyrs. The word 'martyr' literally means 'witness'. Throughout history many have given their lives for the faith and in our own time people are still martyred because they will not swerve from their commitment to Christ.
- By the time Matthew wrote his Gospel the Church was already undergoing persecution in some areas and Christian faith was being sorely tested.

EXPLORING THE WORD

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

The people of Matthew's community were being persecuted for their faith. They were mostly Jews who had come to accept Jesus as the awaited Messiah. But not all Jews accepted this and they did not want the Christians to worship with them in the synagogues, so the Jewish Christians were expelled. Matthew's Christian community was feeling very vulnerable and trying to find a new way of living their faith outside the traditional Jewish practices. In this passage, Matthew comforts them and assures them that they need not fear physical harm for God knows every hair of their heads and will protect them. Those who are strong in their faith and refuse to recant will be honoured before God. If God extends his care to the sparrows, the cheapest life available, how much more will he extend his care to his faithful people?

- Jesus wants to form a community in which each individual is valued. In what ways do you experience God's individual care and concern?
- How does your parish reflect God's individual care and concern?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What makes you afraid as you move towards committing yourself to Christ and his Church? Do you avoid speaking about your journey to faith in case others may think you are 'odd'?
- Think of times when you may be tempted to deny Christ: by actions which do not reflect what you really believe; by silence when something really needs to be said; by failing to challenge an injustice. Try this week to publicly witness to your faith, even in simple ways like saying grace before meals.
- *'Do not be afraid; I am with you.'* Repeat this phrase often this week.

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time July 2

GOSPEL

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Jesus instructed the Twelve as follows:

'Anyone who prefers father or mother to me is not worthy of me. Anyone who prefers son or daughter to me is not worthy of me. Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow in my footsteps is not worthy of me. Anyone who finds his life will lose it; anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it. Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me; and those who welcome me, welcome the one who sent me. Anyone who welcomes a prophet because he is a prophet will have a prophet's reward; and anyone who welcomes a holy man will have a holy man's reward. If anyone gives so much as a cup of water to one of these little ones because he is a disciple, then I tell you solemnly, he will most certainly not lose his reward.'

(Matthew 10:37-42)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- At the time Matthew's Gospel was being written, Jewish families were being literally split by those who were making the decision to move away from traditional Jewish beliefs and follow Christ.
- Even though family relationships are vitally important, 'the first vocation of a Christian is to follow Christ'.

EXPLORING THE WORD

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

To follow Jesus means putting other important relationships second. It means taking up the cross and perhaps facing the same fate that Jesus met – persecution, suffering, death – but remaining faithful leads to eternal life. In ancient times, a person's agent was seen to be the person themselves and here, Jesus is giving great dignity to the apostolate of following him by saying it derives from the Father himself through Jesus.

In the Scriptures, a prophet is a person who speaks for God. To be a prophet, one must have a very clear understanding of what God wants and the task is to transmit that message to the people. There are many instances of the people rejecting the message of the prophets. Some scholars

translate 'holy man' as 'just man' or someone who does the will of God. To recognise and welcome the truth is to be a disciple. The cost of discipleship may be high but the rewards are great.

- Tell stories of Biblical characters and what cost was involved for them in responding to God's will, e.g. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jonah, Mary the mother of Jesus.
- Discuss modern figures who have paid a high price for their faith, e.g. Oscar Romero, Maximillian Kolbe, etc.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- How welcome do you feel in this journey? Have some people reacted badly to your decision to approach the Catholic Church? What does it mean to lose your life so you can find it?
- Share with each other stories about a time when you were made to feel welcome or you offered hospitality to someone else.
- In this text, Jesus praises those who offer hospitality, especially to those who proclaim the gospel. Even the simple symbolic gesture of 'offering a cup of cold water' speaks volumes about what a person believes in or holds as important. What are the small gestures we make each day which speak to others of the sort of person we are? Jesus also warns that to be a disciple can come at a cost. Taking up the cross and following in Jesus' footsteps may lead to places we would rather not go. Have you experienced your journey as a cross?
- This week make a special effort to be open and welcoming to someone you would not normally associate with. Offer hospitality to someone.
- Repeat this often as a mantra this week:
*Lord, as you welcome me,
may I be open to welcome others.*

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time July 9

GOSPEL

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Jesus exclaimed, 'I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children. Yes, Father, for that is what it pleased you to do. Everything has been entrusted to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, just as no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light.'

(Matthew 11:25-30)

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DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The prayer of blessing which Jesus makes in this gospel is known as a *berakah*. It is the basis of Jewish prayers of praise and thanksgiving. In our liturgy we use the *berakah* form just before the Eucharistic Prayer: *Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread and wine to offer ...to which we all respond: Blessed be God forever.*
- A yoke is a piece of agricultural equipment that went around the neck of an ox. It is attached to a plough or a cart that the ox drags along. This method is still used in many parts of the world. The yoke takes the burden of the load which the oxen must pull. It is heavy work.

EXPLORING THE WORD

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

Matthew's community must have been deeply troubled by the fact that the 'learned and clever' religious leaders of the day did not accept the message of Jesus. Surely they, of all people, should have been in a position to recognise the truth. But in this passage, Matthew explains that it is not from a position of knowledge or power that one recognises the truth; rather it is from an attitude of openness and simplicity.

Jesus' intimate address of *Abba (Father)* is used five times. This intimate relationship is characterised by God's entrusting all things to the Son, and the Son in turn revealing them to those who have faith. Jesus is the perfect teacher, describing himself as gentle and humble in heart.

There is an interesting contrast here between the burden of following the restrictive laws of the Pharisees and the 'easy burden' of faith in Christ. The rules and laws of the Pharisees often added to the burden experienced by people of the day, while Jesus tried to lift the burden from people.

- In your journey to faith are there aspects which you find 'burdensome'? What are they? This could be an opportunity to discuss some difficult beliefs of the Church.
- Do you have a sense of having been 'entrusted' with the truth? Discuss this idea. What has been revealed to you so far?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- Can you tell of an occasion when you felt God near? Where do you or have you experienced God's presence? Where do you find your rest? Share your reflections.
- In your everyday life, what causes you to be 'burdened'? What weighs you down? How or who removes burdens from you and lightens your spirit?
- From whom do you learn in your life? What can we learn from Jesus?
- The word *humility* comes from the Latin for 'soil'. Humility is not about being shy or quiet or taking a back-seat; it is about recognising our origins and not becoming so 'learned and clever' that we get too big for our boots. To be like 'mere children' is to have that sense of wonder and awe at things bigger than ourselves. What are the experiences which produce a response of awe in you?
- In your life, within your family or workplace, do you know someone who is burdened and weighed down by cares and concerns? Can you find ways to ease that burden this week?
- Pray the blessing from the first verse of Psalm 144 throughout the week.

I will give you glory, O God, my king.

I will bless your name forever.

*I will bless you day after day
and praise your name forever.*

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time July 16

GOSPEL

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Jesus left the house and sat by the lakeside, but such crowds gathered round him that he got into a boat and sat there. The people all stood on the beach, and he told them many things in parables.

He said, 'Imagine a sower going out to sow. As he sowed, some seeds fell on the edge of the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Others fell on patches of rock where they found little soil and sprang up straight away, because there was no depth of earth; but as soon as the sun came up they were scorched and, not having any roots, they withered away. Others fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Others fell on rich soil and produced their crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Listen, anyone who has ears!'

(Matthew 13:1-9)

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DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- A parable is a simple human story with a profound meaning.
- Parables were a familiar way of teaching in the time of Jesus and some images had set meanings. For example, a vineyard, sons or servants represented Israel, while a master, king or father represented God.
- Chapter 13 of Matthew's Gospel contains numerous parables describing the kingdom of heaven.
- Matthew's Gospel uses the term 'kingdom of heaven' rather than 'kingdom of God' because his audience is largely Jewish converts to Christianity and the Jewish people avoid using the holy name.
- The Sea of Galilee is also known as Lake Gennesaret and as Lake Tiberius. Jesus' base for his preaching ministry in the region was at the town of Capernaum on the northern shores of the lake. Peter had a house in this town.
- Archaeological excavations in Capernaum have revealed a house which was revered from very early times as 'the house of Peter'.

EXPLORING THE WORD

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

This parable would have had a great appeal to the rural population living on the fertile land around the Sea of Galilee. There, the gentle undulating hills are green and verdant. This is a sharp contrast to the desert wilderness of the southern part of the province of Judea around Jerusalem.

In the longer version of today's gospel, Jesus explains the meaning of the parable of the sower. The different soils represent different human responses to hearing the word of God. The message is that, despite some failures, the sower's work ultimately succeeds. Not everyone is open to receiving the word and acting on it but there is encouragement for those who allow the word to take root and bear fruit.

- Discuss some of the initiatives of this parish which have taken root and flourished.
- Have there been initiatives which have encountered obstacles and didn't take root? Why?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- Can you remember a time when the Word of God really spoke to your experience, took root in your heart? What was the experience that it spoke to?
- What are the rocks and thorns in our world which may cause the word of God to choke and wither? In the modern world, what are the things which make it difficult for the word of God to take root and flourish? How can believers 'cultivate their soil' to help the seed of faith grow? Share your reflections with others.
- Jesus uses the image of the seed to help his followers understand something about the word of God. First, it is alive and active and capable of growth and productivity. Second, it requires us to be open to receive it and we must not allow it to be crowded out of our lives by other concerns or stolen away by those indifferent or hostile to Christ. Finally, we must cultivate the soil of our lives so that the seed can take root and bear rich fruits.
- Try to be rich soil this week, not just for the word of God but also for those around you. Listen attentively to your family and work colleagues. Try to discern what God is saying to you in the events of everyday life.
- Say this prayer each day:
*Lord, may the seed of your word fall into deep soil in me.
May it not return to you without yielding its fruit in me.*

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time July 23

GOSPEL

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Jesus put a parable before the crowds, 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. While everybody was asleep his enemy came, sowed darnel all among the wheat, and made off. When the new wheat sprouted and ripened, the darnel appeared as well. The owner's servants went to him and said, 'Sir, was it not good seed that you sowed in your field? If so, where does the darnel come from?'

'Some enemy has done this,' he answered. And the servants said, 'Do you want us to go out and weed it out?' But he said, 'No, because when you weed out the darnel you might pull up the wheat with it. Let both grow until the harvest; and at harvest time I shall say to the reapers: First collect the darnel and tie it in bundles to be burnt, then gather the wheat into my barn.'

(Matthew 13:24-30)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Darnel is an annual grass commonly found in grain fields as a weed. When it first shoots it looks very much like wheat.
- There are echoes in this gospel of the final judgment when the good will be separated from the bad, the sheep from the goats, the weeds from the harvest.
- The Jewish faith has a profound respect for the name of God and the holy name is never pronounced or even written in full. The Gospel of Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels and characteristically always refers to the kingdom of heaven rather than the kingdom of God.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'Gradually I came to realise that the line that separates good from evil passes not between nations, nor between classes of people, nor between political parties – but right through every human heart.' (Alexander Solzhenitsyn)
Do you agree with this estimation of where evil originates? If this is true, how can evil be confronted or challenged? Share your reflections.
- The kingdom of heaven which is proclaimed by Jesus is not explained by him. What Jesus does do is to convey

its meaning through the parables he uses and his life illustrates some of the key characteristics of the kingdom: the overcoming of evil, the triumph of mercy, the welcome extended to all. The kingdom of heaven was established among us through the death and resurrection of Jesus but clearly it has yet to come in its fullness. There is a future dimension to the kingdom as well as a present dimension. In 'The Lord's Prayer' we pray for the kingdom to come. There are also two dimensions in the location of the kingdom. It exists in heaven but we pray for it to come in its fullness on Earth as well. We participate in the building of the kingdom each time we act in harmony with the teaching and example of Jesus.

- We need to accept the imperfections in ourselves and in others to some extent. What do you have to be patient with in yourself? In others? This week, be tolerant of the limitations of others and try to rectify an imperfection in yourself.
- 'Thy kingdom come on Earth as it is in heaven.'
Say the Lord's Prayer slowly each day this week and reflect on ways you can help to build the kingdom.

EXPLORING THE WORD

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

The contrast between the good and bad seed reflects a reality within Matthew's community. This text highlights the difficulty of being a Church called to spread the good news while there are some within its ranks who scandalise others by their bad behaviour or decadent way of life.

This parable counsels patience. The answer to the dilemma is to let both the righteous and the lawless members of the community, grow together until the harvest time and then let God be the judge.

Ultimately, this parable assures its hearers that God will not allow evil to destroy what is good.

In the longer version of this gospel, the short parables of the kingdom compare it to a mustard seed and to the yeast in dough. Both are small and insignificant but both develop almost imperceptibly and once begun, there is no stopping them.

- What small signs of the kingdom already present do we see in our world?
- What signs of the kingdom not yet present do we see in our world?
- What small signs of the kingdom already present do we see in ourselves?
- What signs of the kingdom not yet present do we see in ourselves?

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time July 30

GOSPEL

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Jesus said to the crowds, 'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field which someone has found; he hides it again, goes off happy, sells everything he owns and buys the field.'

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls; when he finds one of great value he goes and sells everything he owns and buys it.

Again the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea that brings in a haul of all kinds. When it is full the fishermen haul it ashore; then, sitting down, they collect the good ones in a basket and throw away those that are no use. This is how it will be at the end of time: the angels will appear and separate the wicked from the just to throw them into the blazing furnace where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth. Have you understood all this?'

They said, 'yes'. And he said to them, 'Well, then, every scribe who becomes a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out from his storeroom things both new and old.'

(Matthew 13:44-52)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- In ancient times people often buried their treasures as they fled from enemies or invaders. Sometimes their owners may return to recover the treasure but often it remained buried for many years. Among priceless discoveries of treasure buried as the owners fled invaders are the Dead Sea Scrolls, hidden from the Roman Army in the late first century.
- A scribe in the ancient world was someone who could read and write and often held government positions. At the time of Jesus, the scribes were influential teachers of the Jewish faith, well versed in Scripture and the Law.
- The householder who brings out things both old and new may be a reference to people like Matthew himself, who, as well as receiving the teachings of Jesus and believing in him, also retain a profound respect for the Law and traditions of Judaism.
- The blazing furnace referred to here is the place of eternal punishment for the wicked known by the Hebrew terms *Sheol* or *Gehenna*. Hell is the English word used to translate these terms.

EXPLORING THE WORD

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

Jesus continues to convey his teaching about the kingdom using the imagery of everyday life. Pearls were highly valued in the Near East and were regarded as a symbol of wisdom – thus the saying 'pearls of wisdom'. In the first two of these parables, the protagonists commit everything they own to acquiring what is beyond price. According to Jesus, the kingdom is worth the sacrifice of everything we value most to gain a place in it.

The parable of the dragnet tells us something more of the kingdom. There will be those who have not recognised its value and are unworthy of the kingdom. However, it is not for people to judge who is worthy and who is not. That belongs to God. Jesus is very concerned that his followers clearly understand his message and he questions them directly: 'Do you understand all this?' There must be no confusion over the meaning of the gospel!

Matthew stresses that believing in Christ does not mean a total rejection of Judaism. Indeed, both the old and the new have value. Jesus did not come to overturn the Law but to fulfil it and those who recognise this truth will honour both the old and the new.

- What are the new understandings you have gained on your journey so far?
- Recall a moment of delight or discovery in your life: falling in love, mastering a skill, coming to understanding. Are these experiences pointers to the kingdom?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What have you given up in order to follow Christ? What are you prepared to give up? How do you understand being a disciple of the kingdom of heaven?
- The image of treasure dominates this text. Jesus sees the search for God as part of the journey of people in all walks of life, because everyone is searching for 'treasure' in their lives. We need to have discerning hearts so that we can recognise what is real treasure and then give our whole lives to it.
- What are the things which are most precious to you? Does this gospel challenge your attitude to them? This week, treasure those things and people who are precious to you in special ways.
- Jesus asks the disciples: 'Have you understood all these things?' Ponder your own understanding of the mystery of faith and how you are coming closer to it. Pray for the strength and understanding you need to continue the journey towards the treasure.

The Transfiguration

August 6

GOSPEL

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Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain where they could be alone.

There in their presence he was transfigured: His face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light. Suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared to them; they were talking with him. Then Peter spoke to Jesus. 'Lord,' he said, 'it is wonderful for us to be here; if you wish I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' He was still speaking when suddenly a bright cloud covered them with shadow and from the cloud there came a voice which said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; he enjoys my favour. Listen to him.' When they heard this, the disciples fell on their faces, overcome with fear. But Jesus came up and touched them. 'Stand up,' he said 'do not be afraid.' And when they raised their eyes they saw no one but only Jesus.

As they came down from the mountain Jesus gave them this order, 'Tell no one about the vision until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.'

(Matthew 17:1-9)

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DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The event of the Transfiguration is traditionally associated with Mt Tabor where a beautiful church with magnificent mosaics commemorates this event.
- The three disciples who witness Jesus' glory will be the same ones who witness his agony in the garden prior to his arrest and crucifixion.
- There is great debate among scholars about the meaning of the term 'Son of Man' and whether Jesus used this title of himself or whether his disciples used it of him after his death. In the Book of Daniel, it is used as a term for God's final agent of salvation at the end times.

EXPLORING THE WORD

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

In the Hebrew Scriptures high mountains were seen as holy places; places where one could encounter God. It was on the summit of Mt Sinai that Moses received the Law from God's own hand (Ex 19); it was on Mt Horeb that Elijah encountered God in the gentle breeze (1 Kings 19:9ff). When Jesus takes the three disciples to the top of the mountain, it should come as no surprise that they encounter the glorified divinity of Christ. In Christ, both the Law, represented by Moses, and the Prophets, represented by Elijah, is fulfilled. This fleeting moment of revelation to the disciples leaves them gasping and speechless. Peter wants to retain the memory of this glimpse of the glorified Christ by commemorating it with three tents but the gesture has a hollow ring when they have the Christ with them as a constant reminder. 'This is my Son, the Beloved; he enjoys my favour. Listen to him.' It is the word of Jesus which will bring life and glorification. This glimpse of who Jesus really is should sustain them and yet the disciples still wonder what the mission and ministry of Jesus means. The true nature of Jesus will only be revealed at his resurrection.

- What deep and fundamental needs brought you to begin this journey you are on? What has been revealed to you so far?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'It is wonderful for us to be here.' Reflect on what this means to you at this point in your journey.
- 'Listen to him.' What is Jesus saying to you?
- Have you ever had a moment of transformation that you feeling dazzled and wonderful? Share your reflections with others.
- Spend time in reflecting this week on the statement of Peter: 'How wonderful it is for us to be here.'
- Use this adaptation of the Collect as your prayer this week. Repeat it often: *O God, grant we pray to your servants that listening to the voice of your beloved Son, we may be worthy of becoming coheirs with him in your Kingdom forever.*

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time August 13

GOSPEL

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Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side while he would send the crowds away. After sending the crowds away he went up into the hills by himself to pray.

When evening came he was there alone, while the boat, by now far out on the lake, was battling with a heavy sea, for there was a head wind.

In the fourth watch of the night he went towards them, walking on the lake, and when the disciples saw him walking on the lake they were terrified. 'It is a ghost' they said and cried out in fear. But at once Jesus called out to them, saying, 'Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid.'

It was Peter who answered. 'Lord', he said, 'if it is you, tell me to come to you across the water.'

'Come,' said Jesus. Then Peter got out of the boat and started walking toward Jesus across the water, but as soon as he felt the force of the wind, he took fright and began to sink.

'Lord! Save me!' he cried. Jesus put out his hand at once and held him.

'Man of little faith,' he said, 'why did you doubt?' And as they got into the boat the wind dropped. The men in the boat bowed down before him and said, 'Truly, you are the Son of God.'

(Matthew 14:22-33)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- For the Hebrew people, the waters of the sea are a symbol of the chaos from which creation sprang. Never having been a seafaring people, they were fearful of the watery deep.
- Even today, storms can blow up on the Sea of Galilee very quickly and make it dangerous for boats out on the lake.
- In art, the Church is often represented as a boat. A boat carries its passengers through threatening waters but is not exempt from the turbulence of storms. The Church can bear us through the storms of life but it does not exempt us from the stresses and struggles.

EXPLORING THE WORD

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

A little noticed phrase in this text adds significantly to the way we understand this story. Jesus told the disciples to cross to the other side of the lake. In doing this they were heading away from the Jewish region and into gentile territory. The boat is a symbol of the Church and as such, we can detect in this text a reflection of the situation of Matthew's community who have been forced out of the synagogue and away from traditional Judaism. More and more, it is gentiles who are coming to belief in Jesus. This is causing fear and concern for some in the community.

Matthew gives a prominent place to Peter whose actions do not make sense except as a combination of impulsive love and faith weakened by doubt. While his full attention is on Jesus, Peter is fine, but as soon as he allows what is going on around him to distract him from Jesus, he begins to sink.

This text offers a parable of the Church besieged and being tossed about. Peter's response is to be bold and step out into the unknown, yet he is vulnerable. The great comfort is in the risen Lord stretching out his hand to restore morale. This manifestation of the power of Christ is greeted by that great acclamation of faith: Truly you are the Son of God.

- Discuss the things which can be a distraction on the journey to faith.
- Are there aspects of the Church or its beliefs which cause participants to doubt? Allow time for questions to arise and fears to be allayed.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What storms have you experienced in your life which have caused fear or confusion? What doubts and fears make you waver in your journey to Christ? How do you experience the calming action of Jesus?
- Describe to others in the group a period in your life when you felt you were 'going under'. What or who was it that kept you afloat?
- Try to calm the fears of others this week in your family or workplace.
- Once again we see Jesus withdrawing alone to pray. The example of Jesus in quiet prayer can be a pointer to us in how to pray. As a Church we pray communally, but quiet reflection is also important. Take time this week to reflect alone. The disciples cry out to Jesus in their distress, 'Lord, save me'. This week, allow yourself to hear Jesus' answer: 'Courage! Do not be afraid.'

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time August 20

GOSPEL

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Jesus left Gennesaret and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Then out came a Canaanite woman from that district and started shouting, 'Sir, Son of David, take pity on me. My daughter is tormented by a devil.'

But he answered her not a word. And his disciples went and pleaded with him. 'Give her what she wants,' they said, 'because she is shouting after us.'

He said in reply, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.'

But the woman had come up and was kneeling at his feet. 'Lord,' she said, 'help me.'

He replied, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the house-dogs.'

She retorted, 'Ah, yes, Sir; but even house-dogs can eat up the scraps that fall from their master's table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, you have great faith. Let your wish be granted.'

And from that moment her daughter was well again.

(Matthew 15:21-28)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The cities of Tyre and Sidon were the leading towns of ancient Phoenicia. Both cities were on the Mediterranean coast of what is now modern Lebanon. The Phoenicians were descendants of the even more ancient Canaanites who populated the area earlier.
- Israel despised the Canaanites. It loathed the Canaanite religion with its pagan gods and fertility cults and found many of their practices abominable.

EXPLORING THE WORD

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

In this gospel we find another example of the common device used by Matthew to denote the movement of Christianity from a Jewish to a gentile setting. Jesus has left the Jewish region around the Sea of Galilee and travelled north-west to the gentile territory of what was ancient Phoenicia in Syria.

Jesus' fame has obviously spread even here, but the focus of the passage is not the cure but the dialogue. The woman knows full well that Jesus is Jewish as she hails him as Son of David. His silence in the face of her plea is explained in the next verse – he did not want to exceed his divine mission which he saw as gathering all Israel into the kingdom. Jesus' response is harsh but the woman is quick to seize on his imagery and twist it to her advantage but with humility. She forces Jesus to confront a truth – God's salvation is available to all. He responds generously with both his praise and his healing power.

- Discuss 'moments of revelation' or learning participants may have had.
- How is inclusion understood and practiced in the Church today?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- Have you ever felt unfairly treated and had to stick up for yourself? Share a story of a time when you felt alien and unwelcome.
- All the readings for this week speak of foreigners who have accepted faith in the one God. The gospel tells of a great learning moment for Jesus. He ignores the pleas of the gentile woman but ultimately, she forces him to recognise that salvation is available to all people who have faith. This would have been a salient message for those in Matthew's community who struggled to come to terms with gentiles entering their community.
- The gospel is universal. It is for all people. Are there ways you can participate in spreading the gospel, even in small ways this week? The best way to do this is by living the gospel. Try to include an outsider.
- This week recite the Psalm and refrain:
O God, let all the nations praise you!
O God, be gracious and bless us
and let your face shed its light upon us.
So will your ways be known upon Earth
and all nations learn your saving help.
O God, let all nations praise you!

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time August 27

GOSPEL

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and Doubleday & Company Inc.

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi he put this question to the disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say he is John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets'.

'But you', he said, 'who do you say I am?' Then Simon Peter spoke up, 'You are the Christ,' he said, 'the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, 'Simon, son of Jonah, you are a happy man! Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. So I now say to you: You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven: whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven.' Then he gave the disciples strict orders not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

(Matthew 16:13-20)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Caesarea Philippi is north of the region of Galilee. It was given to Herod the Great by Augustus Caesar and Herod built a white stone temple there and dedicated it to his patron. After Herod's death it passed into the hands of his son, Philip, who built his capital here – thus the name, Caesarea Philippi.
- The great stone temple built by Herod was at a natural spring which is the source of the Jordan River. The temple was dedicated to the Roman god of nature, Pan. The cave of Pan is housed in a high natural edifice of rock and it was here that Jesus reputedly told Peter, that he, too, would be a rock on which the Church is built – not dedicated to a pagan god but to the one true God.

EXPLORING THE WORD

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

At this point in the gospel, Jesus and his chosen have travelled and lived together for some time. He invites them to explore what they understand of his identity. Even in his question there is explicit hint of his identity, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' The people offer a variety of opinions: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But it is Peter who adds to the title *Son of Man* by recognising Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. This same Peter whose faith faltered when he was buffeted by the wind and waves (see Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time) has now shown that he is open to God and recognises Jesus for who he is. But this is not the end of Peter's story. There are ups and downs in his response, as there are in our own. As long as we remain open to the gift of faith, we are offered forgiveness when we fail to treasure what God has given to us.

- Have you experienced the ups and downs of faith? What sustains you?
- What title would you give to Jesus?
- Are you like the Peter who doubts and falters or the Peter who boldly proclaims his faith?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'Who do you say I am?' If you were to be asked this question by Jesus, how might you respond today?
- In this passage, Jesus speaks of the Church. What are your feelings about the Church at this point in your journey?
- Recall and describe for someone else in the group a time when you were given special authority or responsibility. How did you feel about this special position? How did you carry out the task?
- Keys are a symbol of authority. Jesus says to Peter, 'I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.' Jesus entrusts his authority to Peter, and thus to successive Popes, and to the Church. This authority must always be used with wisdom and compassion and with it comes great responsibility. The crossed keys are part of the emblem of the papacy.
- What are your responsibilities now that you have elected to follow Christ? How will being a disciple of Jesus influence the way you use authority: in your home? In your workplace? In the daily decisions you make? Exercise that responsibility this week.
- *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.* Repeat this often this week.

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sept 3

GOSPEL

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Jesus began to make it clear to his disciples that he was destined to go to Jerusalem and suffer grievously at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, to be put to death and to be raised up on the third day. Then, taking him aside, Peter started to remonstrate with him. 'Heaven preserve you Lord,' he said. 'This must not happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my path, because the way you think is not God's but man's.'

Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it. What, then, will a man gain if he wins the whole world and ruins his life? Or what has a man to offer in exchange for his life?'

For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and, when he does, he will reward each one according to his behaviour.'

(Matthew 16:21-27)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- This text marks the beginning of the fourth major section of Matthew's Gospel which follows Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and death.
- The word 'Satan' originally meant adversary or accuser. Later it came to mean personified evil. Here Jesus uses it figuratively of Peter who does not yet understand the meaning of Jesus' mission.
- The name Peter comes from the Latin word for rock. In last week's gospel, Jesus named Peter the rock on which the Church would be built. Today that rock has become a stumbling block in Jesus' path!

EXPLORING THE WORD

This gospel contains the first of three predictions of his passion and death that Jesus makes along his journey to Jerusalem. Matthew tells the story of that journey across the next four chapters of his gospel.

Peter is highly disturbed by the predictions of Jesus' suffering but is soundly rebuked.

The contrast between this text and the gospel of the previous week is stark! In the immediately prior episode, Peter is praised and rewarded for his sublime affirmation of faith, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'. In this text, Peter's lack of understanding of what that means and the mission Jesus has causes him to be ridiculed as an obstacle to the divine mission.

While we may have some sympathy for Peter in wanting to spare Jesus the pain and suffering he predicts, what is at issue is Peter's failure to see that the cross is part of the plan and that discipleship will also involve the cross.

Taking up the cross, however, will result in great reward and ultimate vindication when the time of judgment comes.

- What cross do you bear?
- How well or otherwise do you cope with this?
- Is the cross and the suffering of Christ an obstacle for you?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What are the obstacles to Christ in your path? Are they of your own making or blocks put in place by circumstances or other people? What crosses do you bear for the sake of Christ?
- Share a story of a cross you have had to bear. Did it change you? In what ways did you become a stronger person? Has there been a time when you chose to face hardship or pain rather than avoid it?
- The cross is the central symbol of the Christian faith. It reminds us immediately of the death of Jesus through which he won eternal life but it also reminds us of our own struggles and sufferings. 'We all have our cross to bear.' St Rose of Lima, a young South American saint of the 17th century, said, 'Apart from the cross there is no ladder to heaven.' What do you think she meant by this?
- Do you know others who are burdened by a cross at the moment? Try to lift a burden from someone this week.
- Recite a verse from this week's Psalm (62:8-9):
*My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God
 For you have been my help;
 In the shadow of your wings I rejoice.
 My soul clings to you;
 your right hand holds me fast.
 My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.*

