

1st Sunday in Lent

Year B

GOSPEL

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The Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness and he remained there for forty days, and was tempted by Satan. He was with the wild beasts, and the angels looked after him.

After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the good news from God. 'The time has come', he said, 'and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the good news.'

(Mark 1:12–15)

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DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Lent lasts for forty days in imitation of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Thursday.
- There is evidence of Lenten preparation for Easter very early in the Church's history but its practices became more regularised after the Council of Nicaea (325CE).
- Each Lent all the baptised are expected to adopt the three Lenten disciplines of Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving to those in need.
- In years gone by, Catholics did not eat meat on any Friday, and later, on Fridays in Lent. Today there are two days of the year when Catholics are expected to not eat meat—Ash Wednesday and Good Friday—but all the Fridays of Lent are still days when we should 'fast'.
- This scene in the gospel has been traditionally associated with the Judean wilderness, an unforgiving dessert landscape in the south of the country.

EXPLORING THE WORD

The Baptist had promised that Jesus would baptise with the Holy Spirit and at his baptism the Holy Spirit had descended on him. Now that same Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness. He is not the master of his own destiny. He is the object of the action of God. There is no murmur of opposition to this. Jesus accepts God's Spirit and God's will. As a consequence, the harmony of creation is restored and Jesus 'is with' the wild beasts. It is a fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah that 'the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and fatling together' (Is 11:6–7). The new creation has begun in the person of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. Indeed, he proclaims that the Kingdom of God is close at hand.

But Jesus also summons his followers to repent and believe the good news. Lent is a time to listen attentively to the gospel and to turn back to the ways of the Father. It is a time for us to consider how close we are to the Kingdom of God.

- What is 'good' for you at this point about the good news of Jesus Christ?
- Jesus heralds the new creation. What would be the perfect world for you? Describe what might be different from our present reality in the Kingdom of God. How can you help to bring this about?
- What tempts you away from the good news?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- How do you experience 'the wilderness' in your life? What are the 'wild beasts' for you in this place? Who or what looks after you?
- Many catechumens are on the final approach to saying 'the time has come'. How do you feel about 'the Kingdom of God being close at hand' for you?
- What extra steps can you take to prepare for full entry into the Church?
- The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. Share stories of times when you felt 'driven' to do a particular thing. How did you respond to this urge? What were the consequences of this urge?
- What comforts and distractions make it difficult for you to follow Jesus' way? Can you dispense with these for the forty days of Lent? Can you, instead, take on additional tasks or disciplines to assist you in walking with God?
- The response to this week's psalm is a wonderful prayer for this week.
*Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth,
to those who keep your covenant.*

2nd Sunday in Lent

Year B

GOSPEL

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Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain where they could be alone by themselves. There in their presence he was transfigured: his clothes became dazzlingly white, whiter than any earthly bleacher could make them. Elijah appeared to them with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus. Then Peter spoke to Jesus. 'Rabbi', he said, 'it is wonderful for us to be here; so let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say; they were so frightened. And a cloud came, covering them in shadow; and there came a voice from the cloud, 'This is my son, the beloved. Listen to him.' Then suddenly, when they looked round, they saw no one with them anymore but only Jesus.

As they came down the mountain he warned them to tell no one what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They observed the warning faithfully, though among themselves they discussed what 'rising from the dead' could mean.

(Mark 9:2-10)

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DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- This event in the life of Jesus is known as the Transfiguration. It is traditionally associated with Mt Tabor near Nazareth in Galilee.
- The words of the voice from the cloud echo the words from heaven at Jesus' baptism, 'You are my son, the beloved, my favour rests on you' (Mk 1:11).
- The three disciples who witness Jesus' glory in this episode are the same three who will witness his agony on the Mount of Olives on the night before he died.
- Jesus is joined by Elijah and Moses in this episode. They represent the Prophets and the Law, major sections of the Hebrew Scriptures.

EXPLORING THE WORD

In the biblical tradition a mountain is often used to situate close encounters between God and his people. In this text, Jesus' appearance takes on the imagery of the divine. Those who join Jesus are significant: Moses was the receiver of the Law and Elijah was the first prophet. Here the Law and the Prophets, the fullness of Scripture, meet Jesus transfigured. Understandably, the disciples are terrified and Peter suggests they build three tents. This would allow them to remain on the mountain and contemplate the face of God. But this is to misunderstand the true call of the disciple. Gazing heavenwards is not enough—the disciple must also listen and act. The mystery of this response will only become clear when placed in the context of the death and resurrection of Jesus. There can be no side-stepping of the cross and its invitation to all who are followers of Jesus that they too must lose themselves for the sake of others.

- How do you understand the divinity of Jesus?
- When you contemplate the face of Christ, what do you see?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'It is wonderful for us to be here.' Is this how you feel?
- 'Listen to him.' When you hear the voice of God's son, what do you hear him say to you?
- How do you visualise Jesus?
- What have been the occasions when you experienced God in a special way? What did they teach you about God? Share these 'religious experiences' with others.
- Read the story of Elijah experiencing God (See 1 Kings 19:11-14) and reflect on how you experience God. Is God in the great wind, the earthquake, the fire or the gentle breeze and silence? Spend time alone reflecting on the majesty and mystery of God.
- A variation from the Collect from today's Mass offers a suitable prayer for this week.
O God, you have commanded us to listen to your beloved son. Be pleased we pray, to nourish us inwardly by your word.

3rd Sunday in Lent

Year B

GOSPEL

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Just before the Jewish Passover Jesus went up to Jerusalem, and in the Temple he found people selling cattle and sheep and pigeons, and the money changers sitting at their counters there. Making a whip out of some cord, he drove them all out of the Temple, cattle and sheep as well, scattered the money changers' coins, knocked their tables over and said to the pigeon sellers, 'Take all this out of here and stop turning my Father's house into a market.' Then his disciples remembered the words of Scripture: Zeal for your house will devour me.

The Jews intervened and said, 'What sign can you show us to justify what you have done?' Jesus answered, 'Destroy this sanctuary, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews replied, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this sanctuary: are you going to raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the sanctuary that was his body, and when Jesus rose from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the words he had said.

During his stay in Jerusalem for the Passover many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he gave, but Jesus knew them all and did not trust himself to them; he never needed evidence about any man; he could tell what a man had in him.

(John 2:13–25)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The only coins acceptable in the Temple were half shekels. Roman coins were not acceptable because they were imprinted with the image of the Emperor and the Commandments clearly state that there should be no graven images used by Jews. The money-changers were actually performing a necessary task for the proper functioning of the religious life of Israel. What may Jesus really have been angry about?
- The trade in animals was necessary for sacrifice at the Temple. Ordinary people needed to sacrifice for a number of religious reasons; for example, to become ritually clean again after childbirth (See Lk 2:22–25). But this trade was under a monopoly of the wealthy and elite Sadducees who controlled the Temple cult. What may Jesus really have been angry about?
- Herod the Great (37BCE–4BCE) began a massive rebuilding of the Temple in the hope of winning favour with the Jewish people who saw him as a usurper of the throne (he was not even Jewish, yet was 'King of the Jews') and a Roman lackey. It took many years to complete.

EXPLORING THE WORD

In John's Gospel, hostility exists between Jesus and the Jews from the very beginning of his public ministry. This is probably a reflection of the situation in which John's community finds itself—that of being excluded from the practice of Judaism after Christians had been ousted from Synagogue worship. We should not, therefore read this text as a criticism by Jesus of Judaism generally.

If we read this text only as an example of Jesus' righteous anger over the greed of those who controlled commerce in the Temple precinct, we miss much of the point that John is making. The Jews believed that the offering of sacrifice to God in the Temple was a central part of their religious observance. Jesus now brings that practice to an end. He speaks of his own body as the new Temple, the new centre of worship. Effectively, Jesus is reinterpreting the religious traditions of the Jews to centre in himself. He becomes the physical embodiment of 'my Father's house'. He is the living Temple of the Father's presence among us.

- In what ways does the Church represent 'the sanctuary of his body' to the world today?
- How does the Church 'embody' Christ and act to bring about the reign of God?
- How does Jesus help us to understand God more fully and to worship God differently?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What are the abuses we should be angry about today?
- What are some ways we can respond to those abuses?
- Exchange stories of times when you became enraged over an injustice. How did you manifest that anger? What actions did you take to right that disorder? What are some appropriate responses to that which disorders our world today?
- Express some 'righteous anger' this week about something which disorders our world; for example, inequality, human rights abuse, exclusion. How are Christians called to respond to these injustices?
- This week's Psalm response offers great wisdom:
Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.
Use it often this week.

4th Sunday in Lent

Year B

GOSPEL

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Jesus said to Nicodemus:

The Son of Man will be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that everyone who believes will have eternal life in him. Yes, 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 might 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. On these grounds sentence is pronounced: that though the light has come into the world men have shown they prefer darkness to the light because their deeds were evil. And indeed, everybody who does wrong hates the light and avoids it, for fear his actions should be exposed; but the man who lives by the truth comes out into the light, so that it may be plainly seen that what he does is done in God.

(John 3:14–21)

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DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the ruling Council of the Jews, the Sanhedrin. He was attracted to the teaching of Jesus but was afraid to openly become a supporter so he came to see Jesus during the darkness of night.
- We meet Nicodemus again in John's Gospel when he brings myrrh and aloes to anoint the body of Jesus after the crucifixion (Jn 19:39). He brings a lavish amount 'weighing about a hundred pounds!' Nicodemus' journey to faith is complete and he openly acknowledges Jesus as Lord.
- Jesus' words about being 'lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert' refer to an incident when, while wandering in the desert, the people of Israel were attacked by venomous serpents. God instructed Moses to raise a bronze image of a serpent on a standard. All who looked on it were cured (Num 21:8–9). Jesus being 'lifted up' on the cross was to become the salvation of all.

EXPLORING THE WORD

Nicodemus comes in search of truth but has difficulty in accepting who Jesus is. He struggles to reach beyond the understandings of his upbringing within Judaism. In a sense, Jesus' words to him are a reassurance that if he publicly embraces faith in Jesus, his life will be saved. Condemnation only comes to those who have had the opportunity to embrace faith but have refused it.

In John's Gospel, the greatest moment in Jesus' life is the moment of his death on the cross. This is not simply a moment of suffering and death but a spiritual exultation because it is at that moment that God's love for the world is made manifest. 'God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son' so that we could have life. The only proper response to this great love and gift of life is to choose light and not darkness.

- What have been some of the moments of exultation in your life?
- What have been the periods of darkness?
- Is there a struggle in coming into the light?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- Nicodemus comes at night to speak secretly with Jesus. Are there barriers to your being open about your exploration of the gospel? How do you explain to friends and family your search for the truth? How easy or difficult is it to 'come into the light'—that is, to make your faith public? Share your thoughts on this.
- What areas of your life have been touched by the light of Christ?
- How do you think of 'eternal life'?
- What does it mean to be 'children of the light'?
- Light a candle each night this week as you pray. Proclaim God's truth and act for the light this week. Carry the light of the gospel wherever you go.
- A variation on today's Collect is apt for those approaching baptism or reception:
O God, who through your word reconcile the human race to yourself, grant, we pray, that with devotion and faith, we may hasten toward the solemn celebrations to come.
Pray this prayer often this week.

5th Sunday in Lent

Year B

GOSPEL

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Among those who went up to worship at the Festival were some Greeks. These approached Philip, who came from Bethsaida in Galilee, and put this request to him, 'Sir, we should like to see Jesus.' Philip went to tell Andrew, and Andrew and Philip together went to Jesus. Jesus replied to them:

'Now the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you solemnly, unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest. Anyone who loves his life loses it; anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for the eternal life. If a man serves me, he must follow me wherever I am, my servant will be there too. If anyone serves me, my Father will honour him. Now my soul is troubled. What shall I say: Father save me from this hour? But it was for this reason I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name!'

A voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' People standing by, who heard this, said it was a clap of thunder; others said, 'It was an angel speaking to him.' Jesus answered, 'It was not for my sake that the voice came, but for yours. Now sentence is being passed on this world; and the prince of this world is to be overthrown. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all men to myself.'

By these words he indicated the kind of death he would die.'

(John 12:20–33)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- In the gospels, Jesus often refers to himself as the Son of Man, a mysterious expression that both reveals and conceals his identity. It is a term which comes from the Book of Daniel.
- The festival referred to here was the Passover (Jn 12:1). Observant Jews who were able to come from far and wide to celebrate this great festival at the Temple in Jerusalem. The city was overflowing with pilgrims from many lands and regions.
- Often, people stayed outside the city because accommodation was very stretched at the times of the pilgrimage festivals. They came into the city each day to celebrate and then returned outside the walls to sleep, either in a nearby village or, often, under the stars.
- This is exactly what Jesus did on his final Passover visit to Jerusalem. After celebrating the meal he was returning to Bethany where his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived. On the way, he stopped to pray at the Garden of Gethsemane and there accepted his fate.
- The Passover is just one of the three great pilgrimage festivals of Judaism.

EXPLORING THE WORD

The Greeks referred to in this text are likely to have been 'God-fearers' or non-Jewish people who are attracted to Judaism as a religion. Not being born Jews, they are unable to fully enter into the chosen people of Israel and its religious life. Here, though, they express their wish to 'see Jesus'. The classic call to discipleship is 'Come and see'. There is an element here which builds on earlier references in John to the fact that the gospel is not just for the Jews but for all people who express faith. The call of the gospel is universal. The imminent death of the grain is already beginning to yield a rich harvest. Jesus is well aware of the fate in store for him but accepts that this is the central act of his mission. Glorification and exultation await him. It is in being lifted up that Jesus will draw all people to himself.

- In what ways do you feel drawn to Jesus at this point in your journey?
- Reflect back on what caused you to say, 'Sir, I would like to see Jesus.' What called you to discipleship?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What might have to 'die' in you in order for something new to take root and grow?
- How do you understand the call to be a servant to others?
- Reflect a little on your own experiences of death— not necessarily a physical death but a time of loss, abandonment or failure. How did you respond to this? Can you see now that 'life' came from this experience? Share your reflections together.
- Make choices for others this week. Die to yourself a little.
- Repeat this prayer often this week:
Lord, may I die to myself in Jesus so that through him I may have new life.

Passion (Palm) Sunday

Year B

GOSPEL

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They lead Jesus out to crucify him ... They brought him to the place called Golgotha, which means the place of the skull. They offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he refused it. Then they crucified him, and shared out his clothing, casting lots to decide what each should get. It was the third hour when they crucified him. The inscription giving the charge against him read: 'The King of the Jews'. And they crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left.

The passers-by jeered at him; they shook their heads and said, 'Aha! So you would destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days! Then save yourself: come down from the cross!' The chief priests and the scribes mocked him among themselves in the same way. 'He saved others,' they said, 'he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, for us to see it and believe.' Even those who were crucified with him taunted him.

When the sixth hour came there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani?' which means 'My God, my God, why have you deserted me?' When some of those who stood by heard this, they said, 'Listen, he is calling on Elijah.' Someone ran and soaked a sponge in vinegar and, putting it on a reed, gave it to him to drink saying, 'Wait and see if Elijah will come to take him down.' But Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.

(Mark 15:1–39, abridged)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Golgotha is a Semitic word which means 'skull'. The name Calvary comes from the Latin translation of 'skull'. It is likely that the name comes from the habitual use of the site for executions.
- Passion or Palm Sunday is the beginning of what is known as Holy Week, a period of intense preparation for the ceremonies of Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil.
- The Passion of Christ refers to his arrest, trial and death.
- Jesus is in Jerusalem at this time to celebrate the Festival of Passover.

EXPLORING THE WORD

Depending on how your parish celebrates the procession of palms and reading of the Passion, there are many readings which could form the basis of reflection. Mark's story of the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem (Mk 11) for this, his last Passover, is in sharp contrast to the Passion narrative. Only days before his arrest and trial, Jesus had been hailed by the crowds who spread their cloaks on the road, waved greenery in homage and shouted Hosanna. It is this same crowd of pilgrims to the Festival who turn on him and shout 'Crucify him' to Pilate and taunt him on the cross. Even the disciples are a disappointment. They are unable to stay awake and pray in the garden as he contemplates his fate. At his arrest, one young man even leaves behind his cloak rather than be taken with Jesus. Peter denies he even knew him. Jesus dies totally alone and abandoned, his human frailty to the fore. Only some faithful women watch from a distance to see the final outcome. But the faithful come to know that through this death comes the rising and the glorification.

- What does the passion of Jesus tell us about where God is in the suffering of the world and in our own personal suffering?
- What is Mark expressing in this image of Jesus as abandoned even by those who have followed him?
- If, as scholars suggest, Mark is writing for a community of believers in Rome who are undergoing persecution and even death, how may this image of Jesus' suffering resonate with them? What comfort may they take from this image of Christ?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What moments of utter abandonment have you experienced?
- Have you ever been jeered at by others? How did you feel?
- Share stories of occasions of desolation in your life.
- Share reflections on how you respond to the abandonment which Jesus experienced. Can you make connections?
- Spend time reflecting on the events of the Passion of Jesus. What does it mean for you that Jesus died for all humanity?
- Make this Prayer often this week.
Save us, Saviour of the world, for by your cross and resurrection, you have set us free.

Easter Sunday

Year B

GOSPEL

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When the Sabbath was over, Mary of Magdala, Mary the Mother of James, and Salome brought spices with which to go and anoint him. And very early in the morning on the first day of the week they went to the tomb, just as the sun was rising.

They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' But when they looked they could see that the stone—which was very big—had already been rolled back. On entering the tomb they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right hand side, and they were struck with amazement. But he said to them, 'There is no need for alarm. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified: he has risen, he is not here. See, here is the place where they laid him. But you must go and tell his disciples and Peter, "He is going before you to Galilee; it is there you will see him, just as he told you".'

(Mark 16:1-7)

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DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The Easter Triduum (which means 'three days'), lasting from Holy Thursday evening to Easter Sunday evening, is the climax of the Church's year.
- Holy Thursday is sometimes known as Maundy Thursday, a corruption of the Latin word for commandment, *mandatum*. This is to commemorate the 'new commandment' that Jesus gave his followers at the Last Supper: Love one another as I have loved you.
- The stories of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus were the earliest stories told and later recorded by the early Church. The commemoration of the events of the Triduum is the earliest of Church celebrations when the first Christians gathered to break bread together.
- Good Friday and Easter Saturday are the only days of the year on which Mass is not celebrated.
- The women come to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus early on Sunday morning because it is the first chance they have to do so. The Jewish Sabbath begins at sunset on Friday and ends at sunset on Saturday. During this time no 'work' can be done so the women must wait until dawn on the first day of the week.

EXPLORING THE WORD

You could perhaps allow time to read over some of the many Scripture texts used over these three days of the Triduum. You could point out the unity of the three days and how the readings fit together. It is essentially one liturgy with various moments. It is not simply a re-enactment of the past but a way of drawing people into the present reality of the mystery of God.

- The death and resurrection of Jesus is the fundamental pattern of life for the Christian. Give some examples of dying and rising from your life or the lives of the saints.
- In what ways was the baptism of the neophytes a dying and rising to new life in Christ?
- In what ways did the liturgy of these days draw you into the mystery?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What memories of these three days do you want to remain with you always? Do you feel a sense of 'amazement' at what has happened to you?
- Reflect together on the ceremonies of the Vigil. Share responses and recollections. What was the highlight for you? What did it mean to you? How did you celebrate with friends and family? How will your life now change?
- Light a candle each time you pray during this Easter season as a sign of keeping the light of Christ consciously before you.
- Repeat this proclamation of the mystery of faith often this week:
We proclaim your death O Lord, and profess your resurrection until you come again.

2nd Sunday of Easter

Year B

GOSPEL

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In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, the doors were closed in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them. He said to them, 'Peace be with you,' and showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were filled with joy when they saw the Lord, and he said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so am I sending you.' After saying this he breathed on them and said: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained.'

Thomas, called the Twin, who was one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. When the disciples said, 'We have seen the Lord', he answered, 'Unless I see the holes that the nails made in his hands and can put my finger into the holes they made, and unless I can put my hand into his side, I refuse to believe.'

Eight days later the disciples were in the house again and Thomas was with them. The doors were closed but Jesus came in and stood among them. 'Peace be with you,' he said. Then he spoke to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; look, here are my hands. Give me your hand; put it in my side. Doubt no longer but believe.'

Thomas replied, 'My Lord and my God.'

Jesus said to him: 'You believe because you can see me. Happy are those who have not seen, yet they believe.'

There were many other signs that Jesus worked and the disciples saw, but they are not recorded in this book. These are recorded 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.

(John 20:19–31)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The period from Easter Sunday to Pentecost is known as the Great Fifty Days and is an integral part of the Lent-Easter-Pentecost cycle.
- There is an ancient tradition that Thomas preached the gospel as far east as India.
- In Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus, the name of Thomas means 'twin'.

EXPLORING THE WORD

This gospel is one of transformation. The fear of the disciples is transformed by the gift of peace and the doubt of Thomas is transformed by his encounter with the risen Jesus. With this transformation, however, comes responsibility. The disciples are not to simply bask in the joy of Christ risen but are sent to continue the mission of Jesus in the world: 'As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.'

- You could discuss the concluding rite of the liturgy and how we are sent out to continue Christ's mission in our own world.

When Thomas is told by his companions that they have seen Jesus, he places his own conditions on faith. He will not believe unless he sees. Jesus must fulfil the expectation that Thomas has. The following week, he is forced to confront this and is brought to realise the pointlessness of imposing conditions on God. Only then can he see that God's ways are often surprising. Only after accepting this truth does Thomas come to understand what faith really is.

- Are there times when we expect God to behave as we want rather than being open to the presence of the risen Christ in unexpected ways?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What have been some of the doubts and uncertainties you experienced on your faith journey? Have these been fully resolved?
- Do you see yourself as now being 'sent'? What does this mean for you?
- How do you experience the peace of Christ?
- Have you ever been 'locked in' because of fear or being trapped in a certain way of thinking or responding? What was it that liberated you? Share your experiences.
- Have you ever had 'blind faith' in something or someone? What does this mean?
- Look for ways in which a simple touch can convey friendship, compassion or healing this week.
- Repeat Thomas' great acclamation of faith often:
My Lord and my God.

3rd Sunday of Easter

Year B

GOSPEL

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The disciples told their story of what had happened on the road and how they recognised Jesus at the breaking of bread. They were still talking all about this when Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you!'

In a state of alarm and fright, they thought they were seeing a ghost. But he said, 'Why are you so agitated, and why are these doubts rising in your hearts? Look at my hands and feet; yes, it is I indeed. Touch me and see for yourselves; a ghost has no flesh and bones as you can see I have.'

And as he said this he showed them his hands and feet. Their joy was so great that they could not believe it, and they stood dumbfounded; so he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' And they offered him a piece of grilled fish, which he took and ate before their eyes.

Then he told them, 'This is what I meant when I said, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, in the Prophets and in the Psalms, has to be fulfilled.' He then opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and he said to them, 'So you see how it is written that the Christ would suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that, in his name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses to this.'

(Luke 24:35-48)

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DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The disciples referred to in this gospel are the two who had been fleeing from Jerusalem towards Emmaus when they encountered Jesus on the road. They returned to be witnesses of their encounter with the risen Christ.
- Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles. His gospel is the story of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem to the cross and resurrection. Acts is the story of the gospel spreading from Jerusalem to 'all the nations'. A unifying theme in Luke is that of 'journey'.

EXPLORING THE WORD

In the Gospel of Luke all the events of Easter run into one another and the whole of Chapter 24 should be read as a continuous narrative. Beginning with the discovery of the empty tomb, the resurrection narrative follows the disciples as they move away from what had happened in Jerusalem towards Emmaus, but they encounter the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread. In witnessing to this, Christ is present among them again until he finally returns to the Father.

Jesus goes to great lengths to reassure them that he is the same Jesus who was with them during his ministry. Something in his nature has changed but he is still 'flesh and bone'. There is continuity with the Jesus they knew but now also something 'other-worldly' which they cannot quite comprehend. Jesus is the same but somehow transformed.

Jesus' journey is about to be completed with his return to the Father, but their journey is only just beginning. Now the disciples must journey from Jerusalem to all the nations, witnessing to what they have seen and heard, preaching the good news of repentance and the forgiveness of sin.

- Now that you are newly baptised, can you identify with the notion of just setting out on a journey of witnessing to the good news?
- Where do you think your journey will lead you?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.' Reflect on your journey towards Jesus through the Scriptures.
- How do you plan to continue that journey of deepening faith through the Scriptures?
- 'Their joy was so great they could not believe it.' How are you feeling now about what has happened to you in these last weeks?
- Exchange memories of times of great joy or revelation in your life. Have you ever experienced a wave of relief and delight after a period of tension or sorrow?
- 'You are witnesses to all this.' How will you witness to Christ in your life this week?
- Today's Psalm response could be repeated this week.
Lord, let your face shine on us.

4th Sunday of Easter

Year B

GOSPEL

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Jesus said, 'I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his sheep. The hired man, since he is not the shepherd and the sheep do not belong to him, abandons the sheep and runs away as soon as he sees a wolf coming, and then the wolf attacks and scatters the sheep; this is because he is only a hired man and has no concern for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for my sheep.

And there are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and these I have to lead as well. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be only one flock, and one shepherd.

The Father loves me because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me; I lay it down of my own free will, and as it is in my power to lay it down, so it is in my power to take it up again; and this is the command I have been given by my Father.'

(John 10:11-18)

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DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The Latin word for shepherd is the root of the word pastor which is often used to describe the priest who leads the community.
- From this Latin root we also derive other terms such as pastoral associate, pastoral council and pastoral care, all of which imply a duty of love and care towards others.
- Bishops carry a staff known as a crosier which is the shepherd's crook and a symbol of the care of the bishop for his people.
- John's Gospel will be read for some weeks during this period. John is the latest of the written gospels, probably being composed at the very end of the first century.

EXPLORING THE WORD

King David had been a shepherd as a boy so the image of the Shepherd Messiah underlies this text. But the intimacy of Jesus' relationship with his flock goes beyond even this. This gospel is a statement of the seriousness of Jesus' commitment to the Father's will and his self-giving love for humankind. Jesus' life is freely given for his flock. It is sometimes thought that Jesus died to satisfy the will of the Father imposed on the Son. This is not so. Jesus' gift was a free gift because he responded at all times to that which was most profound in him: the Father's love which he wished to make known to the world. It is generous, self-giving love for others.

- In what ways are Christians today called to offer this same self-giving love for others?
- Who are those in our world who are most in need of this generous love?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- Who have been the shepherds in your life who have guided and protected you?
- What or who are the 'wolves' which threaten and cause fear?
- Share memories of times when you were given special responsibility to care for something or for someone.
- Who are the people who rely on your care? Extend that care in special ways this week.
- Use the opening lines of Psalm 23 this week:
*The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want.
Fresh and green are the pastures where he gives me repose.
By quiet waters he leads me to revive my soul.*

5th Sunday of Easter

Year B

GOSPEL

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Jesus said to his disciples: 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that bears no fruit he cuts away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes to make it bear even more. You are pruned already, by means of the word that I have spoken to you. Make your home in me as I make mine in you. As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, but must remain part of the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me, and I in them, bear fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; these branches are collected and thrown on the fire, and they are burnt.

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask what you will and you shall get it. It is to the glory of my Father that you should bear much fruit, and then you will be my disciples.'

(John 15:1-8)

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DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The vineyard was one of the ancient images of the people of Israel, God's chosen people and God is the vinedresser.
- In John's Gospel the term 'I am' has a special significance. When Moses encountered God on Mt Sinai, God revealed himself as 'I am who am'. Jesus reveals himself as Son of God in the use of this term and tells something of his mission: I am the living water, I am the good shepherd, I am the way, the truth and the life, I am the light of the world, I am the bread of life.

EXPLORING THE WORD

Jesus continues to speak to the disciples through imagery which they understood from their everyday experience and with symbols that come from their Jewish tradition. The vine is a staple part of Israel's agricultural life. It carries the idea of the life which flows into the branches from the thick stalk of the vine. Jesus becomes that giver of life and prosperity, but behind his life-giving presence is the Father. Like the vine dresser, the Father must cut away anything which impedes that life or comes from a source which is not nourished from the 'true vine'. Jesus exists to make the Father known and so it must be with disciples of Jesus. We must 'remain with' Jesus and thus make the Father known.

- Discuss the ways in which you cultivate and keep healthy your connection to Jesus. Who or what helps you do this?
- How may you continue with this after the period of mystagogy?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'Cut off from me you can do nothing.' How are you connected to Christ? In what ways are you connected to all the other 'branches' who are the followers of Christ?
- What has been pruned from you? What fruit do you bear?
- 'You are pruned already by means of the word I have spoken to you.' Words can be powerful weapons both for healing and hurting. Share experiences of times when words have harmed or healed.
- Offer hospitality this week, not in the sense of offering food or drink but in making someone feel 'at home', secure and accepted.
- Today's gospel acclamation makes a suitable prayer for the week:
*Live in me and let me live in you, says the Lord.
My branches bear much fruit.*

6th Sunday of Easter

Year B

GOSPEL

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Jesus said to his disciples: 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's will and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my own joy may be in you and your joy be complete. This is my commandment: Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends, if you do as I command you. I shall not call you servants any more, because a servant does not know his master's business; I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father. You did not choose me, no, I choose you; and I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last; and then the Father will give you anything you ask in my name. What I command you is to love one another.'

(John 15:9-17)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- In John's Gospel there is no account of the last meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. Instead there is the account of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, an act of absolute service to others, and a long discourse of instruction on how they must conduct themselves in the future. This is known as the 'Farewell Discourse' and part of it is read this Sunday and next week.

EXPLORING THE WORD

The heart of today's gospel lies in Jesus repeating himself: 'Love one another'. The model for this love is the love that Jesus showed towards all those who follow him. Jesus has changed the way in which God relates to human beings. We are no longer servants of God but are drawn into deep intimacy and friendship through the Son. This new relationship is not dependent on our choice or will. God has chosen us and we are now commissioned to bear fruit, fruit that will last. The Christian command to love is not a vague feeling of good will; it is a love which suffers all, and may demand great sacrifice. The command to love as Jesus loved may be the most difficult test of our Christianity. This is how the presence of Jesus is experienced even in his absence.

- You could discuss some examples of people who have laid down their lives for others, e.g. St Maximilian Kolbe or Archbishop Oscar Romero.
- How are we called 'to lay down our life for our friends' in our daily existence?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- When have you experienced complete joy? What or who brought that sensation on for you?
- Have you ever found that love is a costly and demanding emotion?
- What does it mean to love one another as Christ loved us?
- With your entry into the Church, you too have been commissioned to go out and bear fruit. How are you feeling about this now? Are there any difficulties or struggles? Discuss your experiences so far.
- Relate in special ways of openness with friends this week.
- Today's Entrance Antiphon makes a lovely reflection for the week:
Proclaim a joyful sound and let it be heard; proclaim to the ends of the earth: the Lord has freed his people, alleluia.

The Ascension of the Lord

Year B

GOSPEL

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Jesus showed himself to the Eleven, and said to them, 'Go out to the whole world, proclaim the good news to all creation. He who believes and is baptised will be saved; he who does not believe will be condemned. These are the signs that will be associated with believers: in my name they will cast out devils; they will have the gift of tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and will be unharmed should they drink deadly poison; and they will lay their hands on the sick, who will recover.'

And so the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven: there at the right hand of God he took his place, while they, going out, preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word by the signs that accompanied it.

(Mark 16:15–20)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- These final verses of Mark's Gospel were a later addition to the original ending of the women at the empty tomb. They show that from the earliest of times, the disciples realised that, although Jesus was no longer physically present, 'the Lord was working with them'.
- The word 'apostle' comes from the Greek for 'one who is sent out'.
- Mark uses the dramatic figures of speech about serpents and poisons to illustrate that those who believe in the good news and preach it can overcome all that threatens or destroys life.
- All the baptised share in this missionary task of the Church; to go out to proclaim the good news 'to all creation'. Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis have all called on Christians to be bringers of good news to creation. We must be stewards of Earth and all its resources to ensure that future generations inherit an environment which God gifted to all humanity.

EXPLORING THE WORD

The central point to this gospel is the instruction which Jesus gives to the disciples to continue his work and mission: to take the good news of the gospel to the whole world and to all creation. He warns that this task may not be easy and that some will reject the message the disciples bring, but for those who do accept it the rewards will be great. They will overcome all that impedes or threatens life and will be given great gifts. In the preaching of the gospel, Jesus is still present and working with them.

The disciples unquestioningly carry out the instructions they are given. The preaching and the sacramental life of the Christian Church is the continuation of the presence of Jesus in the world.

- What hope is offered to us by Jesus taking up his place at the right hand of God?
- What signs of hope accompany the work of the Church in the world today?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What 'good news' does our world need today?
- How do you experience Jesus' presence, even though he is absent?
- This gospel tells of the closing of one era and the opening up of another. What experiences have you had of closing off one chapter of your life and the opening of another. Share your stories. In what ways was your baptism or acceptance into the Church the beginning of a new way?
- Make a special effort this week to be good news for others or for Earth. Plant a tree, refuse plastic bags at the supermarket, recycle, conserve water and reduce waste.
- Use this simple prayer often this week:
God draw us to you and lift our spirits on high.

Pentecost

Year B

GOSPEL

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Jesus said to his disciples: 'When the Advocate comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, he will be my witness. And you too will be witnesses, because you have been with me from the outset. I still have many things to say to you but they would be too much for you now. But when the Spirit of truth comes he will lead you to the complete truth, since he will not be speaking as from himself but will say only what he has learnt; and he will tell you of the things to come. He will glorify me, since all he tells you will be taken from what is mine. Everything the Father has is mine; that is why I said: All he tells you will be taken from what is mine.'

(John 15:26–27; 16:12–15)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The reason why the disciples were in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost was that they were celebrating the Jewish Harvest Festival which occurs fifty days after the Passover. This festival also celebrated the covenant made by God with the people of Israel on Mt Sinai.
- The Christian feast of Pentecost is fifty days after Easter Sunday and marks the culmination and closure of the Lent-Easter-Pentecost cycle.
- The word for spirit in Hebrew is the feminine 'ruah', meaning literally breath, wind or air.

EXPLORING THE WORD

This text again comes from the farewell discourse of Jesus to the disciples in John's Gospel. In it he promises to send the Advocate to them. An advocate is one who stands by in times of trial or difficulty, defending, guiding and instructing. In many ways the Spirit is the ongoing presence of Jesus with his disciples in all ages and these texts give an eloquent instruction on the reason for God's gift of the Spirit. The Spirit will witness to the truth which comes from the Father through the Son. The Spirit will guide the Church's future understandings as they gradually unfold. The Spirit will be the link between the Father, the now absent Son and the ongoing unfolding of the complete truth. The Spirit will inspire the followers of Jesus to continue his mission and will provide assistance and guidance in achieving this. No single set of human beings could completely know the implications of the Christ event. It is the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth sent by Jesus from the Father, who will accompany the Church through the whole of history, guiding it towards the complete truth.

- What evidence has there been in your own life of the Spirit guiding you towards an ever unfolding understanding of the complete truth of Jesus Christ?
- How do you experience the presence of the Spirit in your life at the moment?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- Are there people you still have 'many things to say to'? Is it important that such things are said?
- In what ways have you been lead to the complete truth?
- How do you experience the Spirit present in your life?
- The first reading tells of the experience of the disciples receiving the Spirit. They were astounded by what had happened to them and it produced a change in them as people. Share stories of times you have been 'blown away' by something. Did the experience produce lasting change? How have you kept this feeling alive?
- The Spirit is bestowed at baptism and 'confirmed' for us. Galatians 5:22 lists the fruits of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Try to live these fruits this week.
- Today's gospel acclamation makes a wonderful prayer for this week:
*Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful;
And kindle in them the fire of your love.*

