

1st Sunday in Advent

Year C

GOSPEL

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Jesus said to his disciples: 'There will be signs in the sun and moon and stars; on earth nations in agony, bewildered by the clamour of the ocean and its waves; men dying of fear as they await what menaces the world, for the powers of heaven will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand erect, hold your heads high, because your liberation is near at hand.

Watch yourselves, or your hearts will be coarsened with debauchery and drunkenness and the cares of life, and that day will be sprung on you suddenly, like a trap. For it will come down on every living man on the face of the earth. Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive what is going to happen, and to stand with confidence before the Son of Man.'

(Luke 21:25–28, 34–36)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Advent is the beginning of the church's liturgical year.
- The Advent period is concerned with 'waiting' for the coming of the Christ child.
- A recurring theme in the gospels read during Advent is looking towards the end times, when Christ will come again.
- Today begins the cycle of readings for Year C in the Lectionary. This means that most of the gospel readings are taken from the Gospel of Luke.
- The Advent wreath is one way of preparing for the coming of the Christ child. The circle of greenery is a symbol of God's love without beginning or end, while the candles represent the four weeks of preparation time. One candle is lit each Sunday during Advent, and the final, central candle is lit on Christmas Day.

EXPLORING THE WORD

Luke's gospel is written for a Gentile church community who are caught in 'between' times. The early Christians believed that Christ's second coming was imminent—that Jesus would return soon as the Lord of Glory. As time passed, they had to rethink this belief. In this text, Luke addresses a community who are able to contemplate the past history of Jesus and the church while looking forward to his future coming as the Son of Man. The text deals with how Christians are to live in the 'in-between time'. They must be attentive to the gospel and live in readiness to meet their God. They must not be distracted by the cares and snares of the world, but be ready to stand confidently before the Son of Man.

- What are the things in your life that distract you from the gospel?
- What are some strategies that make it easier to be attentive to the important things in life?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- In your life, what things have been 'sprung on you suddenly'? How did you deal with such surprises?
- What does it mean to 'stand with confidence before the Son of Man'?
- Share with each other some of your hopes and fears for the future. Are there particular goals you have set for yourself?
- How are you preparing for the future? What would you like that future to hold for you? Do you see it as a time of uncertainty or do you look forward with confidence?
- This week, be attentive to the time you spend in waiting—in traffic, in a shop, on the phone, to cross the road. Use these small moments of waiting to focus on, and prepare yourself for, the coming of Christ at Christmas.
- Repeat the gospel acclamation often this week:

*Lord, show us your mercy and love,
and grant us your salvation.*

2nd Sunday in Advent

Year C

GOSPEL

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In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar's reign, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of the lands of Ituraea and Trachonitis, Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the pontificate of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. He went through the whole Jordan district proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of sayings of the prophet Isaiah:

A voice cries in the wilderness:

*Prepare a way for the Lord,
make his paths straight.*

*Every valley will be filled in,
every mountain and hill laid low,
winding ways will be straightened
and rough roads made smooth.*

And all mankind shall see the salvation of God.

(Luke 3:4–6)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Luke goes to great lengths to describe the geographical and political world into which Jesus is born. God enters into human history at a specific time and place. The coming of Jesus for the salvation of the world is not a vague notion but a concrete event in time.
- The prophets of the Hebrew tradition were specially chosen people who spoke the word of God to Israel. John the Baptist is sometimes referred to as the last of the great prophets.
- Scholars believe that Jesus may well have spent some time as a disciple of the Baptist before embarking on his own public ministry.
- The 'Herod' mentioned in this text is Herod Antipas—son of Herod the Great, who ruled at the time of Jesus' birth. After Herod the Great's death, his realm was divided between three of his sons. One son proved an inept ruler and was removed from power in Judaea by the Romans and replaced by a Roman governor.

EXPLORING THE WORD

The word of God that comes to John in the wilderness is not a word meant for him alone but is to be shared with all the people. John's proclamation of the word of God 'through the whole Jordan district' is a precursor to Jesus' instruction to his disciples 'that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations' (Luke 24:47). The salvation brought by the Lord is not a personal and private matter but one that is destined for the whole of humankind. This salvation can only be achieved, however, if one is prepared to realign one's life—to repent of past sins and take a new path in life. John's call is a call to a new beginning.

- What new beginning are you being called to as you undertake your journey to baptism?
- What are the 'sins of the past' that you are called to repent of?
- What 'sins of the past' is all humanity being called upon to repent of in order to make a new beginning?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'The word of God came to John.' How did the word of God first come to you?
- Are there hills and valleys in your life that need to be made straight in order to make it easier for the Lord to come to you?
- Who are the prophets of the modern age who call people back to fidelity to God's plan for the world? Are there voices that are raised to warn us to honour the earth and all people? Are there voices that call us to respect creation and to share the bounty of God's gifts more equitably? How does the modern world receive the voices of the prophets of today? What hills need to be leveled and what paths made straight? Share your reflections together.
- This week try not to get bound up in the 'Christmas cheer' that dominates all around us. Choose instead, this week, to concentrate on the waiting and the preparation for what is to come.
- Today's entrance antiphon is a lovely prayer for this week:

*The Lord will come to save the nations,
and the Lord will make the glory of his voice heard
in the joy of your heart.*

3rd Sunday in Advent

Year C

GOSPEL

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When all the people asked John, 'What must we do?' he answered, 'If anyone has two tunics he must share with the man who has none, and the one with something to eat must do the same.' There were tax collectors too who came for baptism, and these said to him, 'Master, what must we do?' He said to them, 'Exact no more than your rate.' Some soldiers asked him in their turn, 'What about us? What must we do?' He said to them, 'No intimidation! No extortion! Be content with your pay!'

A feeling of expectancy had grown among the people, who were beginning to think that John might be the Christ, so John declared before them all, 'I baptise you with water, but someone is coming, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandals; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out.' As well as this, there were many other things he said to exhort the people and to announce the Good News to them.

(Luke 3:10-18)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Tax collectors at the time of Jesus were disliked immensely for two reasons. They collaborated with the Roman oppressors and they skimmed additional monies from the people for themselves.
- The Jewish people of this time were hopeful that a Messiah would come to overthrow the tyranny of the Roman Empire and set them free.
- The word *Messiah* in Hebrew means 'anointed one'; the word *Christ* has exactly the same meaning in Greek.

EXPLORING THE WORD

'What must we do?' This is a profound question. The answer does not lie in pious gestures or private devotions. The Baptist is very clear that to be saved, people need to respond to the ways of God by being in right relationship with their neighbour and by living justly. The justice of God is forged in right relationship so that those who have more share with those who have nothing; so that people are treated fairly and no extortion or violence is used against them. John is inviting his hearers to form a new society, and they begin to suspect that he may be the Messiah. But he is adamant that the one more powerful than he is still to come, bringing a baptism of the Holy Spirit and of fire. At Pentecost, this baptism becomes a reality for the early church, forming its members into the new society who respond to God's love by imitating the life and the love of the Son. They must now live like the wheat and not like the chaff fit only to be burnt.

- If we were to ask today, 'what must we do?' what might John's answer be to us?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'A feeling of expectancy had grown among the people.' Is there an expectancy growing in you as the coming of Christ draws closer?
- 'What must we do?' Are there things that you can do in your life in order to live more ethically? John's words offer a deep challenge to how people live.
- Living ethically is not always an easy thing to do. What are some of the challenges of the present age that make it difficult to live ethically? How often do we hear 'but everyone does it,' and what are some of the circumstances about which such a statement is made? How should a Christian respond in such circumstances? Share your reflections together.
- Make a special effort to live ethically this week. There are many opportunities provided by various church agencies at this time of year to share our wealth or good fortune with those who have little. Share yours.
- Use the responsorial psalm as this week's prayer:

Truly, God is my salvation,

I trust, I shall not fear.

For the Lord is my strength, my song,

he became my saviour.

Cry out with joy and gladness:

For among you is the great and Holy One of Israel.

4th Sunday in Advent

Year C

GOSPEL

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Mary set out and went as quickly as she could to a town in the hill country of Judah. She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. Now as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She gave a loud cry and said, 'Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord? For the moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leapt for joy. Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.'

(Luke 1:39-44)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- In Luke's gospel, the conception and birth of Jesus are described in parallel with the conception and birth of John the Baptist. One important difference is that the announcement of the miraculous conception of John to elderly parents comes to his father Zechariah, while the announcement of the conception of Jesus comes to his mother, Mary.
- In Matthew's gospel, it is Joseph who is the main protagonist, while Luke concentrates on Mary's role in cooperating in God's plan for the world.
- Luke's gospel pays a great deal of attention to the role that women play in the story of salvation.
- Mary undertakes a journey from Nazareth in Galilee, in the north of Israel, to the hill country of Judah in the south. This is an extraordinary journey for a young pregnant woman of her time to undertake alone!

EXPLORING THE WORD

Elizabeth's response to the visit of her young kinswoman is quite remarkable. She can have had no way of knowing what had happened to Mary but she receives a sudden intuition from God and is 'filled with the Holy Spirit'. Elizabeth and the child she carries both recognise and respond to an in-breaking of God's action in human history. The revelation to Elizabeth is even more profound when we realise that she rejoices not only because Mary is carrying the long awaited saviour, but also because she sees that Mary's blessedness is a direct result of her faith. 'Blessed is she who believed that the promise made to her by the Lord would be fulfilled.' It is Mary's willing acceptance of the role God chose for her that has resulted in her being blessed among women.

- Can you think of a time when you 'knew' something without being told? What was the source of your intuition?
- What promises has God made to you? Do you believe the promises that have been made?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'You are most blessed.' Do you have a sense of how 'blessed' you are? Can you recognise the 'blessedness' of others?
- Have there been occasions when you had a sense of being filled with the Holy Spirit or a sense of the closeness of God?
- Have you ever felt honoured by a visit from someone special? Is there a favourite relative that you visit on a regular basis? Do you have special memories associated with your mother or grandmother? Share your reflections with others.
- This week try to visit someone who is in need of some attention, especially as Christmas is almost upon us. Make the time to reach out to another.
- Mary's great song of rejoicing, which comes after today's gospel, makes a suitable prayer this week:

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord
my spirit rejoices in God my saviour.
For he has looked upon my lowliness;
behold, from now on, all ages will call me blessed.
The Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.*

Christmas Day

Year C

GOSPEL

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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 around 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 men who enjoy his favour.’

(Luke 2:1–14)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- A 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 6–4 BC in the reign of Herod the Great (Herod died in 4 BC). 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.
- This story of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, being laid in a manger and visited by the shepherds is unique to Luke. Matthew’s birth story is quite different. Jesus is born at Joseph’s house because the couple lives in Bethlehem. In Matthew, the family is visited by the Gentile Magi—the wise men from the East. What is important to understand is that both evangelists seek to say something about who Jesus is. They construct their particular stories of the birth to present a theological understanding of the identity and mission of this child.

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.) 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.’

- How strong is your belief in all that has been told to you?
- In what ways do you glorify and praise God?
- Read all the gospel texts for the different Masses for Christmas.
- You could discuss the text from John that presents the Word as pre-existent with the Father ‘in the beginning’. Point out that this is a profound reflection on the growing christological understanding of Jesus.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- ‘I bring you news of great joy.’ How will you manifest this joy today?
- 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?
- Use the gospel acclamation of the Mass during the day as your prayer this week:

Alleluia, Alleluia!

A holy day has dawned upon us.

Come you nations and adore the Lord.

Today a great light has come upon the earth.

Alleluia!

The Holy Family

Year C

GOSPEL

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Every year the parents of Jesus used to go to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up for the feast as usual. When they were on their way home after the feast, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem without his parents knowing it. They assumed he was with the caravan, and it was only after a day's journey that they went to look for him among their relations and acquaintances. When they failed to find him they went back to Jerusalem looking for him everywhere.

Three days later they found him in the Temple, sitting among the doctors, listening to them, and asking them questions; and all those who heard him were astounded at his intelligence and his replies. They were overcome when they saw him, and his mother said to him, 'My child, why have you done this to us? See how worried your father and I have been, looking for you.' 'Why were you looking for me?' he replied. 'Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father's affairs?' But they did not understand what he meant.

He then went down with them and came to Nazareth and lived under their authority. His mother stored up all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and men.

(Luke 2:41-52)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The Passover was one of the three Jewish feasts that should be celebrated in Jerusalem at the temple if at all possible. It was common that many people from a town, or an extended family, would travel together to Jerusalem for Passover, mostly for reasons of safety on the road.
- This text demonstrates yet again that Mary and Joseph were devout and pious Jews who observed all the rituals and customs of Judaism.
- This is the only scene focusing on the boyhood of Jesus in any of the gospels. Luke includes it to highlight one of his central motifs: Jesus' later journey to Jerusalem to the cross—the new Passover.

EXPLORING THE WORD

It is highly likely that Jesus had been to Jerusalem many times before with his parents, but at the age of twelve, his experience is deepened significantly. The timing of his listening and questioning may have had to do with the normal education in the Jewish faith that he would have been receiving as part of the preparation for his 'bar mitzvah' at age thirteen. At thirteen, a Jewish boy becomes 'bar mitzvah'—a 'son of the law'—which means that henceforth, he must observe all the dietary and religious laws of Judaism.

This is the final episode in Luke's story of the birth and childhood of Jesus, and it is Jesus himself who announces the project for the remainder of the gospel: he will be 'busy with my Father's affairs'.

The natural response of Mary and Joseph—consternation, anxiety, fear and confusion—cause them to ask in admonishment, 'Why have you done this to us?' But Jesus, in his confident response, shifts the discussion to another level: the will of his heavenly Father.

- Have you ever needlessly worried about something?
- What part has worry, confusion or misunderstanding played in your own journey to faith?
- Can you now answer confidently that you are focused on 'your Father's affairs'?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- Try to imagine the anxiety and fear that Mary and Joseph would have felt at being unable to find their son for three whole days!
- How has your family reacted to your decision to be 'busy with my Father's affairs'?
- Have you ever learnt a valuable lesson from a child?
- Reflect on your own experience of family life. Can you discern ways in which you came to experience God's love in your family? In what ways is the love of God for all his children reflected in the love shared by family members? Share your reflections.
- This week take a note of all the questions you would like to ask about your new life of faith. Ask them next week.
- Use the responsorial psalm as your prayer this week:

*How lovely is your dwelling place,
Lord, God of hosts.
My soul is longing and yearning,
is yearning for the courts of the Lord.
My heart and my soul ring out their joy
to God, the living God.*

The Epiphany of the Lord

Year C

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 and 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.
- The 'wise men' were probably magi or astrologers from Persia and represent all those who seek God with a sincere heart.
- Matthew's community is largely composed of Jewish Christians who are struggling to come to terms with the movement of the gospel into the Gentile world. In this episode, Matthew is trying to reassure his community that all people who recognise and honour the Christ are welcomed into the new people of God.
- You will notice that the text simply says, 'some wise men'; there is no mention of a number. Over time, this has become 'three' (based on the three gifts), and the magi became 'kings' and were even given names!
- You will also notice that Matthew has Jesus being visited in a house, presumably at home in Joseph's house.

EXPLORING THE WORD

The key to understanding this highly symbolic gospel lies in the various actors' responses to Jesus. 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 Jewish political leader, and the chief priests and scribes, the interpreters of Scripture and the religious leaders, have not seen what is there before them and, when they do come to understand, they seek only to do harm to Jesus. This is the first hint of the harm that will ultimately come to him from the same 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 initially 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?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What is leading you on 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? In what ways do you encounter the Christ child in your life?
- Use today's collect as your prayer this week:

*May the splendor of your majesty, O Lord, we pray,
shed its light upon our hearts,
that we may pass through the shadows of this world
and reach the brightness of our eternal home.*

Baptism of the Lord

Year C

GOSPEL

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A feeling of expectancy had grown among the people, who were beginning to think that John might be the Christ, so John declared before them all, 'I baptise you with water, but someone is coming, someone who is more powerful than I am and I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandals; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'

Now when all the people had been baptised and while Jesus after his own baptism was at prayer, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily shape, like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you.'

(Luke 3:15-16, 21-22)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- This feast and the wedding at Cana miracle (next week's gospel) were originally celebrated on the same day as the feast of the Epiphany because they are also considered to be manifestations of the Christ.
- 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.
- The mainstream Christian churches—Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Anglican—recognise the same baptism. If a person is baptised into one of these churches, it is not repeated, even if they move to worshiping in another church.
- Jesus is clearly attracted by the preaching of the Baptist and submits to his baptism of repentance. Scholars believe that Jesus may have spent some time as a disciple of John the Baptist before embarking on his own public ministry.

EXPLORING THE WORD

A small text later in the Gospel of Luke offers us a key to today's gospel. During his public ministry, Jesus says, 'Up to the time of John it was the Law and the Prophets; since then the Kingdom of God has been preached' (Luke 16:16). The baptism of Jesus marks the turning point. Today's gospel tells the story of crossing the threshold from the old order into the new. John very clearly states that despite some people's expectations, he is not the Messiah—the usher of the new order. John points beyond his own time to a future when God's Spirit is given at baptism, and the first of such baptisms belongs to Jesus himself. Immediately after Jesus' somewhat anonymous immersion along with 'all the people', the Spirit does indeed come to Jesus and the affirming voice from heaven announces Christ's sonship. God has come among us indeed.

- In Luke's gospel, Jesus is very aware of the consequences of submitting to the baptism proclaimed by John. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he goes into the desert, where he wrestles with all that he will be forced to forego in taking up his role as God's beloved Son. His resolve is firm, and he announces his mission in the synagogue at Nazareth. You could read together the next chapters of Luke, which trace this resolution.
- What will be the consequences of baptism for you? How will your life change? What will you be sent to do?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- How strong is your own sense of being 'beloved' and 'favoured' by God?
- How much time do you spend alone 'at prayer'?
- 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.
- Each day this week, take some time alone to pray; listen to the voice from heaven. Use your own name and repeat:
...N..., you are my child, my beloved, my favour rests on you.

2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C

GOSPEL

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There was a wedding at Cana in Galilee. The mother of Jesus was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited. When they ran out of wine, since the wine provided for the wedding was all finished, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' Jesus said, 'Woman, why turn to me? My hour has not come yet.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' There were six stone water jars standing there, meant for the ablutions that are customary among the Jews: each could hold twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, 'Fill the jars with water,' and they filled them to the brim. 'Draw some out now' he told them 'and take it to the steward.' They did this; the steward tasted the water, and it had turned into wine. Having no idea where it came from—only the servants who had drawn the water knew—the steward called the bridegroom and said, 'People generally serve the best wine first, and keep the cheaper sort till the guests have had plenty to drink; but you have kept the best wine till now.'

This was the first of the signs given by Jesus: it was given at Cana in Galilee. He let his glory be seen, and his disciples believed in him.

(John 2:1-11)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Ritual cleanliness was very important to the Jewish people. It was the custom to wash thoroughly before eating or drinking, after coming in from the marketplace or the road, in case a person had come into contact with someone or something that may have rendered them 'unclean'.
- In John's gospel, Jesus performs only seven 'signs', and each is designed to reveal something of who he is. Here he ushers in the messianic banquet, a symbol of the Messiah often used in the Jewish Scriptures.
- This is the third of the 'manifestations' of Christ, read in succession over the last three weeks.

EXPLORING THE WORD

In the Gospel of John, this is the first public act of Jesus and it is the woman, his mother, who initiates this first display of his divine origins when he 'let his glory be seen'. Her total trust that he will respond to her observation helps to explain why we look to Mary as a model of faith and discipleship. Jesus takes the symbol of the old rituals of Israel—the water for ritual cleanliness—and transforms it into something new. This is a recurring motif in John. Another recurring theme is that of 'the hour' of Jesus. In John's gospel, the 'hour' will not be finally fulfilled until the supreme moment when Jesus shows the fullness of his love for both his Father and for all people; the moment when he is 'lifted up' on the cross. This story is about much more than the performance of a miracle at a wedding feast. In the performance of this sign, Jesus reveals something of the power and glory of God operating in and through him, and it is this revelation of the glory of God that has a transformative effect on his disciples, so that they come to believe in him. The miracle at Cana announces the richness of the gifts of God that Jesus has come to dispense, and for the disciples and for all who come to believe in Jesus, this is a life-changing event.

- In what ways has your encounter with the richness of God's bounty been a life-changing experience?
- How do you now experience the abundance of God in your life?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What makes you believe?
- What does Jesus provide for you?
- Where or how do you experience God's glory?
- 'Do whatever he tells you.' What do you think Jesus is telling you at this point in your journey?
- Share stories of wonderful meals or banquets that you have experienced. What were the occasions? Describe the abundance. What effect did it have on those who shared the experience?
- Offer hospitality in abundance to someone in need this week.
- Repeat often this week:

*Lord, you provide drink for my thirst
and food for my hunger.*

Lord, may I always share in your abundance.

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year C

GOSPEL

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Seeing that many others have undertaken to draw up accounts of the events that have taken place among us, exactly as they were handed down to us by those who from the outset were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, I in my turn, after carefully going over the whole story from the beginning, have decided to write an ordered account for you, Theophilus, so that your Excellency may learn how well founded the teaching is that you have received.

Jesus with the power of the Spirit in him, returned to Galilee; and his reputation spread throughout the countryside. He taught in their synagogues and everyone praised him.

He came to Nazara, where he had been brought up, and went into the synagogue on the sabbath day as he usually did. He stood up to read, and they handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written:

*The spirit of the Lord has been given to me,
for he has anointed me.*

*He sent me to bring the good news to the poor,
to proclaim liberty to captives
and to the blind new sight,
to set the downtrodden free,
to proclaim the Lord's year of favour.*

He then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the assistant and sat down. And all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to speak to them, 'This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen.'

(Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The name Theophilus literally means 'friend of God' or 'lover of God'. Both the Gospel of Luke and Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, are addressed to him. It is not known who he was.
- Of all the gospels, Luke's is the most explicit and frequent in its references to the Holy Spirit.
- The Jewish Sabbath runs from sunset on Friday until sunset on Saturday.
- All Jewish men who have been 'bar mitzvah' (meaning 'son of the law') are eligible to come forward to read the sacred scrolls.
- Jesus would have been attending the very important Saturday morning synagogue prayers.

EXPLORING THE WORD

It is very unusual in the sequence of Sunday gospels to have two texts from completely different chapters, but such is the case this week. The opening text from Luke claims that he has a special purpose in undertaking to write his gospel. It is clear that Luke did not know Jesus personally—indeed he places himself among those to whom the story of Jesus 'was handed down', first by eyewitnesses and then by ministers of the word. Luke is of the second or third generation of Christians, and his purpose is to 'write an ordered account' to instruct Theophilus so that 'he can learn how well founded the teaching is'.

The Lectionary then moves to this central text in Luke—where the mission and mandate of Jesus is proclaimed. The text from Isaiah chosen by Jesus is about the coming of the Messiah or the 'anointed one'. Two weeks previously, we read the text of the baptism of Jesus, where the Spirit had indeed been given to him and he had indeed been anointed by God as the one who carries God's favour. Here Jesus announces how he will carry out his messianic mission of bringing hope to the hopeless. The gospel continues with Jesus carrying out this mandate. Luke includes many stories of Jesus bringing good news to the poor, of raising up those who are downtrodden, of bringing sight to the blind. His whole ministry is his living out this very task. Indeed, 'this text is being fulfilled today even as you listen.'

- Are there ways in which you can see yourself as among the 'poor', the 'blind', the 'downtrodden' or the 'captive'?
- In what ways does Jesus relieve these limitations?
- Discuss what these terms mean in our day? Who are the downtrodden, the poor, the captive and the blind today? What is the good news that our world needs?
- In what ways are we called to be bringers of good news to these situations?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'So that you may learn how well founded the teaching is that you have received.' Are you convinced of the truth of what you have been hearing and learning?
- How do you bring good news to others?
- Have you ever acted as a witness either in a courtroom, at a wedding, on a legal document or simply to a traffic accident? What responsibilities come with acting as a witness? How did you feel? Were you up to the task? Share your experiences.
- This week offer the gift of yourself to someone who is downtrodden, or be good news to someone who is in need.
- Repeat often and contemplate this week:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
for he has chosen me.*

He has sent me to bring good news to the poor.

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year C

GOSPEL

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Jesus began to speak in the synagogue, 'This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen.' And he won the approval of all, and they were astonished by the gracious words that came from his lips.

They said, 'This is Joseph's son, surely?' But he replied, 'No doubt you will quote me the saying, "Physician, heal yourself" and tell me, "We have heard all that happened in Capernaum, do the same here in your own countryside."' And he went on, 'I tell you solemnly, no prophet is ever accepted in his own country.

'There were many widows in Israel, I can assure you, in Elijah's day, when heaven remained shut for three years and six months and a great famine raged throughout the land, but Elijah was not sent to any of these: he went to a widow at Zarephath, a Sidonian town. And in the prophet Elisha's time there were many lepers in Israel, but none of these was cured, except the Syrian, Naaman.'

When they heard this everyone in the synagogue was enraged. They sprang to their feet and hustled him out of the town; and they took him up to the brow of the hill their town was built on, intending to throw him down the cliff, but he slipped through the crowd and walked away.

(Luke 4:21-30)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Capernaum is a town on the shores of the Sea of Galilee where Jesus performed miracles. It was the home town of Peter.
- Elijah was one of the greatest prophets of Israel. He lived around 850 years before Jesus and was famed for resisting the idolatry of the time and for his preaching and wonder-working. Elisha was his successor.
- Both Syria and Sidon were close neighbours of Israel, but they worshipped pagan gods and were not part of the chosen people. Despite this, both Elijah and Elisha worked wonders in God's name among them. They reached out to the Gentiles when they found people of faith there.

EXPLORING THE WORD

This text is the continuation of last week's gospel, where Jesus announces his mission in his home town. His program is to bring hope to the hopeless and inclusion to the outcast. Here we learn of how his mission is received: initial approval very quickly turns to rejection! What Jesus is pointing out is that God acts unexpectedly and that his love and care are available to all people, not just to the people of Israel, even though their needs may be great. One of their own has dared to challenge their preconceptions, and they vent their disapproval with violence, a violence that will reach its culmination on the cross. Jesus leaves Nazareth and never returns. The remaining action in the Gospel of Luke occurs in Capernaum and on the road to Jerusalem, where the final rejection will come to completion.

- Have you ever been genuinely shocked by something said by someone you thought you knew well?
- Talk about why the people of Nazareth may have been shocked by Jesus' words.
- Have others been shocked by your decision to pursue a life of faith?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'Physician, heal yourself.' Are there things within you that need healing?
- 'He won the approval of all.' When have you won approval from others? How did you respond?
- Have you ever had your opinions or comments treated with derision or disdain? Perhaps you were saying something you knew others may not want to hear. How did you feel? Were you able to hold your ground or was your opinion simply 'hustled' out?
- Have you ever had the experience of being ridiculed or rejected because of your faith? How do you respond to this?
- Who are the prophets of our own time who speak words we may not like to hear? How are they sometimes treated?
- This week reach out to someone who has experienced rejection. Offer solace to someone in need of healing.
- Use an adaptation of the collect this week:

*Grant us, Lord our God,
that we may honour you with all our mind,
and love everyone with truth of heart.*

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year C

GOSPEL

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Jesus was standing one day by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the crowd pressing round him listening to the word of God, when he caught sight of two boats close to the bank. The fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats—it was Simon's—and asked him to put out a little from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

When he had finished speaking he said to Simon, 'Put out into deep water and pay out your nets for a catch.' 'Master,' Simon replied, 'we worked hard all night long and caught nothing, but if you say so, I will pay out the nets.' And when they had done this they netted such a huge number of fish that their nets began to tear, so they signaled to their companions in the other boat to come and help them; when they came, they filled the two boats to sinking point.

When Simon Peter saw this he fell at the knees of Jesus saying, 'Leave me, Lord; I am a sinful man.' For he and all his companions were completely overcome by the catch they had made; so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were Simon's partners. But Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on it is men you will catch.' Then, bringing their boats back to land, they left everything and followed him.

(Luke 5:1-11)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The lake of Gennesaret is simply another name for the Sea of Galilee. It is also sometimes known as the Sea of Tiberias.
- This episode probably took place on the north-west corner of the lake near the village of Capernaum, where Simon Peter lived.
- The huge haul of fish is symbolic of the overabundance of good that is promised to those who believe in and follow Jesus. It is also a symbol of the abundance of the messianic banquet that Jesus brings.

EXPLORING THE WORD

This text tells Luke's story of the call of Simon to become a disciple of Jesus. Jesus already knew Simon; he had cured his mother-in-law after 'they interceded with him about her' (Luke 4:38). Jesus had already spent time in Capernaum, Simon's home town, and had performed miracles and cures. The large crowd who had witnessed these things now pressed on Jesus and he made use of the 'pulpit' of the boat. When asked to 'put into the deep', Simon, despite his misgivings, complies. The sheer wonder of the unprecedented catch of fish hints that somehow the action of God is to be traced in this extraordinary event. Simon—now with his Christian name, Peter, added to his Hebrew name—confesses his unworthiness and addresses Jesus as 'Lord'. It is only then, in the face of Peter's faith, that Jesus reveals the vocation and the mission of the disciple, and Peter, James and John immediately accept that mission wholeheartedly. They leave everything and follow him.

- Spend some time imagining what 'putting out into the deep' may have meant for Peter and his companions.
- What does it mean for Christians today to confess Jesus as 'Lord'?
- What does it mean to you to 'leave everything and follow him'?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- Are there ways in which you are already sharing in the task of being a 'fisher' of others?
- In what ways are you being asked to 'put out into deep water'? What does this mean? Is this prospect a fear-filled one?
- Have there been occasions in your life when, like Peter and his companions, you were 'completely overcome'? What was the source of this feeling? What happened? Share your stories with others.
- Spend time each day reflecting on being 'caught up' in the net of Christ and what that means for you.
- Repeat these words of the prophet Isaiah from the first reading:

*'Whom shall I send? Who will be my messenger?'
'Here I am, Lord. Send me!'*

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year C

GOSPEL

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Jesus came down with the Twelve and stopped at a piece of level ground where there was a large gathering of his disciples with a great crowd of people from all parts of Judaea and from Jerusalem and from the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon who had come to hear him and be cured of their diseases.

Then fixing his eyes on his disciples he said:

'How happy are you who are poor: yours is the Kingdom of God.

Happy are you who are hungry now: you shall be satisfied.

Happy you who weep now: you shall laugh.

Happy are you when people hate you, drive you out, abuse you, denounce your name as criminal, on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice when that day comes and dance for joy, for then your reward will be great in heaven. This was the way their ancestors treated the prophets.

But alas for you who are rich: you have your consolation now.

Alas for you who have your fill now: you shall go hungry.

Alas for you who laugh now: you shall mourn and weep.

Alas for you when the world speaks well of you! This was the way their ancestors treated the false prophets.'

(Luke 6:17; 20-26)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- This text is commonly known as the 'Beatitudes', from the Latin meaning 'blessing'.
- Both Matthew and Luke report this famous sermon of Jesus, but with slight differences.
- The main difference is that Luke balances the 'blessings' with a series of 'woes' aimed at would-be disciples who are still bound up with the signs of success in this world.

EXPLORING THE WORD

Luke takes care to alert us to who is present at this gathering. There are the newly formed twelve special friends of Jesus as well as many other disciples and both Jews and foreigners who come out of curiosity. The words of Jesus are meant for all but are especially addressed to his disciples.

Luke does not speak of 'the poor in spirit' or 'those who hunger and thirst for justice' as Matthew does. Luke is much more interested in the lived experience of those who are literally poor, hungry and suffering. They were the ones who were persecuted under the status quo of their day, and it was they who had an openness to the new order announced by Jesus' preaching of the kingdom. The powerful, who directed the established order of the day, could not bear such a challenge to their own position and thus they will 'drive you out, abuse you, denounce your name as criminal' for preaching the new order of God's kingdom. Such is the challenge to those who are disciples.

- How do you feel about the fact that Jesus' words challenge many of the things we think we need to be happy and blessed?
- Reflect on what makes you truly happy.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What are your ultimate pursuits?
- What would you see reversed in our present order?
- Remember a time of difficulty or suffering in your own life. Was there a blessing for you hidden in that experience? How and when did you come to realise the blessing born of pain? Share your stories.
- Choose the Beatitude that is most applicable to you and live it out this week. Alternatively, if the language of the 'woes' seems aimed at you, take steps to make yourself a little less comfortable or to switch your attention to other things.
- This week, repeat the response to the psalm often:

Happy are they who hope in the Lord.

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year C

GOSPEL

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Jesus said to his disciples: 'I say this to you who are listening: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly. To the man who slaps you on one cheek, present the other cheek too; to the man who takes your cloak from you, do not refuse your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and do not ask for your property back from the man who robs you. Treat others as you would like them to treat you. If you love those who love you, what thanks can you expect? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what thanks can you expect? For even sinners do that much. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what thanks can you expect? Even sinners lend to sinners to get back the same amount. Instead love your enemies and do good, and lend without any hope of return. You will have a great reward, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge, and you will not be judged yourselves; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned yourselves; grant pardon, and you will be pardoned. Give, and there will be gifts for you: a full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured into your lap; because the amount you measure out is the amount you will be given back.'

(Luke 6:27-38)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- This gospel contains the most challenging of all the Christian commandments and probably the most difficult to keep: love your enemies and do good to those who hurt you.

EXPLORING THE WORD

In last week's gospel, the disciples learned that to be a faithful follower of Jesus, they must be committed to a new order. This week's text tells them how they must live in that new order; in a sense it provides the practical details. What Jesus is suggesting should not be confused with passivity or simply inaction or resignation in the face of persecution and injustice. Quite the contrary! What Jesus is suggesting is radical action. It demands that we act towards others without being asked, that believers offer friendship and pardon constantly, without asking or hoping for anything in return. In Jesus is located God's self-revelation, God's actions in and for the world, his plan for salvation and its fulfilment. Followers of Jesus must act in these ways precisely because they are the ways of God.

- Turn the other cheek; love your enemies; do good to those who hurt you! Why should we? How can we? How challenging do you find this directive?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What is the most challenging thing for you in this text?
- In what ways have you experienced the compassion of God?
- Describe an experience of being hurt, criticised, misjudged or wronged in some way. How did you feel, and how did your feelings affect your response to the situation?
- Respond in a practical way to one of the commands of Jesus in this gospel—for example, pray for those who treat you badly; be compassionate to someone, or forgive someone who has wronged you.
- Repeat this line from the Lord's Prayer often this week and act on it:

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

8th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year C

GOSPEL

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Jesus told a parable to his disciples. 'Can one blind man guide another? Surely both will fall into a pit? The disciple is not superior to his teacher; the fully trained disciples will always be like his teacher. Why do you observe the splinter in your brother's eye and never notice the plank in your own? How can you say to your brother, "Brother, let me take out the splinter that is in your eye," when you cannot see the plank in your own? Hypocrite! Take the plank out of your own eye first, and then you will see clearly enough to take out the splinter in your brother's eye.

There is no sound tree that produces rotten fruit. For every tree can be told by its own fruit; people do not pick figs from thorns, nor gather grapes from brambles. A good man draws what is good from the store of goodness in his heart; a bad man draws what is bad from the store of badness. For a man's words flow out from what fills his heart.'

(Luke 6:39-45)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Parables are often used by Jesus as a teaching tool. They are generally brief stories with a double meaning, and we should read them for their metaphorical interpretation rather than their literal meaning.

EXPLORING THE WORD

Luke continues with his examination of the new order ushered in by discipleship and turns to a very personal dimension of what it means to be a follower of Christ. The 'fully trained disciple will always be like his teacher'. Jesus offers himself as a model of non-judgement. This, after all, belongs only to God. There are echoes here of last week's text: 'Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge and you will not be judged yourselves; grant pardon and you will be pardoned.' The disciple must recognise their own shortcomings and work tirelessly to rectify these so that what issues forth from their hearts are the good fruits that only true goodness of heart can produce.

- How easy or difficult do you find it to be self-reflective or self-critical?
- How can you encourage each other to recognise and nurture the goodness inside us all?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- Do you find it easier to judge the shortcomings of others than to face your own shortcomings?
- What fills your heart?
- Take a brief period of quiet time each day this week to undertake an 'examination of conscience' to discern what truly fills your heart and what fruit you can produce.
- Have you ever been the victim of someone's unfair judgement or criticism? How did this make you feel? Have you ever been too quick to judge someone else or been forced to confront your own failings? What steps did you take to make changes? Share your reflections together.
- Try not to judge others for what you may see as their shortcomings.
- You could use today's communion antiphon as your prayer this week:

*I will sing to the Lord who has been bountiful to me,
sing psalms to the name of the Lord Most High.*

