

1st Sunday of Advent

Year A

GOSPEL

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Jesus said to his disciples: 'As it was in Noah's day, so will it be when the Son of Man comes. For in those days before the Flood people were eating, drinking, taking wives, taking husbands, right up to the day Noah went into the ark, and they suspected nothing till the Flood came and swept all away. It will be like this when the Son of Man comes. Then of two men in the fields one is taken, one left; of two women at the millstone grinding, one is taken, one left.

'So stay awake, because you do not know the day when your master is coming. You may be quite sure of this, that if the householder had known at what time of the night the burglar would come, he would have stayed awake and would not have allowed anyone to break through the wall of his house. Therefore, you too must stand ready because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.'

(Matthew 24:37-44)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Advent is a four week season of preparation for the coming of Christ at Christmas. The word 'advent' means *coming*. Advent takes up this theme in looking forward to the coming of Christ at Christmas, and especially in looking towards the future coming of Christ at the end times.
- The early church believed that the second coming of Christ—the *Parousia*—was imminent. It could happen at any moment.
- The first Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of the church's liturgical year.
- This is Year A of the liturgical calendar, during which the Lectionary readings come predominantly from the Gospel of Matthew.

EXPLORING THE WORD

Matthew's Gospel is written for a mostly Jewish audience who had converted to Christianity. Because of this Jewish background, Matthew often uses images and incidents from the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament, with which his community is very familiar. For Matthew, Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecies of old, and the Messiah who has long been awaited.

In this text, Jesus twice uses the title 'Son of Man' to describe himself. It is an ambiguous term because it can simply mean a human being but is also used in the Hebrew Scriptures to refer to the one who will be judge and saviour of all.

- Explore how the term 'Son of Man' is an apt one for Jesus to use of himself.
- This text points to the early church's belief that the end times—the second and final coming of Christ—were imminent and that believers should be ready at all times for this unexpected event.
- Explain how this expectation arose and was later modified in the early church. How can we live in expectation today? What does that mean for followers of Christ?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- How do you cope when the unexpected occurs in your life?
- In what ways are you 'alert to life'?
- Exchange some memories of unexpected events in your life that took you completely by surprise. How did you cope? What did you do? You could contrast this by sharing stories of an occasion when you spent a great deal of time and energy in preparing for something that you knew was coming. How did it feel when the long-awaited event finally arrived? Was the preparation useful?
- Be alert and watchful for the needs of others this week, and be ready to respond to those needs. Rejoice in the unexpected.
- One of the prayers of the early church that is linked with this season of waiting and longing is the Aramaic word *Maranatha*, which means 'Come Lord.' Use this prayer as a mantra this week.

2nd Sunday of Advent

Year A

GOSPEL

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In due course John the Baptist appeared; he preached in the wilderness of Judaea and this was his message: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.' This was the man the prophet Isaiah spoke of when he said:

*A voice cries in the wilderness
Prepare a way for the Lord,
make his paths straight.*

This man John wore a garment made of camel-hair with a leather belt round his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judaea and the whole Jordan district made their way to him, and as they were baptised by him in the river Jordan they confessed their sins. But when he saw a number of Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism he said to them, 'Brood of vipers, who warned you to fly from the retribution that is coming? But if you are repentant, produce the appropriate fruit, and do not presume to tell yourselves, "We have Abraham for our father," because, I tell you, God can raise children for Abraham from these stones. Even now the axe is laid to the roots of the trees, so that any tree which fails to produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown on the fire. I baptise you in water for repentance, but the one who follows me is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to carry his sandals; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fan is in his hand; he will clear his threshing-floor and gather his wheat into the barn; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out.'

(Matthew 3:1-12)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Luke's Gospel suggests that John the Baptist and Jesus were cousins, but there is no hint of this in Matthew.
- John the Baptist was not alone in his criticism and rejection of the soft religious life in the cities of Palestine. There were others, too, who withdrew from what they saw as the corruption of the temple cult and retreated to the desert to live a life of prayer and asceticism. The best known of these groups were the Essenes of the Dead Sea region. It is likely that John was in some way associated with them.
- The Essenes established a community at Qumran on the shores of the Dead Sea. It was this community that left the wonderful legacy of the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in the 1940s. These scrolls have proven invaluable to scholars in throwing light on the religious practices of the day.
- Advent is a time in which we too are invited to withdraw a little in prayer and contemplation.

EXPLORING THE WORD

During Advent in Year A, the first reading always comes from the prophet Isaiah. It is useful to pay particular attention to his voice, noticing the development of the vision and images he puts before us relating to the meaning of Jesus for the church and the world. In last week's reading, Isaiah sees what is to come: the nations assembling, surrendering to the Lord, laying down the weapons of war, beating them into the useful tools of farming and peaceful life. Today, Isaiah describes the qualities of the Spirit of the Lord and the just judgments this brings, resulting in a world of no conflict. In next week's text, Isaiah describes the glorious and triumphant coming of the Lord and the healing of all that is broken. In the final week of Advent, Isaiah speaks of the maiden who will conceive and give birth to one who is 'God-is-with-us'.

- Explore together these readings from Isaiah and the idyllic, joyous and triumphant world they depict.
- In what ways are these readings a reflection of the kingdom of heaven that the Baptist says is near at hand?
- What insights does Isaiah offer to the church for our understanding of the mission and ministry of Jesus?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- In what ways are you preparing a way for the Lord to come into your life at Christmas and at baptism?
- What 'good fruit' have you produced so far in your life?
- Recall some occasions when you were very conscious that you had produced 'good fruit' or done something really well. Have there also been occasions when you failed in such a task or were found wanting, when you knew you could have done better? Share your reflections.
- Withdraw a little this week from the hectic celebrations of Christmas cheer and concentrate instead on waiting and prayerfully preparing for what is to come. Give thought to the real meaning of Christmas and contemplate what the 'advent' of Christ meant to the world.
- Use today's gospel acclamation as your prayer this week:

*Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths:
all people shall see the salvation of God. Alleluia!*

3rd Sunday of Advent

Year A

GOSPEL

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John in his prison had heard what Christ was doing and he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or have we got to wait for someone else?' Jesus answered, 'Go back and tell John what you hear and see; the blind see again, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised to life and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor; and happy is the man who does not lose faith in me.'

As the messengers were leaving, Jesus began to talk to the people about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swaying in the breeze? No? Then what did you go out to see? A man wearing fine clothes? Oh no, those who wear fine clothes are to be found in palaces. Then what did you go out for? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and much more than a prophet: he is the one of whom scripture says:

'Look, I am going to send my messenger before you; he will prepare your way before you.

'I tell you solemnly, of all the children born of women, a greater than John the Baptist has never been seen; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he is.'

(Matthew 11:2-11)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The Word *Messiah* means 'anointed one' in Hebrew. The word *Christ* means the same thing in Greek.
- The healing of those who are afflicted was one of the signs given in the Hebrew Scriptures that the Messiah had come. When the blind see and the deaf hear; when the downtrodden are raised up and the lame walk, the reign of God will have come.
- John the Baptist was arrested and executed by Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great and ruler of Galilee, because John had criticised Antipas for his marriage to his brother's wife, Herodias, who was also his niece.

EXPLORING THE WORD

As we have already noted, one of the main purposes of Matthew's Gospel is to reveal Jesus as the long awaited Messiah of the Jews to Matthew's largely Jewish community. In this text, Matthew cites the evidence that is before their eyes. Why is it necessary for John to question the identity of Jesus when his own eyes and ears will give him the answer he seeks? The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear,

the dead are raised to life, and good news is proclaimed to the poor! Such were the signs of the coming of the Lord that Isaiah had prophesied. Such are the actions that Jesus undertakes! His identity is clear for all who have the eyes to see it.

- How do you recognise Jesus in the events and actions of your life?
- In what ways are we called to continue the actions of Jesus in the world today?
- What do you think is meant by the final line of today's gospel: 'the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he is'?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- When you look at our contemporary world, what do you 'see and hear'?
- How distant is this reality from the kingdom of God?
- Who are the people today who gather 'a great following'? What is their message? How different is that message from the one brought by John?
- Who are some of the 'great' people you have encountered in your life—not those who are famous or wealthy, but those who have had a profound influence on you. Share the memories of the gift you received from such people. Who are the great people who have made timeless contributions to the world? What has been their legacy?
- This week, find ways to be 'good news' to others, especially those who are sick or alienated or marginalised.
- Use today's entrance antiphon as your prayer this week:

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice.
Indeed the Lord is near.*

SHARING THE TRADITION

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 word *gospel* means 'good news'. The four accounts of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus are at the heart of the Christian Scriptures. Each of the four gospels presents its story of Jesus according to the particular needs of the community for which it was written. There are some differences of theological perspective but overwhelming consistency in the overall picture of Jesus that emerges.

- Using Bibles, point out the division between the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and explain, if necessary, the arrangement of chapters and verses.
- Give some brief introductory material on the particular theological perspective and major themes of each of the four gospels.

4th Sunday of Advent

Year A

GOSPEL

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This is how Jesus Christ came to be born. His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph; but before they came to live together she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph; being a man of honour and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally. He had made up his mind to do this when the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins.' Now all this took place to fulfil the words spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel,

a name which means 'God-is-with-us.' When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do: he took his wife to his home.

(Matthew 1:18-24)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- In Matthew's Gospel, Joseph is the main protagonist in the infancy narrative, while Luke's story of the birth of Jesus centres on Mary and her response.
- There are significant differences between the two accounts, which can be understood as reflecting the particular theological perspective of each author and the way each seeks to point to the identity of Jesus and address the concerns of his own community.
- Did you notice that there is no stable or manger in Matthew's account of Jesus' birth? Jesus is born at the home of Joseph and Mary, who live in Bethlehem. Look at the birth stories in Luke (chapters 1-2) and in Matthew (chapters 1-2) and see who visits the infant Jesus.

EXPLORING THE WORD

In Palestine, the betrothal period was akin to our period of engagement but was somewhat more binding. The couple are considered married but have not yet come to live together. An indiscretion of the nature described by Matthew requires a formal divorce and thus public knowledge. Joseph seeks to spare Mary this public disgrace, but God intercedes and alerts Joseph to the real identity of this child, which is in her 'by the Holy Spirit'. For Matthew, this is the most important point of

his infancy narrative. The child Jesus is the fulfillment of the ancient prophecy that the maiden will conceive 'God-with-us'. God has freely chosen to come among people. The second important point in this text is Joseph's response. The anguish and turmoil he must have felt is overcome by his trust in God's ways, and he obeys. He simply 'did what the angel told him to do'. Through his trust and acceptance of God's will, human history will never be the same because 'God-is-with-us'.

- You could tell something of the story of King Ahaz (featured in the first reading) and his disregard of God's commands and compare this with the response of Joseph.
- What does this convey of the nature of faith?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- Have you ever undertaken a bold and trusting action, even though you were dubious about the outcome?
- How was your trust rewarded?
- Spend some time thinking about how each of these characters would feel: Mary, the young maiden, who finds herself inexplicably with child; Joseph, the man who must have doubted her fidelity and felt betrayed by her. Each character took a great risk in accepting this situation as God's will and being willing to see where it would take them.
- Have you ever had the experience of having made up your mind to do something, only to have doubt cast on your chosen path by an 'inner sense' or 'gut feeling'? How well did you trust in your own intuition? What was the outcome? Conversely, have you ever taken a great risk, with little idea of the outcome but with a willingness to follow that path wherever it may lead? Share your reflections.
- Try to be intuitive to God's voice this week. What is being communicated to you at this time in your life?
- Learn by heart and pray often one of the most loved prayers of the Church, the Hail Mary:

*Hail Mary, full of grace,
the Lord is with you.
Blessed are you among women
and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, mother of God,
pray for us sinners,
now, and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

Christmas Day

Year A

GOSPEL

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[Here we use the gospel reading for Midnight Mass.]

Caesar Augustus issued a decree for a census of the whole world to be taken. This census—the first—took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria, and everyone went to his own town to be registered. So Joseph set out from the town of Nazareth in Galilee and travelled up to Judaea, to the town of David called Bethlehem, since he was of David’s House and line, in order to be registered together with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. While they were there the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to a son, her first-born. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them at the inn. In the countryside close by there were shepherds who lived in the fields and took it in turns to watch their flocks during the night. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone round them. They were terrified, but the angel said, ‘Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. And here is a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly with the angel there was a great throng of the heavenly host, praising God and singing:

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and peace to those who enjoy his favour.’

(Luke 2:1–14)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Luke’s Gospel is sometimes referred to as the ‘gospel of joy’ because this theme of rejoicing and joy is often repeated.
- Caesar Augustus ruled the Roman Empire from 27 BC to AD 14. He was the great nephew of Julius Caesar.
- A Roman census was usually undertaken for purposes of taxation but also at times for other ends, such as conscription or forced labour.
- A problem of timing exists within this text. Most scholars agree that Jesus was born about 6 BC in the reign of Herod the Great. However, Quirinius was not appointed as governor of Syria until about eleven years later. After his appointment, he did in fact supervise a census of the region.
- Luke goes to great pains in this text to situate Jesus’ birth in the historical world of the time.

EXPLORING THE WORD

The gospel reading for the Midnight Mass is Luke’s brief but profound description of the birth of Jesus. Only the Gospels of Matthew and Luke give any information on this remarkable event, and both represent the unfolding of christological understandings over time. It is likely that Luke uses the device of the census to explain why Mary and Joseph are in Bethlehem, the predicted birthplace of the Messiah, when it is common knowledge that Jesus came from Nazareth. At the centre of Luke’s story is the proclamation of the birth to the shepherds in the fields and their reaction to it. (In Matthew, the proclamation comes to the Gentile magi or wise men.) At the time, shepherds were regarded as among the lowest of the population. They did not have a good reputation and were not to be trusted! But it is to these, not the high and mighty of the land, that God chooses to announce the birth of the saviour. In the continuation of the text, the shepherds are shown as accepting the proclamation and going ‘with haste’ to Bethlehem to ‘see the thing that has taken place.’ They are not checking the veracity of the angel’s story but believe it implicitly. Their response is immediate. They return to their fields ‘glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard, as it had been told them.’ Their response to the coming of the Messiah is wholehearted!

- How strong is your belief in all that has been told to you?
- In what ways do you glorify and praise God?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- ‘I have good news of great joy.’ What is your greatest joy at this point in your life?
- What difference does the birth of this child make to you?
- Share together your reminiscences of past Christmases. What have been the most important parts of celebrating this special feast? Has there been a shift or a new understanding of the meaning of Christmas since you began your journey?
- Give nourishment to others this week—not just food but a sense of their value to you.
- Use the gospel acclamation this week:

Alleluia, Alleluia!

*Good News and great joy to all the world:
today is born our saviour, Christ the Lord.
Alleluia!*

The Holy Family

Year A

GOSPEL

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After the wise men had left, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother with you, and escape into Egypt, and stay there until I tell you, because Herod intends to search for the child and do away with him.' So Joseph got up and, taking the child and his mother with him, left that night for Egypt, where he stayed until Herod was dead. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken through the prophet:

I called my son out of Egypt.

After Herod's death, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother with you and go back to the land of Israel, for those who wanted to kill the child are dead.' So Joseph got up and, taking the child and his mother with him, went back to the land of Israel. But when he learnt that Archelaus had succeeded his father Herod as ruler of Judaea he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he left for the region of Galilee. There he settled in a town called Nazareth. In this way the words spoken through the prophets were to be fulfilled:

'He will be called a Nazarene.'

(Matthew 2:13-15,19-23)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Matthew often presents Jesus as the new Moses. There are many parallels in this text: a threat of death at birth, an escape, being called out of Egypt and being under the special protection of God.
- After the death of Herod the Great, his kingdom was divided between three of his sons: Archelaus, Herod Antipas (who ruled Galilee and was the Herod mentioned at Jesus' death) and Philip. All these men ruled only as regents under Rome, which held the real power.
- In Matthew's Gospel, Mary and Joseph live in Bethlehem rather than at Nazareth in Galilee. Bethlehem is in Judaea, not far from Jerusalem, and thus comes under the rule of Archelaus.
- Archelaus proved to be an inept ruler and was stripped of his power by Rome. Judaea was instead placed under direct Roman rule through a Roman governor. Pontius Pilate was such a governor.

EXPLORING THE WORD

Again we see a communication from God, through a dream, and an angel leading Joseph into risky and dangerous behaviour. Such a journey in the first century—across the desert of Sinai—would have been a long and arduous trek. Again, Joseph's response to God's command is made with absolute trust and confidence. The parallels with the story of Moses are obvious.

- Read the opening three chapters of Exodus and trace the parallels.

It was well established in the early church and from contemporary Roman sources that Jesus was known as a Nazarene, so Matthew uses the device of Archelaus, a son of Herod the Great and an inept and evil ruler, to explain how the Holy Family came to live in Nazareth. The protection Joseph offers to his fledgling family is paralleled with the protection God offers to this child who is God's Son. Mary and Joseph provide a positive model for all parents who selflessly risk all for their child.

- How is love, concern and protection expressed in your family?
- What are some of the sacrifices that you make as a parent or that have been made for you by your parents?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- Are there situations or people in your life that it is more sensible to escape from than to confront?
- What in your life poses the biggest threat to your faith journey?
- How far are you willing to go to safeguard your faith?
- In what ways has the family within which you grew to maturity influenced the sort of person you have become? What, ultimately, would you like to think you had contributed to your own family? Share your reflections.
- Make special times for family this week. Contemplate the richness of family life.
- At this time in human history, when so many people find themselves forced to flee their homes, pray this week for all who are refugees:

God of all, you called your Son out of Egypt. Watch over all who are fleeing death or persecution. Open our hearts to their plight. May we give the protection that your Son received.

The Epiphany of the Lord

Year A

GOSPEL

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After Jesus had been born at Bethlehem in Judaea during the reign of King Herod, some wise men came to Jerusalem from the east. 'Where is the infant king of the Jews?' they asked. 'We saw his star as it rose and have come to do him homage.' When King Herod heard this he was perturbed, and so was the whole of Jerusalem. He called together all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, and enquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 'At Bethlehem in Judaea,' they told him 'for this is what the prophet wrote:

*And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
you are by no means least among the leaders of Judah,
for out of you will come a leader
who will shepherd my people Israel.'*

Then Herod summoned the wise men to see him privately. He asked them the exact date on which the star had appeared, and sent them on to Bethlehem. 'Go and find out all about the child,' he said 'and when you have found him, let me know, so that I too may go and do him homage.' Having listened to what the king had to say, they set out. And there in front of them was the star they had seen rising; it went forward, and halted over the place where the child was. The sight of the star filled them with delight, and going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees they did him homage. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. But they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and returned to their own country by a different way.

(Matthew 2:1-12)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The word 'epiphany' comes from a Greek word meaning manifestation or revelation. In Matthew's Gospel, this episode is the first public manifestation of Jesus.
- Herod the Great ruled only because Rome allowed it. He was not Jewish (his mother was not Jewish) but he had married into the royal family. He would have been very afraid of a possible rival to his claim to the throne.
- This text again mentions that Jesus was born at home in Joseph's house in Bethlehem. The family only relocated to Nazareth after having fled to Egypt to escape the threat from Herod to the child's safety.
- The 'wise men' were probably magi or astrologers from Persia and represent all those who seek God with a sincere heart.
- The gifts of the magi are of great value; gifts fit for a king!

EXPLORING THE WORD

The key to understanding this highly symbolic gospel lies in the response to Jesus of the various actors. The wise men are not of the house of Israel; they are foreigners from the East. And yet it is they who recognise the signs and embark on a journey to find the newborn king and worship him. The opposite response comes from the very people who should know better. Herod, the King of the Jews, and the chief priests and scribes, the interpreters of Scripture, have not seen what is there before them and, when they do come to understand, seek only to do harm to Jesus. This is the first hint of the harm that will ultimately come to him from similar characters much later in his life. They are not open to the revelation of God in this child.

Imagine the disappointment the wise men must have felt when they find a poor child born in a simple house instead of a mighty king. But they are open to the revelation of God and bow down before him. The expensive gifts of the wise men are highly symbolic: gold was presented to kings, frankincense was offered to God, and myrrh used in anointing for burial. Thus they refer to the kingship of Jesus, his divinity and his salvific death.

- In what ways do you recognise the divine in the ordinary?
- How long have you been on your journey, and how much progress have you made?
- What keeps leading you on?
- What new road have you taken, and where do you hope it leads you?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What is leading your journey towards Jesus?
- What gifts do you bring to Jesus?
- 'The sight of the star filled them with delight.' Share your own stories of times of pure delight in your life.
- Spend time this week reflecting on the new road you have taken? How has it changed the way you act or think?
- Use today's gospel acclamation as your prayer this week:

Alleluia, alleluia!

*We have seen his star in the East;
and have come to adore the Lord.*

Alleluia!

The Baptism of the Lord

Year A

GOSPEL

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Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John. John tried to dissuade him. 'It is I who need baptism from you' he said 'and yet you come to me!' But Jesus replied, 'Leave it like this for the time being; it is fitting that we should, in this way, do all that righteousness demands.' At this, John gave in to him.

As soon as Jesus was baptised he came up from the water, and suddenly the heavens opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming down on him. And a voice spoke from heaven, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on him.'

(Matthew 3:13-17)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The Jordan River runs the length of Israel, from north of the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea in the south, and is the lifeblood of the land.
- The exact site of the baptism of Jesus by John is unknown, but the traditional site is at el-Mughtas, about ten and a half kilometres north of the point where the river enters the Dead Sea.
- The word *baptism* comes from a Greek word meaning 'to plunge'.
- The first Christians were baptised by being plunged into running streams or rivers, following the practice of John. Later, large fonts were built in churches, and baptism of the faithful, usually adults, was by full immersion.

EXPLORING THE WORD

This text introduces Jesus in the first public moment of his adult life. It is significant that the public mission of Jesus begins with his baptism. He has made decisions about his future action, which begins with a long and arduous journey spanning the length of Israel from Galilee to the deep south. This is not a random act. Jesus makes that journey with a single purpose: 'to be baptised by John.' In light of Matthew's presentation of Jesus as the fulfillment and perfection of all that is good in Israel, the conversation between these two figures is fascinating. The Baptist recognises Jesus' greater role in God's plan. He has played the part of the Old Testament prophet in preparing the way. Now that the main player has appeared on the stage, is it not fitting that the Baptist bows out of the action? But Jesus is aware of a bigger picture and insists that things remain as they

are 'for the time being' so that the demands of righteousness can be satisfied. Both Jesus and John show an openness to accept God's plan, and in reward, God himself enters the story with words of affirmation and love for the Chosen One. Heaven and earth have met in the person of Jesus.

- Jesus' mission grew out of a profound sense of being loved and chosen by God. You too have been chosen. What might your mission be?
- Look at the first reading from Isaiah. What insight does this provide in understanding your mission?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- How strong is your own sense of being loved and favoured by God?
- What feelings are you experiencing as your own baptism or reception approaches?
- Have you ever had an experience of being chosen, singled out for a special role or particular responsibility? How did you feel? Were you able to carry out the task? What challenges did you face? Share your recollections with others.
- Encourage catechumens, along with their sponsors, to visit the baptismal font in the church at some point this week. It may be a good opportunity to chat informally about how the journey is progressing.
- Use these lines from today's collect often this week:
Almighty ever-living God who, when Christ had been baptised in the River Jordan and as the Holy Spirit descended upon him, solemnly declared him your beloved Son, grant that your children by adoption, reborn of water and the Holy Spirit, may always be pleasing to you.
- Spend some time each day in quiet contemplation of what the 'voice from heaven' is saying to you and what you must do to be pleasing to God.

2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

GOSPEL

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Seeing Jesus coming towards him, John said, 'Look, there is the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. This is the one I spoke of when I said: A man is coming after me who ranks before me because he existed before me. I did not know him myself, and yet it was to reveal him to Israel that I came baptising with water.' John also declared, 'I saw the Spirit coming down on him from heaven like a dove and resting on him. I did not know him myself, but he who sent me to baptise with water had said to me, "The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and rest is the one who is going to baptise with the Holy Spirit." Yes, I have seen and I am the witness that he is the Chosen One of God.'

(John 1:29-34)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The title of 'Lamb of God' would have suggested the Passover feast to those listening to John. At that time, sacrificial lambs were slaughtered in the temple, recalling the blood of the lambs that was shed so that Israel could be spared death and freed from slavery in Egypt. Read the story of this deliverance in Exodus 12.
- Now that the Christmas cycle is completed, the church enters what is known as 'Ordinary Time' for a period. (This will be interrupted for the Lent-Easter-Pentecost cycle.)
- Ordinary Time does not mean a time that is commonplace or unremarkable. The name derives from the word *ordinal*, which means 'counted and sequential'.

EXPLORING THE WORD

This week, we depart from the normal cycle of readings from Matthew for this text in John. There is no explicit account of the baptism of Jesus in John. Rather, the emphasis is on John the Baptist as a witness to the real identity of Jesus: the Lamb of God and the Chosen One of God. Twice John says, 'I did not know him myself but it was to reveal him that I came.' Such a statement would have had a significant effect on the evangelist's community. This is the last of the gospels written, at around the end of the first century. It is unlikely that many followers of Jesus in this community would have known him personally, some seventy years earlier!

But John the Baptist, despite his not knowing Jesus in person, is in no doubt as to his identity. Filled with conviction, he knows that Jesus is the one in whom the hopes of Israel and all humankind will be fulfilled. 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe' (John 20:29).

- In what ways does this echo our own experience of not knowing Jesus as a physical reality but recognising him as the fulfillment of our longings?
- What things may hinder our recognition of Jesus?
- How could you point others to Jesus and give witness to who he is?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- How do you witness to the Chosen One of God?
- Twice John says that he did not know Jesus himself, but that Jesus was revealed to him by God. What was it that first revealed Jesus to you?
- What sin of the world is in need of redemption today?
- Have you ever been an eye witness to something significant, either in your family or in the wider community? Share stories of what you have seen? How did you bear witness to this event? What effect did it have on you?
- Like John, give witness to Christ this week. Share something of your search for faith with others.
- The title of 'Lamb of God' is used of Jesus during the liturgy in the Communion rite. Learn this prayer by heart and say it often, contemplating its meaning:

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, grant us peace.

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

GOSPEL

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Hearing that John had been arrested, Jesus went back to Galilee, and leaving Nazareth he went and settled in Capernaum, a lakeside town on the borders of Zebulun and Naphtali. In this way the prophecy of Isaiah was to be fulfilled:

*'Land of Zebulun! Land of Naphtali!
Way of the sea on the far side of Jordan,
Galilee of the nations!
The people that lived in darkness has seen a great light;
on those who dwell in the land and shadow of death
a light has dawned.'*

From that moment Jesus began his preaching with the message, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.'

As he was walking by the Sea of Galilee he saw two brothers, Simon, who was called Peter, and his brother Andrew; they were making a cast in the lake with their net, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.' And they left their nets at once and followed him. Going on from there he saw another pair of brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John; they were in their boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. At once, leaving the boat and their father, they followed him.

He went round the whole of Galilee teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom and curing all kinds of diseases and sickness among the people.

(Matthew 4:12-23)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- When the people of Israel returned to the Promised Land after their liberation from Egypt, the land was divided among the twelve tribes descended from the twelve sons of Jacob. Zebulun and Naphtali were two of those sons.
- The town of Capernaum stood on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, on the border of the areas given to these two sons of Jacob.
- Matthew uses the term *kingdom of heaven* rather than *ingdom of God*. This may have been because his audience is largely Jewish, and Jews avoided using the sacred name of God.
- This is another example of Matthew stating that, in Jesus, the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah coming are fulfilled.

EXPLORING THE WORD

This gospel tells of the first public actions of Jesus' ministry. It should be studied in conjunction with the first reading from Isaiah, which speaks of a light coming that breaks the 'bars', 'yokes' and 'rods' that bind people and weigh them down.

- What are the things that weigh you down at the moment?
- From what does our world need to be liberated?

This gospel reveals Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. John the Baptist, the precursor, has now left the scene, having been arrested, so Jesus takes up and completes his message of repentance because the kingdom is at hand. In the final verses, the manifestation of that kingdom is made apparent. People are healed and the Good News is proclaimed. The second part of this text shows the effectiveness of Jesus' message. His voice and his proclamation draw people from their labours to a new kind of work: cooperating in the task of drawing people to the truth of God's plan for the world.

- Explore the call of discipleship and what that means for people who follow Christ today. How are we called to 'come, follow me'?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What have you left behind to follow Jesus?
- How do you feel about that?
- Have you ever felt 'called' to do something? A challenge you just could not pass by? A strange urge to move beyond your normal behaviour? To pursue something outside your experience? What was the outcome? Share your reflections.
- Try to be a light for other people this week. Be aware of opportunities through which you could draw other people to Christ.
- Use a part of today's psalm as your prayer this week:

*The Lord is my light and my salvation.
Whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
before whom shall I shrink?
The Lord is my light and my salvation.*

The Presentation of the Lord Year A

GOSPEL

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When the day came for them to be purified as laid down by the Law of Moses, the parents of Jesus took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord,—observing what stands written in the Law of the Lord: Every first-born male must be consecrated to the Lord—and also to offer in sacrifice, in accordance with what is said in the Law of the Lord, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.

Now in Jerusalem there was a man named Simeon. He was an upright and devout man; he looked forward to Israel's comforting and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death until he had set eyes on the Christ of the Lord. Prompted by the Spirit he came to the Temple and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the Law required, he took him into his arms and blessed God; and he said:

'Now, Master, you can let your servant go in peace, just as you promised; because my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all the nations to see, a light to enlighten the pagans and the glory of your people Israel.'

As the child's father and mother stood there wondering at the things that were being said about him, Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'You see this child: he is destined for the fall and for the rising of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is rejected—and a sword will pierce your own soul too—so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare.'

There was a prophetess also, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was well on in years. Her days of girlhood over, she had been married for seven years before becoming a widow. She was now eighty-four years old and never left the Temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayer. She came by just at that moment and began to praise God; and she spoke of the child to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem.

When they had done everything the Law of the Lord required, they went back to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. Meanwhile the child grew to maturity, and he was filled with wisdom; and God's favour was with him.

(Luke 2:22–40)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- 'The Law of the Lord' refers to the Torah, or the first five books of the Jewish Scriptures, sometimes called the Pentateuch. It was believed that these five books were written by Moses—thus the law of Moses.
- The Torah contains many regulations and laws relating to how Jews should lead their lives, including ritual purification. Leviticus 12 outlines the regulations that tell how a woman must become purified after childbirth, a process that included a ritual bath and the offering of a sacrifice of pigeons or doves.
- Mary and Joseph are acting as practising, pious Jews in following the requirements of the Law after the birth of Jesus.
- This text is unique to Luke's Gospel. No other gospel tells us as much of the early years of Jesus as Luke does.

EXPLORING THE WORD

This gospel text is another example of the 'manifestation' of who Jesus is. Luke sets his action in the heart of Judaism, in the temple itself. Mary and Joseph are pious Jews doing all that the Law requires of them. The two characters who are introduced—Simeon and Anna—are both also depicted by Luke as pious Jews. Simeon is 'an upright and devout man', while Anna 'served God night and day with fasting and prayer.' They would both have seen many first-born sons presented at the temple in consecration to the Lord. But they see something in this particular child that goes beyond the expected. They recognise this child as 'the salvation which you have prepared for all the nations', and Anna speaks of the child 'to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem'.

The reaction of the parents is natural under such circumstances: 'They stood there wondering at the things being said about him.' Mary is warned that being the mother of such a child will not be easy for her: 'a sword will pierce her soul.' For Mary, adherence to the will of God will come at a price.

- What do you understand will be your obligations once you are baptised or received into the church? Are there things that need to be clarified for you?
- How is Christ made manifest in the world today?
- Do you know people who you would describe as 'pious'? What does that mean?

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

GOSPEL

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Jesus said to his disciples: 'You are the salt of the earth. But if salt becomes tasteless, what can make it salty again? It is good for nothing, and can only be thrown out to be trampled underfoot by men.

'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill-top cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub; they put it on the lamp-stand where it shines for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine in the sight of men, so that, seeing your good works, they may give the praise to your Father in heaven.'

(Matthew 5:13–16)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- In the ancient world, salt was absolutely essential. It was used not simply to season food or to add to its taste, but as a preservative, enabling food to be stored and kept.
- At the time of Jesus, the main source of oil for lamps was the olive. A saucer-shaped lamp held the oil, and a wick, made of flax or a similar material, burned from a small opening on the rim. Such lamps were often placed in a niche in the walls of rooms.
- Lamp oil was a precious commodity. Once lit, a lamp was often placed high to give maximum illumination.
- Ancient cities were often built on hilltops so that they were easily defended against invaders and were visible for many miles around.

EXPLORING THE WORD

To understand this text, it is important to place it alongside the Beatitudes that immediately precede it (you could read these together first). In that text, the virtues to be cultivated by followers of Jesus are outlined, but the danger with taking the Beatitudes on their own is that faith can become contented peacefulness and somewhat inward-looking. To avoid this risk, Matthew follows the Beatitudes with this text, which teaches disciples about the task of Christians in the world. They have been given the gifts; they are the salt of the earth. But if they just see their blessedness and rest there, they risk becoming 'tasteless' and good only to be 'trampled underfoot'. Instead, the disciples are urged to place their light high on a hill and let it shine for all to see. They are witnesses to God's living presence, not just for the nation of Israel but for all the world. In seeing

the way that Christians live and act—their 'good works'—others will be drawn to God through their active witness to faith. Others will come to give praise to God in heaven. This is an amazing responsibility, and Jesus acknowledges that some salt may lose its taste and some lights be hidden. The challenge for Christians, new and old, is not to take the gift of faith for granted and let it become tasteless; not to keep the light confined to private moments but to allow others to see the difference faith makes so that they can know the presence and power of God.

- How is this a challenge to you?
- How can you let your faith shine forth?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What aspects of your journey so far have been a 'light' to you?
- For whom are you a light?
- In what circumstances does your light shine best?
- Reflect on what it is in your life that gives you zest and flavour, and that preserves you. What guides your behaviour and gives you strength to keep going? What is 'salt' to you? Share your reflections.
- Identify one talent that you have and use it well and often this week. Let your light shine.
- Use a candle this week each time you pray. Use an adaptation of the gospel acclamation:

*I am the light of the world, says the Lord;
the one who follows me
will have the light of life.
Alleluia!*

*6th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A***GOSPEL**

Jesus said to his disciples: 'Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete them. I tell you solemnly, till heaven and earth disappear, not one dot, not one little stroke, shall disappear from the Law until its purpose is achieved. Therefore, the man who infringes even one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be considered the least in the kingdom of heaven; but the man who keeps them and teaches them will be considered great in the kingdom of heaven.

'For I tell you, if your virtue goes no deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.

'You have learnt how it was said to our ancestors: You must not kill; and if anyone does kill he must answer for it before the court. But I say this to you: anyone who is angry with his brother will answer for it before the court; if a man calls his brother "Fool!" he will answer for it before the Sanhedrin; and if a man calls him "Renegade" he will answer for it in hell fire. So then, if you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering. Come to terms with your opponent in good time while you are still on the way to the court with him, or he may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the officer, and you will be thrown into prison. I tell you solemnly, you will not get out till you have paid the last penny.

'You have learnt how it was said: You must not commit adultery. But I say this to you: if a man looks at a woman lustfully, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye should cause you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; for it will do you less harm to lose one part of you than to have your whole body thrown into hell. And if your right hand should cause you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; for it will do you less harm to lose one part of you than to have your whole body go to hell.

'It has also been said: Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a writ of dismissal. But I say this to you: everyone who divorces his wife, except for the case of fornication, makes her an adulteress; and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

'Again, you have learnt how it was said to our ancestors: You must not break your oath, but must fulfil your oaths to the Lord. But I say this to you: do not swear at all, either by heaven, since that is God's throne; or by the earth, since that is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, since that is the city of the great king. Do not swear by your own head either, since you cannot turn a single hair white or black. All you need say is "Yes" if you mean yes, "No" if you mean no; anything more than this comes from the evil one.'

(Matthew 5:17-37)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Two of the major divisions of the Jewish Scriptures are the Law (comprising the first five books of the Old Testament, the Hebrew *Torah*) and the Prophets (*nebi'im* in Hebrew). The other major division is known as the Writings (*ketubim* in Hebrew) and comprises the Wisdom literature of Israel, including such books as the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job and Ruth.
- The Pharisees were a group of very pious Jews who observed all the laws of Israel. They are often depicted in the gospels as overly legalistic or even hypocritical, but this is probably an unfair depiction that has been influenced by the events surrounding the separation of the early Christians from the mainstream Jewish religion after the destruction of the temple in AD 70.
- The origin of the term *scribes* is unclear and seems to cover a variety of functions and bureaucratic officers. The term does not seem to denote a group with particular religious beliefs but, rather, learned men more generally. During the time of Jesus, they were probably influential in the temple and at various levels of government.

EXPLORING THE WORD

The central theme of this week's reading from Matthew is built upon for the next several weeks. In this text, Matthew is reassuring his Jewish audience that Jesus has not come to replace the Law of Judaism but to bring it to fullness and completion. In this gospel, Jesus reassures his hearers that 'not one dot, one little stroke, shall disappear from the Law.' Instead, Jesus extends the Law of Israel and interprets it in a new way. His emphasis is on the spirit of the Law, not the letter of the Law. Doing only what the Law requires as a minimum is, for Jesus, not enough. Disciples are called to discern what is at the heart of faith and to bring this to all our dealings with people. The observance of outward expressions of faith is hollow unless it is accompanied by an attitude that shapes our whole being and informs all our actions, responses and decisions.

- Discuss why laws are necessary for the best ordering of societies.
- Think of some examples of actions that may be 'legal' but are not necessarily 'moral'.
- Contrast and discuss the 'spirit of the law' and the 'letter of the law'.
- Explore how Christianity is an attitude that shapes the whole being and life of a believer.

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

GOSPEL

Jesus said to his disciples: 'You have learnt how it was said: Eye for eye and tooth for tooth. But I say this to you: offer the wicked man no resistance. On the contrary, if anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the other as well; if a man takes you to law and would have your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone orders you to go one mile, go two miles with him. Give to anyone who asks, and if anyone wants to borrow, do not turn away.

'You have learnt how it was said: You must love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say this to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; in this way you will be sons of your Father in heaven, for he causes his sun to rise on bad men as well as good, and his rain to fall on honest and dishonest men alike. For if you love those who love you, what right have you to claim any credit? Even the tax collectors do as much, do they not? And if you save your greetings for your brothers, are you doing anything exceptional? Even the pagans do as much, do they not? You must therefore be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect.'

(Matthew 5:38-48)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- 'An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth.' This notion of justice and retribution from the Old Testament is often misunderstood. Rather than a dire punishment aimed at vengeance, it is in fact a way of limiting retribution. In effect, Old Testament law on this point says that you may not extract more punishment than was inflicted.
- In Jesus' time, a Roman soldier had the right to command any man to carry his kit one mile but no further.
- Tax collectors were reviled by the Jews because they cooperated with the Romans and collected Roman taxes on their behalf. Because of their association with Gentiles, they were considered unclean.

EXPLORING THE WORD

This gospel continues the theme of going beyond what is required by law, but here Jesus takes the teaching much further. More than honouring the spirit of the law over the letter of the law, Jesus advocates what must have sounded like the ravings of a mad man to his hearers: don't just allow a person to strike you once; offer him the other cheek as well. If asked, don't just give away your tunic; give your cloak as well! Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. What was Jesus thinking?

It is the final verse of this text that gives us the clue to the meaning of this demanding passage. In essence, what Jesus is saying is that believers must emulate God's own actions. God is a God of total self-giving. God is a God of unbounded generosity, even to those who may not seem to deserve such magnanimity. God is a God whose love and self-giving embrace all, both the honest and the dishonest. The offer of the kingdom of heaven is open to all who seek to be God-like in their dealings with others.

- You could discuss examples from Scripture of the unbound generosity of God.
- How have you experienced this in your own life?
- You could discuss the total self-giving of Jesus at his death and all that it achieved for humanity.
- What does that mean for you in your life at this point in your journey?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- How easy or difficult is it to go beyond the minimum required of us? To offer real generosity of spirit?
- How easy or difficult is it to love those who ridicule or persecute you? To reach out to those who are different from us?
- Have you ever 'gone the extra mile'? Have you ever had to do something that was 'beyond the call of duty'? What were the circumstances? What were the outcomes? How easy or difficult was it for you? Share your reflections.
- Go beyond the minimum this week and reach out in generosity to someone you may not ordinarily associate with. Offer friendship or material support to someone who may be seen as an outcast in our society.
- Again, today's entrance antiphon makes a suitable prayer for this week:

O Lord, I trust in your merciful love.

My heart will rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the Lord who has been bountiful to me.

