

**Monday, 1st January, Mary, The Holy Mother of God
Numbers 6:22-27, Galatians 4:4-7, Luke 2:16-21**

The shepherds hurried away and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw the child they repeated what they had been told about him, and everyone who heard it was astonished at what the shepherds had to say. As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen; it was exactly as they had been told. When the eighth day came and the child was to be circumcised, they gave him the name Jesus, the name the angel had given him before his conception.

A person of prayer

Today, we celebrate the first day of the New Year, and it is also the celebration of the Feast of Mary, the Mother of God. She, who carried Jesus in her womb, continues to carry each of us in her heart.

We are invited to take Mary's hand and let her lead us to a deeper life of prayer.

Many times, we tend to rush through the days consumed by our own worries and anxieties. There is no space for God or for His Word to take root and grow in our lives because we simply have no time. Mary is our Mother who will teach us how to become people of prayer - people who make time for God, people who ponder, rejoice and remember all small and big actions of God in our daily life.

In today's gospel, we see the shepherds hurrying off in search of the baby that they had heard about from the Angel. When they found Mary and Joseph and saw the baby Jesus, they rejoiced and told them all what they had heard. She, like everyone else, was amazed. But Mary did one more thing - she "treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart." She treasured and valued the Word of God. She made time to meditate and ponder on his Word, so as to search and know God's will for her. Mary did this throughout her life and thus she was able to face her greatest challenge when she stood by the cross of her Son.

In this New Year, may we be determined to become people of prayer, like Mary, so that we can seek and know God's will each day.

Questions for reflection:

- 1) Is making time and space for God a challenge? Why?
- 2) What can I do in order to make God and His Word the centre of my life?

**Tuesday, 2nd January, Ss. Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen
1 John 2:22-28, John 1:19-28**

This is how John appeared as a witness. When the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' he not only declared, but he declared quite openly, 'I am not the Christ'. 'Well then,' they asked 'are you Elijah?' 'I am not' he said. 'Are you the Prophet?' He answered, 'No'. So they said to him, 'Who are you? We must take back an answer to those who sent us. What have you to say about yourself?' So John said, 'I am, as Isaiah prophesied: a voice that cries in the wilderness: Make a straight way for the Lord'. Now these men had been sent by the Pharisees, and they put this further question to him, 'Why are you baptising if you are not the Christ, and not Elijah, and not the prophet?' John replied, 'I baptise with water; but there stands among you - unknown to you - the one who is coming after me; and I am not fit to undo his sandal-strap'. This happened at Bethany, on the far side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.

My whole life is Christ!

John the Baptist's whole life is to proclaim Jesus as Christ, the Messiah. His role was simply to be the Voice that shouts in the desert and to prepare the way for the Messiah. John the Baptist's message is about Christ, and he was successful in this mission. Many people from all over the country flocked to see him, hear him and be baptised by him. Yet, he was not swayed by the praises and high opinions of people. He was contented with his role as a messenger, a voice shouting in the desert. He knew that he was not 'the Christ', 'the Elijah' or 'the Prophet', but simply a voice.

We are also called to be the voice proclaiming Jesus to our family and friends. The greatest temptation of a messenger is to draw attention to himself/herself. Therefore, the challenge is to continuously use the words of St John the Baptist, 'I am not the Christ'... 'I am not the Star... I am the messenger who brings good news to people. I am but a voice shouting in the desert: Make a straight path for the Lord to travel.'

John the Baptist was a humble messenger who recognised his unworthiness

to even untie Jesus' sandal-strap. He said this to emphasize that he was not interested in claiming any glory or worldly recognition for himself. His whole life was to proclaim Christ, his Master, and no one else, not even himself.

Let us not be scared or ashamed to share the Good News with those around us. People need Jesus, not us. How great if in our life time, we can bring at least one person to come to know and love Jesus.

Questions for reflection:

- 1) Is there someone with whom I can share Jesus' love? Who is this person?
- 2) How can my life be a humble instrument to bring people to Jesus?

Wednesday, 3rd January, The Most Holy Name of Jesus

1 John 2:29-3:6, John 1:29-34

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

Only Jesus can complete me

John the Baptist saw Jesus coming to him and he recognised that this man was the One who would come after him, the One whose sandals he was not good enough to untie. Joyously, he proclaimed, *"There is the Lamb of God..."* He singled Jesus to others so that they could follow Him.

He continued, *"I saw the Spirit coming down on him from heaven like a dove and resting on him."* It is interesting that St John, in his gospel, should mention the Holy Spirit as it was not mentioned in the other three gospels regarding John the Baptist's testimony of Jesus' baptism. The evangelist, St John, wanted us to see the important role of the Holy Spirit in our life of faith.

When we encounter Jesus, it is the Holy Spirit that opens our hearts to

recognise Jesus and prompts us to respond. He stirs our hearts and makes us acknowledge that money, wealth, pleasures, worldly powers cannot complete our lives, but only Jesus can!

Let us continue to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. He is the one who constantly leads us to a deeper encounter with Jesus. It is from our own personal encounters with Jesus that we can point Him to others. We need to depend on the Holy Spirit to give us courage, strength, perseverance and joy to keep going in this mission.

Someone once said, *"I'm just a beggar telling other beggars where I found bread."*

Like John the Baptist, let us be happy beggars who point Christ to others so that others may also find Him, the Lamb of God - the One who will truly satisfy the hunger of each person.

Questions for reflection:

- 1) Is Jesus important in my life now? In what ways?
- 2) How can I open myself more to the work of the Holy Spirit so that He can lead me to a constant and deeper encounter with Jesus?

Thursday, 4th January, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

1 John 3: 7-10, John 1: 35-42

As John stood there again with two of his disciples, Jesus passed, and John stared hard at him and said, 'Look, there is the lamb of God'. Hearing this, the two disciples followed Jesus. Jesus turned round, saw them following and said, 'What do you want?' They answered, 'Rabbi,' - which means Teacher - 'where do you live?' 'Come and see' he replied; so they went and saw where he lived, and stayed with him the rest of that day. It was about the tenth hour. One of these two who became followers of Jesus after hearing what John had said was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. Early next morning, Andrew met his brother and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' - which means the Christ - and he took Simon to Jesus. Jesus looked hard at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John; you are to be called Cephas' - meaning Rock.

Come and see

Prayer is a time to have a strong encounter with Jesus. Just like the two disciples, we need to have an awareness of His presence and the desire to know Him personally and not just from what we hear from others or read from books, etc.

We need to go to Jesus and express to him the longing in our heart, *“Jesus, who are you? You who are calling me to follow you, to be with you.”* Jesus continues to fix his gaze of love and say - *“Come and see”*.

The two disciples had such a strong encounter with Jesus that they spent the rest of the day with Him. For them, the experience of being with Jesus, of listening to Him, changed their lives totally. They knew that they had discovered the treasure to happiness. They knew that they had obtained the answer to what they were searching for in their lives. Like Levi, they too had found the Messiah who loved them and called them to follow Him.

Thus, in this time of prayer, let us not miss the presence of Jesus who is constantly inviting us to experience His love more and more in our lives. Let us also be aware of the call of Jesus to us today - *“Come and see. Come and experience my love. Come and follow me.”*

Jesus, please help me to be open in this time of dialogue with you so that I can have an encounter with you and allow you to show me who you really are in my life. Help me to see you, know you and follow you today.

Questions for reflection:

- 1) How has my relationship with Jesus grown? Is He a stranger or a friend?
- 2) How can I follow Jesus more closely today?

Friday, 5th January, St. John Neumann

1 John 3:11-21, John 1:43-51

After Jesus had decided to leave for Galilee, he met Philip and said, ‘Follow me.’ Philip came from the same town, Bethsaida, as Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, the one about whom the Prophets wrote: he is Jesus son of Joseph, from Nazareth.’ ‘From Nazareth?’ said Nathanael ‘Can anything good come from that place?’ ‘Come and see’ replied Philip. When Jesus saw Nathanael coming he said of him. ‘There is an Israelite who deserves the

name, incapable of deceit.’ ‘How do you know me?’ said Nathanael. ‘Before Philip came to call you,’ said Jesus, ‘I saw you under the fig tree.’ Nathanael answered, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel.’ Jesus replied, ‘You believe that just because I said: I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.’ And then he added, ‘I tell you most solemnly, you will see heaven laid open and, above the Son of Man, the angels of God ascending and descending.’

Passing on the baton of faith

In today’s Gospel, Jesus met Philip and called him to follow Him. Philip did not want to keep Jesus just for himself. He thought of his friend, Nathanael, and wanted to bring him to know and encounter Jesus. Philip had no other intention than to simply desire what was good for his friend.

“Being a disciple means being constantly ready to bring the love of Jesus to others, and this can happen unexpectedly and in any place; on the street, in a city square, during work, on a journey.” (Pope Francis)

We too are Jesus’ disciples. This means that we must all be ready to bring the love of Jesus to others. We are always so eager to share the latest bargains, the most recent food craze, the most amazing recipes for certain dishes, etc. with our friends and family members. Are we excited to share Jesus with others?

Philip simply told Nathanael, ‘We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, the one about whom the prophets wrote: he is Jesus son of Joseph, from Nazareth’. However, Philip’s passion when he spoke about Jesus must have sparked an interest in Nathanael and he went to Jesus to check Him out for himself.

When Nathanael approached Jesus, Jesus told him, ‘There is an Israelite who deserves the name, incapable of deceit’. Nathanael was surprised with Jesus’ description of his character – a person of integrity. Curious, he asked Jesus, ‘How do you know me?’ Jesus’ response caught Nathanael by surprised. ‘Before Philip came to call you, I saw you under the fig tree’.

Pious Jews used to find secluded places under a fig tree to pray and mediate God’s Word in private. No one would have known that Nathanael was doing just that! He knew then that he was dealing with someone who was truly from God. Nathanael started to follow Jesus.

The steps Nathanael took to follow Jesus started with Philip's eagerness to bring Jesus to his friend. Today, let us, like Philip, share Jesus with others. So, what are we waiting for?

Question for reflection:

Am I constantly ready to bring the love of Jesus to others?

Saturday, 6th January

1 John 5:5-13, Mark 1:7-11

In the course of his preaching, John said, 'Someone is following me, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to kneel down and undo the strap of his sandals. I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'

It was at this time that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised in the Jordan by John. No sooner had he come up out of the water than he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit, like a dove, descending on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you.'

Beloved

"Yes, there is that voice, the voice that speaks from above and from within and that whispers softly or declares loudly; 'You are my Beloved, on you my favour rests.' It certainly is not easy to hear that voice in a world filled with voices that shout: 'You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable, you are nobody unless you demonstrate the opposite.' These negative voices are so loud that it is easy to believe them. That's the great trap. It is the trap of self-rejection. Over the years, I have come to realise that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity or power, but self-rejection. Success, popularity and power can, indeed, present a great temptation, but their seductive quality often comes from the way they are part of the much larger temptation to self-rejection. When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. The real trap, however, is self-rejection. I am constantly surprised at how quickly I give in to this temptation. As soon as someone accuses me or criticises me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone or abandoned, I find myself thinking: 'well, that proves once again that I am a nobody.' Instead of taking a critical look at the circumstances or trying to understand my own and others' limitations,

I tend to blame myself – not just for what I did, but for who I am. My dark side says: ‘I am no good... I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected and abandoned.’ Maybe you think you are more tempted by arrogance than by self-rejection. But isn’t arrogance, in fact, the other side of self-rejection? Isn’t arrogance putting yourself on a pedestal to avoid being seen as you see yourself? Isn’t arrogance, in the final analysis, just another way of dealing with the feelings of worthlessness? Both self-rejection and arrogance pull us out of the common reality of existence and make a gentle community of people extremely difficult, if not impossible, to attain. I know too well that beneath my arrogance there lies much self-doubt, just as there is a great amount of pride hidden in my self-rejection. Whether I am inflated or deflated, I lose touch with my truth and distort my vision of reality.” (Henri Nouwen)

In prayer, let us listen once more to that gentle voice within that tells us of the truth of who we are – children of God, the beloveds. By living securely in our deepest identity, we can then rejoice that others too are God’s beloved sons and daughters, and so they too are our brothers and sisters. As Beloveds, we take steps to put an end to jealousy, anger, hatred and seek to build fraternal union instead.

Question for reflection:

How can I live out my true identity that I am a child of God, His beloved today?

**Sunday, 7th January, The Epiphany of the Lord
Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6, Matthew 2:1-12**

After Jesus had been born at Bethlehem in Judaea during the reign of King Herod, some wise men came to Jerusalem from the east. ‘Where is the infant king of the Jews?’ they asked. ‘We saw his star as it rose and have come to do him homage.’ When King Herod heard this he was perturbed, and so was the whole of Jerusalem. He called together all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, and enquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ‘At Bethlehem in Judaea,’ they told him ‘for this is what the prophet wrote: And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, you are by no means least among the leaders of Judah, for out of you will come a leader who will shepherd my people Israel’. Then Herod summoned the wise men to see him privately. He asked them the exact date on which the star had appeared, and sent them on to Bethlehem. ‘Go and find out all about the child,’ he said ‘and when you

have found him, let me know, so that I too may go and do him homage.’ Having listened to what the king had to say, they set out. And there in front of them was the star they had seen rising; it went forward, and halted over the place where the child was. The sight of the star filled them with delight, and going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees they did him homage. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. But they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and returned to their own country by a different way.

What am I searching for?

In our journey of life, we all search for something. In one way or another, we all want to be happy. In order to achieve it, we may take different paths, thinking that they all lead us to our desired goal for happiness.

In this passage, we have two different groups of people. The first –group is the men from the East who were genuine seekers and they were searching for the One who would bring them true happiness. The act of searching demands courage and trust. It demands us to start walking, without knowing the way, similar to Abraham as he journeyed, guided only by the certainty of his faith in God.

The second group is Herod and the teachers of the Law. As Jews, they knew that the Messiah was supposed to come from Bethlehem, but they were not interested in finding Him in order to worship Him. Herod was searching for more and more power. For him, worldly power would make him happy. Thus, he wanted to get rid of any obstacle that prevented him from gaining worldly power.

What about me? What kind of happiness am I searching for?

Monday, 8th January, The Baptism of the Lord Isaiah 55:1-11, 1 John 5:1-9, Mark 1:7-11

In the course of his preaching John the Baptist said, ‘Someone is following me, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to kneel down and undo the strap of his sandals. I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.’ It was at this time that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised in the Jordan by John. No sooner had he come up out of the water than he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit,

like a dove, descending on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you.'

Living securely in my identity

After the baptism, Jesus heard a voice that affirmed Him in His identity – *"You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you."* With these words, Jesus rooted His whole life in His Truth. He lived His life as the Son of God, as the Beloved. Nothing and nobody could remove Him from this identity.

Because He was rooted in his Truth, Jesus knew that His mission was to help others to also discover the same voice calling each, 'My child'. He looked around and saw the self-righteous Pharisees and Teachers of the Law living in lies by making rules and regulations their gods, lies of looking down on others who are considered 'not good'. All these lies made them miss living in a close relationship with God as their Father. He too saw many outcasts who were burdened by the many labels that society had placed upon them. These labels - such as *'You are a sinner. You are no good. You are useless. You are punished by God'*. Thus, Jesus saw many people living as slaves of lies, instead of living with freedom in their Truth - in their identity as beloved sons and daughters of God.

Jesus went around loving and doing good in order to break down the many walls of lies and to reveal the true face of God the Father, as well as to show the freedom of living as a child of God.

Today, we are also called to live as children of God, and not to live in the many lies that either make us proud and self-righteous or to live in shame and fear. We are children of God and not slaves. Living as the Beloveds of God, we will not separate others from us. Rather, we will spontaneously see others also as Beloveds of God. Today, let us listen again to the words of God as he tells each one of us, *'You are my child, the Beloved; my favour rests on you.'*

Question for reflection:

1) What is Jesus' message for me in this time of prayer?

Tuesday, 9th January

1 Samuel 1:9-20, Mark 1:21-28

Jesus and his disciples went as far as Capernaum, and as soon as the sabbath came he went to the synagogue and began to teach. And his teaching made a deep impression on them because, unlike the scribes, he taught them with authority.

In their synagogue just then there was a man possessed by an unclean spirit and it shouted, 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: the Holy One of God.' But Jesus said sharply, 'Be quiet! Come out of him!' And the unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions and with a loud cry went out of him. The people were so astonished that they started asking each other what it all meant. 'Here is a teaching that is new' they said 'and with authority behind it: he gives orders even to unclean spirits and they obey him.' And his reputation rapidly spread everywhere, through all the surrounding Galilean countryside.

Authority in accordance with the Gospel

We live now in an era where many people question authority. With so many scandals involving those in power, many are cynical, jaded and simply have lost faith in all forms of authority. What kind of authority is Jesus inviting us to display as a parent, a grandparent, a sibling, an aunt/uncle, a friend, a teacher, an employer, a leader?

In today's Gospel, Jesus went to the synagogue and He taught with authority. His teaching impressed the people as they saw Jesus to be a person whose life and words were in harmony. They recognised how deeply humble and transparent Jesus was. He spoke from His heart to their hearts, and His words gave them freedom. The people were so used to their own religious leaders who demanded respect because of the titles and positions they held. Such leaders used their status to make people do as they instructed, but they did not care for the people and their needs.

We can ask ourselves: What about us? What kind of authority are we called to live as Jesus' disciples?

"Although man frequently equates authority with control, dominion, success, for God authority is always synonymous with service, humility, love..." (Pope Francis)

This is the authority that Jesus invites us to exercise - one that is rooted with humility, love and service in the environment where we are – in our family, in our workplace, in our parish, etc. May we exercise authority by understanding, caring, sharing and accepting every person, especially those who stand at the margins of society. Today, let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and follow Him closely again.

Wednesday, 10th January

1 Samuel 3:1-10, 19-20, Mark 1:29-39

On leaving the synagogue, Jesus went with James and John straight to the house of Simon and Andrew. Now Simon's mother-in-law had gone to bed with fever, and they told him about her straightaway. He went to her, took her by the hand and helped her up. And the fever left her and she began to wait on them. That evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were sick and those who were possessed by devils. The whole town came crowding round the door, and he cured many who were suffering from diseases of one kind or another; he also cast out many devils, but he would not allow them to speak, because they knew who he was. In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there. Simon and his companions set out in search of him, and when they found him they said, 'Everybody is looking for you'. He answered, 'Let us go elsewhere, to the neighbouring country towns, so that I can preach there too, because that is why I came'. And he went all through Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out devils.

It is good to be busy!

What do we do with 86,400 seconds each day? Perhaps the first thing that comes to our mind is that each second is busied with activities and deadlines.

It is not a sin to be active and busy! In today's Gospel passage, we see Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law. Jesus was also tending to the many sick and needy people who kept coming to Him. Thus, Jesus busied Himself doing good by caring for others and sharing with them God's love.

Sometimes, we busy ourselves with trying to seek glory for ourselves, and not for God. For example, to get affirmation and praises for ourselves, or to

proof to others that we are right, etc. Such busyness will only make us feel exhausted.

Today, Jesus invites us to be busy but in the right ways. When we truly love God, we will put our time, energy and creativity to serve others. Like Jesus, we have to be busy by doing good deeds. However, by caring for people and their needs, we will experience being burdened and frazzled. This is where we need to look at Jesus and learn from Him how to handle the busyness of life.

“In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there.”

Prayer - His intimate relationship with God the Father - was what sustained Jesus. As for us, we tend to put prayer aside when we find ourselves overwhelmed with the many daily demands of life. ‘No time’ is the convenient excuse that we tend to give. Precisely when we have no time, all the more we should spend time in prayer.

Today, let us ask for the grace to be busy by using our gifts to serve others and doing it all for love.

Questions for reflection:

- 1) In my daily schedule, in what ways is my busyness a consequence of my desire to do good deeds?
- 2) Is spending time in prayer my top priority? Why?

Thursday, 11th January

1 Samuel 4:1-11, Mark 1:40-45

A leper came to him and pleaded on his knees: ‘If you want to’ he said ‘you can cure me’. Feeling sorry for him, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. ‘Of course I want to!’ he said. ‘Be cured!’ And the leprosy left him at once and he was cured. Jesus immediately sent him away and sternly ordered him, ‘Mind you say nothing to anyone, but go and show yourself to the priest, and make the offering for your healing prescribed by Moses as evidence of your recovery’. The man went away, but then started talking about it freely and telling the story everywhere, so that Jesus could no longer go openly into any town, but had to stay outside in places where nobody lived. Even so, people from all around would come to him.

Love restores

In Jesus' time, leprosy was regarded as a terrible skin disease. It was seen as punishment by God for sins, and thus, those who suffered from leprosy were ostracized for their sinful and unclean state.

In today's Gospel passage, the leper went to Jesus to be healed. *"If you want to, you can cure me."* The leper recognised that Jesus had the power to heal him. Looking at the leper and his suffering, Jesus was moved with pity. Why pity? This was because Jesus knew that the leper was cast out of the community due to his condition. Instead of being helped by others, he was isolated and uncared for. The people looked at the leper with fear, and thus they built a wall of division to protect themselves from him.

Out of love, Jesus immediately reached out, touched the leper and healed him in order that he could be restored once again to his community.

Perhaps we can ask ourselves in this time of prayer, do we identify with the leper? Have we experienced being ostracised by our family and friends because of certain conditions or situations in our life? Or do we ourselves cut people off from our lives because we see others as 'lepers' who are unworthy of our care and concern?

To be Jesus' disciples, we must follow His way of love that restores and heals.

Lord, carry out your work of restoring and healing through me!

Friday, 12th January

1 Samuel 8:4-7, 10-22, Mark 2:1-12

When Jesus returned to Capernaum some time later, word went round that he was back; and so many people collected that there was no room left, even in front of the door. He was preaching the word to them when some people came bringing him a paralytic carried by four men, but as the crowd made it impossible to get the man to him, they stripped the roof over the place where Jesus was; and when they had made an opening, they lowered the stretcher on which the paralytic lay. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, 'My child, your sins are forgiven'. Now some scribes were sitting there, and they thought to themselves, 'How can this man talk like that? He is blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God?' Jesus, inwardly aware that this was what

they were thinking, said to them, 'Why do you have these thoughts in your hearts? Which of these is easier: to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven" or to say, "Get up, pick up your stretcher and walk"? But to prove to you that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,' - he said to the paralytic - I order you: get up, pick up your stretcher, and go off home.' And the man got up, picked up his stretcher at once and walked out in front of everyone, so that they were all astounded and praised God saying, 'We have never seen anything like this'.

The dynamics of faith: To help and be helped

In today's Gospel, we see four friends who did their best to get their paralyzed friend to be healed by Jesus. They were so determined that they even removed the roof of the place where Jesus was in order to lower the sick friend to Jesus. Nothing seemed to be an obstacle for these four friends! They had the faith that Jesus would heal their sick friend.

Today, the faith of these four friends challenges us as to how our faith can bring our family members and friends to Jesus. There are many people out there who live their lives without faith, without God. Some people are 'paralyzed' from living life fully because they are weighed down by their inability to forgive, or their hurt from past wounds. Jesus wants to heal them and restore them to wholeness, but He needs each of us to bring them to Him.

At the same time, we sometimes can experience being tired and weak in faith, and find ourselves needing the help of others to bring us to Jesus.

"In the history of salvation, God saved a people. No one has complete identity apart from a people. No one is saved on his or her own, as an isolated individual; rather, God draws us to himself by considering the network of interpersonal relationships that form the human community. God enters into this 'popular' dynamics." (Pope Francis)

Our vocation, more than simply being a parent, a child, a spouse, an employer, etc. is to constantly fall in love with Jesus and bring others to Him. We are here to be bridges that help others to walk over and meet Jesus.

Today, let God enter into our interpersonal relationships so that each person whom we meet will encounter Him. Let us not live our faith as isolated

individuals, but let us enter into the dynamics of helping others in their journey as well as to allow others to help us in ours.

Questions for reflection:

- 1) Have I ever experienced being helped by the faith journey of others?
- 2) Today, how can I bring those around me to Jesus?

Saturday, 13th January

1 Samuel 9:1-4, 17-19; 10:1, Mark 2:13-17

Jesus went out again to the shore of the lake; and all the people came to him, and he taught them. As he was walking on he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus, sitting by the customs house, and he said to him, 'Follow me'. And he got up and followed him. When Jesus was at dinner in his house, a number of tax collectors and sinners were also sitting at the table with Jesus and his disciples; for there were many of them among his followers. When the scribes of the Pharisee party saw him eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard this he said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. I did not come to call the virtuous, but sinners.'

Jesus calls

We must never get tired of allowing Jesus to look after us in moments of prayer as well as in our daily life. If we miss being looked after by Jesus, we will remain in our tiredness, frustrations, busyness that life brings. Let us be renewed internally by listening attentively to Jesus calling us, *"Follow me."* Today can be a moment of grace when we let ourselves be loved by Him again.

In today's passage, Levi the son of Alphaeus was sitting in the customs house as he would every other ordinary day. At that moment, Jesus drew near to Levi and said, *"Follow me."* Levi, hearing Jesus' call, had to make a decision: to remain living his old life or to leave his old life behind and surrender everything in order to follow Jesus. Levi chose the latter and his life was never the same again.

Jesus calls us every day to leave behind our old life, our habits, our addictions, our self-centred pride, our fears, etc. and to follow him. He calls us to trust Him and enter into the realm of a deeper faith and a deeper love.

One assurance is that Jesus calls us and keeps calling us. Along the way, we might experience ourselves being unfaithful, but Jesus remains faithful. We might make excuses not to maintain our daily prayer life or become tired of loving and doing good. However, our unfaithfulness does not deter Jesus from waiting and calling us again. He, like a persistent lover, never gives up on any of us.

Today can be moment of grace when Jesus enters into our life again.

Question for reflection:

1) What is Jesus' invitation to me as I reflect on the Gospel today?

Sunday, 14th January, Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Samuel 3:3-10,19, 1 Corinthians 6:13-15, 17-20, John 1:35-42

As John stood there again with two of his disciples, Jesus passed, and John stared hard at him and said, 'Look, there is the lamb of God'. Hearing this, the two disciples followed Jesus. Jesus turned round, saw them following and said, 'What do you want?' They answered, 'Rabbi,' - which means Teacher - 'where do you live?' 'Come and see' he replied; so they went and saw where he lived, and stayed with him the rest of that day. It was about the tenth hour. One of these two who became followers of Jesus after hearing what John had said was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. Early next morning, Andrew met his brother and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' - which means the Christ - and he took Simon to Jesus. Jesus looked hard at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John; you are to be called Cephas' - meaning Rock.

Come and see

Prayer is a time to have a strong encounter with Jesus. Just like the two disciples, we need to have an awareness of His presence and the desire to know Him personally and not just from what we hear from others or read from books, etc.

We need to go to Jesus and express to him the longing in our heart, "*Jesus, who are you? You who are calling me to follow you, to be with you.*" Jesus continues to fix his gaze of love and say - "*Come and see*".

The two disciples had such a strong encounter with Jesus that they spent the

rest of the day with Him. For them, the experience of being with Jesus, of listening to Him, changed their lives totally. They knew that they had discovered the treasure to happiness. They knew that they had obtained the answer to what they were searching for in their lives. Like Levi, they too had found the Messiah who loved them and called them to follow Him.

Thus, in this time of prayer, let us not miss the presence of Jesus who is constantly inviting us to experience His love more and more in our lives. Let us also be aware of the call of Jesus to us today - *"Come and see. Come and experience my love. Come and follow me."*

Jesus, please help me to be open in this time of dialogue with you so that I can have an encounter with you and allow you to show me who you really are in my life. Help me to see you, know you and follow you today.

Questions for reflection:

- 1) How has my relationship with Jesus grown? Is He a stranger or a friend?
- 2) How can I follow Jesus more closely today?

**Monday, 15th January,
1 Samuel 15:16-23, Mark 2:18-22**

One day when John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting, some people came and said to him, 'Why is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not?' Jesus replied, 'Surely the bridegroom's attendants would never think of fasting while the bridegroom is still with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they could not think of fasting. But the time will come for the bridegroom to be taken away from them, and then, on that day, they will fast. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; if he does, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and the tear gets worse. And nobody puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost and the skins too. No! New wine, fresh skins!'

An invitation to joy

In the Bible, the image of a bride is used for God's people and the image of a groom for the God who loves us. Jesus likens Himself to a bridegroom. He calls us to be His brides, His beloveds. When we have Jesus in our lives, we experience true joy!

'A Christian is one who is invited. Invited to what? You are invited to join in the feast, to the joy of being saved, to the joy of being redeemed, to the joy of sharing life with Christ!' (Pope Francis)

The Pharisees missed the bridegroom because their hearts had become rigid like old wineskins. They could not accept Jesus and the new concept of love He brought to their lives.

Today's message for each of us is to be open to Jesus and His Word so that we can experience again the newness that He brings to our hearts.

'Let's try to be open to God's word, and open to the Lord's surprises when he speaks to us.' (Pope Francis)

Questions for reflection:

- 1) What strikes me in today's passage?
- 2) Is there anything that closes my heart and makes it rigid to God and his Word? What is it?

Tuesday, 16th January

1 Samuel 16:1-13, Mark 2:23-28

One Sabbath day Jesus happened to be taking a walk through the cornfields, and his disciples began to pick ears of corn as they went along. And the Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing something on the Sabbath day that is forbidden?' And he replied, 'Did you never read what David did in his time of need when he and his followers were hungry - how he went into the house of God when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the loaves of offering which only the priests are allowed to eat, and how he also gave some to the men with him?' And he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath; the Son of Man is master even of the Sabbath'.

Jesus, Lord of my life

"In setting this commandment within the context of the basic structure of ethics, Israel and then the Church declare that they consider it not just a matter of community religious discipline but a defining and indelible expression of our relationship with God, announced and expounded by biblical revelation.

But, man's relationship with God also demands times of explicit prayer, in which the relationship becomes an intense dialogue, involving every dimension of the person. The Lord's Day is the day of this relationship par excellence when men and women raise their song to God and become the voice of all creation." (Pope John Paul II, Dies Domini; 13, 15).

We are always so busy and active that we have forgotten the true essence of the Sabbath. We live in order to work, and thus we neglect what is truly most vital in our lives.

Work is important as it provides income for us and our families. However, let us ask ourselves, do we place so much importance on our jobs, building up our careers and businesses and striving to make more money that we have, in fact, no time for our families and even for God? Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath and the Lord of our lives. Let us never take our relationship with Him for granted!

Jesus, may you be the Lord of my life that I may walk in your light and your love!

Wednesday, 17th January, St Anthony, Abbot
1 Samuel 17:32-33, 37, 40-51, Mark 3:1-6

Jesus went again into a synagogue, and there was a man there who had a withered hand. And they were watching him to see if he would cure him on the Sabbath day, hoping for something to use against him. He said to the man with the withered hand, 'Stand up out in the middle!' Then he said to them, 'Is it against the law on the Sabbath day to do good, or to do evil; to save life, or to kill?' But they said nothing. Then, grieved to find them so obstinate, he looked angrily round at them, and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand'. He stretched it out and his hand was better. The Pharisees went out and at once began to plot with the Herodians against him, discussing how to destroy him.

To follow the Master's footsteps

The Pharisees, as religious teachers, zealously followed the Law so much that they failed to point people towards God. Not only did they fail to lead people to God, but they did not have compassion for others.

Jesus, on the other hand, had eyes only for those who were in need of His help. Jesus had come to do good and not evil; to save life and not to kill.

'Let us learn from Christ how to pray, to forgive, to sow peace, and to be near those in need.' (Pope Francis)

How sad it is if we were to do good acts simply because we hope that others would reward us in one way or another. This is because we would simply do good for our personal gains and interests, and not because of our sincere desire to follow Jesus' footsteps.

Today, let us learn from Jesus how to do good acts to those around us, out of a compassionate heart like His.

Questions for reflection:

- 1) How different am I from the Pharisees and the Herodians?
- 2) How can I consciously follow Jesus' footsteps by doing good acts to the people around me?

Thursday, 18th January

1 Samuel 18:6-9; 19:1-7, Mark 3:7-12

Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lakeside, and great crowds from Galilee followed him. From Judaea, Jerusalem, Idumaea, Transjordan and the region of Tyre and Sidon, great numbers who had heard of all he was doing came to him. And he asked his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, to keep him from being crushed. For he had cured so many that all who were afflicted in any way were crowding forward to touch him. And the unclean spirits, whenever they saw him, would fall down before him and shout, 'You are the Son of God!' But he warned them strongly not to make him known.

Drawing close to Jesus

Crowds and crowds of people kept going to Jesus because they saw the great miracles He did, and so they kept coming from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, Tyre and Sidon. They came and kept coming because they saw that there was something special about this man called Jesus. Thus, they pushed their way through just to get something from Him.

Today, let us ask ourselves: What is the reason why we come to pray? Why do we draw close to Jesus?

Like the crowds, many Christians tend to go to Jesus with a long list of prayer demands that He has to solve and respond to. Jesus becomes for many, a superman possessing superpowers, out to save the world. If He fails to do their bidding, then their faith is shaken and they start to doubt.

A mature faith leads us to know, love and trust Jesus more and more. We go to Jesus because we need Him and not for the things we can get from Him.

Today, let us have the desire to draw close to Jesus, with no other intentions than to love Him.

'To fall in love with God is the greatest romance; to seek Him the greatest adventure; to find Him, the greatest human achievement.' (St Augustine)

Friday, 19th January

1 Samuel 24:3-21, Mark 3:13-19

Jesus went up into the hills and summoned those he wanted. So they came to him and he appointed twelve; they were to be his companions and to be sent out to preach, with power to cast out devils. And so he appointed the Twelve: Simon to whom he gave the name Peter, James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James, to whom he gave the name Boanerges or 'Sons of Thunder'; then Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, the man who was to betray him.

Called to be Jesus' companion

We can be sure Jesus calls every one of us to Him each day but how many of us accept the challenge and respond to His call? How wonderful it is if we can readily respond to His invitation to come to Him and be His companions, His friends? From a real and intimate friendship with Jesus, we are then ready to be sent out to preach and share the Good News of His friendship through our actions and deeds. We are the disciples whom Jesus calls today - people who stay close to Him and who are trusted by Him to go and share God's unconditional love with others.

'It is easy to love the people far away. It is not always easy to love those close to us. It is easier to give a cup of rice to relieve hunger than to relieve the loneliness and pain of someone unloved in our own home. Bring love into your home for this is where our love for each other must start.' (Mother Teresa)

This is a real challenge for many of us because we find it so difficult to bring Jesus' love, peace, joy and hope to those closest to us. We are afraid of what our family members and friends would say when they see us putting our big or small efforts to become more loving like Jesus our Master. Mission begins at home. Thus, let us first rejoice at who we are for Jesus. By acknowledging that we are loved and called by Jesus, we are able to become His authentic disciples. Jesus desires to carry out His work through us. Today, He looks at our spouse, children, parents, colleagues, helpers at home and others we come in contact with and wants us to bring His presence to them.

Questions for reflection:

- 1) Do I regard myself as Jesus' companion whom He trusts?
- 2) As Jesus' disciple, what can I do today so that I can let Jesus carry on His work through me?

Saturday, 20th January

2 Samuel 1:1-14, 11-12, 17, 19, 23-27, Mark 3:20-21

Jesus went home again, and once more such a crowd collected that they could not even have a meal. When his relatives heard of this, they set out to take charge of him, convinced he was out of his mind.

A happy fool for Christ

Was Jesus out of his mind? Yes! He was 'mad' with love for God and for his people. He was so 'mad' that he dedicated His whole waking moments giving Himself for the mission.

Jesus was out of His mind, not in the sense of being mentally unsound, but He was passionate for God and for the people. He was so full of love that even His closest family could not understand him.

What is our passion? What is THE THING that takes away our mind, our time, our creativity? Is it the Korean drama series? Is it computer games? Is it

Happy Hour with jugs of beer? What is our passion? Is it God? Are we giving ourselves to bring people close to God?

We are called to be Fools for Christ - Fools whose lives are totally with Christ, for Christ, in Christ. The world needs Fools for Christ in order to make sense of this world of hatred, revenge, injustice, oppression and greed. People need us to show them that God still exists and that He has not abandoned them to the chaotic mess.

Let us look at Jesus and ask him to reveal His heart to us so that we can see what it is beating for. Let us imitate His heart so that we may also be mad for God, and passionate in bringing His love to those around us.

Jesus, let me understand your heart. I want to be a Fool for you so that I can truly be your Friend who shines with your message of Love in this world.

**Sunday, 21st January, Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, St. Agnes
Jonah 3:1-5, 10, 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, Mark 1:14-20**

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.' As he was walking along by the Sea of Galilee he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net in the lake - for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you into fishers of men'. And at once they left their nets and followed him. Going on a little further, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John; they too were in their boat, mending their nets. He called them at once and, leaving their father Zebedee in the boat with the men he employed, they went after him.

People of action!

As Christians, we are all called by Jesus to follow Him. This call of Jesus is urgent. He calls and we respond NOW, not tomorrow, not with a maybe, not with a 'Let me consider the pros and cons'. NOW!

In today's gospel, Jesus saw two fishermen, Simon and his brother Andrew. He saw in them the potential for an extraordinary life and mission. He said to them, 'Come with me, Come and follow me!' Jesus called them to leave their nets of security, comforts, etc and to follow Him. It was not to follow a philosophy or a set of rules and regulations, but to follow Jesus the person. It

was a call to enter into a loving relationship with Him. Simon and Andrew felt the strength of his call, the gaze of love over their lives, and they obeyed the call. They did not stop to ask the plans of Jesus for them or the nature of the mission, but they simply left everything and followed Him at once.

There was so much of courage in the actions of Simon and Andrew!

If we really want to be followers of Jesus, we too must have the courage to respond to his call. A true follower of Jesus is not a coward, but a person of character, a person of action. A true follower is also a person deeply in love with Jesus who puts Him to be his/her number 1 in his/her life and is also willing to devote his/her life for the sake of others.

Question for reflection:

1) Jesus, what must I leave behind in order to follow you today?

Monday, 22nd January, St. Vincent
2 Samuel 5:1-7, 10, Mark 3:22-30

The scribes who had come down from Jerusalem were saying, 'Beelzebul is in him' and, 'It is through the prince of devils that he casts devils out'. So he called them to him and spoke to them in parables, 'How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot last. And if a household is divided against itself, that household can never stand. Now if Satan has rebelled against himself and is divided, he cannot stand either - it is the end of him. But no one can make his way into a strong man's house and burgle his property unless he has tied up the strong man first. Only then can he burgle his house. 'I tell you solemnly, all men's sins will be forgiven, and all their blasphemies; but let anyone blaspheme against the Holy Spirit and he will never have forgiveness: he is guilty of an eternal sin.' This was because they were saying, 'An unclean spirit is in him'.

A second chance

Jesus was going around healing people and touching the lives of many. He was doing good deeds. Yet, the scribes said that an evil spirit possessed Him! Why? Out of spite and jealousy, they judged and accused Him. They saw that crowds of people were going to Jesus and they were afraid of losing their power and authority. What did Jesus do in the face of such accusation? He simply gathered them around Him and told them a parable, a story so that

they could reflect and hopefully be open enough to allow their stubborn hearts to be transformed. Jesus was giving them another chance.

Perhaps we have experienced people accusing us of things which are untruthful. What do we do? Do we bear grudges and plan to take revenge? Do we wait for our opportunity to humiliate them? What did Jesus do? He neither took revenge nor allowed the words of others to hurt Him. Instead, He told them the truth and continued loving them.

It takes a lot of courage to face such people in our lives and to speak and present the truth to them, to try and transform their hearts, etc. This is the way of Jesus that we are called to follow. This is the way of love.

Jesus, teach me not to react against people, but help me to be like you and try my best to be patient with them

Questions for reflection:

- 1) Have I experienced being accused for something that I did not do?
- 2) Today, how is Jesus inviting me to live such situations?

Tuesday, 23rd January

2 Samuel 6:12-15, 17-19, Mark 3:31-35

The mother and brothers of Jesus arrived and, standing outside, sent in a message asking for him. A crowd was sitting round him at the time the message was passed to him, 'Your mother and brothers and sisters are outside asking for you'. He replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking round at those sitting in a circle about him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother.'

Belonging to God's family

"Whoever does what God wants him to do is my brother, my sister, my mother." – We are part of Jesus' family as long as we do what God wants us to do.

What is the will of God? What does God want us to do?

The will of God for each one of us is that we live fully by loving fully! God is love. This is the essence of our God! We, who have been created in the

image and likeness of God, are also called to be like Him and make love the essence of our life!

When we do what God wants, i.e. when we start to love, we belong to the family of God, the inner circle of Jesus. Can we love? How? Who?

It is possible for us to love as long as we go to Jesus and draw from Him the strength, the courage and joy that we need to love. We are called to love in the same way we experience Jesus' love - with compassion, forgiveness, joy, encouragement and openness.

To love is to love the people closest to us, and so, we start with our family members. Let us always remember that when we do what God wants us to do, we become children of God and we are part of His family.

Jesus, the will of God for me is simply to start loving! Help me to love you and others around me this day!

Questions for reflection:

- 1) What is God's will for me today?
- 2) Do I experience joy knowing that I belong to God's family?

Wednesday, 24th January, St. Francis De Sales

2 Samuel 7:4-17, Mark 4:1-20

Jesus began to teach by the lakeside, but such a huge crowd gathered round him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there. The people were all along the shore, at the water's edge. He taught them many things in parables, and in the course of his teaching he said to them, 'Listen! Imagine a sower going out to sow. Now it happened that, as he sowed, some of the seed fell on the edge of the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some seed fell on rocky ground where it found little soil and sprang up straightaway, because there was no depth of earth; and when the sun came up it was scorched and, not having any roots, it withered away. Some seed fell into thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it produced no crop. And some seeds fell into rich soil and, growing tall and strong, produced crop; and yielded thirty, sixty, even a hundredfold.' And he said, 'Listen, anyone who has ears to hear!' When he was alone, the Twelve, together with the others who formed his company, asked what the parables meant. He told them, 'The secret of the kingdom of God is given to you, but to those who are outside

everything comes in parables, so that they may see and see again, but not perceive; may hear and hear again, but not understand; otherwise they might be converted and be forgiven'. He said to them, 'Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand any of the parables? What the sower is sowing is the word. Those on the edge of the path where the word is sown are people who have no sooner heard it than Satan comes and carries away the word that was sown in them. Similarly, those who receive the seed on patches of rock are people who, when first they hear the word, welcome it at once with joy. But they have no root in them, they do not last; should some trial come, or some persecution on account of the word, they fall away at once. Then there are others who receive the seed in thorns. These have heard the word, but the worries of this world, the lure of riches and all the other passions come in to choke the word, and so it produces nothing. And there are those who have received the seed in rich soil: they hear the word and accept it and yield a harvest, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.'

Which ground am I?

The parable of the sower is our journey of each day. Every day, God, the sower, patiently sows His seed of His Word in our hearts. Every day, we can choose to be the type of ground we want to be - the pathway, the rocky ground, the thorny ground or the good soil. How do we listen? We can listen but ignore. We can listen but forget. We can listen but get distracted. We can listen and nurture.

We need to reflect and ask ourselves: Today, which ground am I? How can I be like the good soil that receives the Word and yields a rich harvest?

The Good News for us is that even if we are sometimes complacent or even reject Him, God never gives up but continues to sow the seeds of His word.

Let us hunger for God's Word, and ask humbly that it may take root in our lives. When the Word penetrates and takes root in our hearts, we will experience God's merciful and patient love transforming the dry and hard areas of worldly passions, brokenness and fears. We cannot be good soils on our own but we truly need God's help to be one.

"Let me leave behind my old life, so that the seeds of your Word won't be eaten up by the birds of frivolous thought, or choked out by the thorns of

worry. Give me a soft heart full of humility and joy, so that I will be good soil and bring forth fruit in patience.” (St. Albert the Great)

Questions for reflection:

- 1) Which type of ground do I tend to identify myself with? Why?
- 2) How can I strive to be the good soil and bring forth fruit with patience?

Thursday, 25th January, The Conversion of St. Paul the Apostle

Acts 22:3-16, or 9:1-22, Mark 16:15-18

(St. Paul: Patron Saint of the Verbum Dei Missionaries)

Paul said to the people, ‘I am a Jew, and was, born at Tarsus in Cilicia. I was brought up here in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was taught the exact observance of the Law of our ancestors. In fact, I was as full of duty towards God as you are today. I even persecuted this Way to the death, and sent women as well as men to prison in chains as the high priest and the whole council of elders can testify, since they even sent me with letters to their brothers in Damascus. When I set off it was with the intention of bringing prisoners back from there to Jerusalem for punishment. I was on that journey and nearly at Damascus when about midday a bright light from heaven suddenly shone round me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” I answered: Who are you, Lord? and he said to me, “I am Jesus the Nazarene, and you are persecuting me”. The people with me saw the light but did not hear his voice as he spoke to me. I said: What am I to do, Lord? The Lord answered, “Stand up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told what you have been appointed to do”. The light had been so dazzling that I was blind and my companions had to take me by the hand; and so I came to Damascus. Someone called Ananias, a devout follower of the Law and highly thought of by all the Jews living there, came to see me; he stood beside me and said, “Brother Saul, receive your sight”. Instantly my sight came back and I was able to see him. Then he said, “The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Just One and hear his own voice speaking, because you are to be his witness before all mankind, testifying to what you have seen and heard. And now why delay? It is time you were baptised and had your sins washed away while invoking his name.”

A call to be like St Paul

Today, we celebrate the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. Interestingly, before his conversion, St Paul thought that he was a good Jew, a moral person. When he encountered Jesus in his life, his vision of life changed and

he re-examined everything in his life. From a persecutor of the early Church, St. Paul gave his life to be a zealous apostle of Christ.

What does this feast speak to us about our own personal conversion?

All of us need to undergo some form of daily conversion - for example, in the way we perceive ourselves or others, in certain habits we have, in the manner we treat others, etc. Daily conversion leads us to become daily disciples of Jesus with greater faithfulness and joy. Thus, every moment of every day is a moment to encounter Jesus and allow Him to lead us to our daily conversion.

Today, as we celebrate the Feast of this great Saint, let us also celebrate with joy that Jesus calls us for a higher calling. We are not meant simply to live our life by building a successful career or bringing our children up to become prosperous people or achieving wealth for ourselves. Like St. Paul, Jesus calls us to be His witnesses of God's love through our lives. Like St. Paul, we have been entrusted to pass on the eternal richness and treasure of our faith in Jesus to our family and friends. This treasure of faith is what matters at the end of the day, as people receive God's life and love that will never pass away.

As we reflect on the conversion story of St. Paul in this time of prayer, let us fall in love with Jesus and renew our friendship with Him. Together with St. Paul, we too can say *"It is not I but Christ living in me."* (Galatians 2:20)

Questions for reflection:

- 1) What obstacle do I have that prevents me from following Jesus closely?
- 2) How can I live my life with Jesus and for Him?

Friday, 26th January, Ss. Timothy and Titus

2 Timothy 1:1-18, or Titus 1:1-5, Mark 4: 26- 34

Jesus went on to say, "The Kingdom of God is like this. A man scatters seed in his field. He sleeps at night, is up and about during the day, and all the while the seeds are sprouting and growing. Yet he does not know how it happens. The soil itself makes the plants grow and bear fruit; first the tender stalk appears, then the head, and finally the head full of grain. When the grain is ripe, the man starts cutting it with his sickle, because harvest time has come.

“What shall we say the Kingdom of God is like?” asked Jesus. “What parable shall we use to explain it? It is like this. A man takes a mustard seed, the smallest seed in the world, and plants it in the ground. After a while it grows up and becomes the biggest of all plants. It puts out such large branches that the birds come and make their nests in its shade.”

Jesus preached his message to the people, using many other parables like these; he told them as much as they could understand. He would not speak to them without using parables, but when he was alone with his disciples, he would explain everything to them.

We are collaborators of God’s field

Jesus shares about the parable of the seed to the disciples as well as to us today. In today’s society where everything is efficient and fast, we would often like to see immediate and tangible results in the things we do. For example, if we have invested time and money on our children’s tuition, we would expect that they obtain good grades for their exams; if we have helped a fellow colleague in an aspect of their work, we would expect the favour to be returned.

Similarly, when we share the faith with someone, we expect the person to have an immediate conversion of heart. Or perhaps we might think that the little seed of faith we have planted in their heart is not enough to change anything.

However, Jesus, in today’s Gospel, tells us to be patient and to trust in Him. *“A man scatters seed in his field. He sleeps at night, is up and about during the day, and all the while the seeds are sprouting and growing. Yet he does not know how it happens.”*

The man in the parable scatters his seed and goes about continuing his daily life and chores and the takes root and grows on its own. The man does not know how it happens but he knows that the seed will one day grow into a beautiful tree. We are also called to be collaborators of the field and to allow Jesus, the owner of the field to water the seeds and allow them to take root and grow. The little that we think we have done and given can grow into a huge mustard tree, if we are open and have the patience to allow God to work in His time and way.

So, let us work hand in hand with Jesus in God's field, to sow the seeds for His Kingdom, and at the same time, trust and allow Him to nurture the seed into a beautiful tree.

Question for reflection:

1) What areas in my life do I need to trust and be patient for God to work?

Saturday, 27th January, St. Angela Merici

2 Samuel 12:1-7, 10-17, Mark 4:35-41

With the coming of evening, Jesus said to his disciples, 'Let us cross over to the other side'. And leaving the crowd behind they took him, just as he was, in the boat; and there were other boats with him. Then it began to blow a gale and the waves were breaking into the boat so that it was almost swamped. But he was in the stern, his head on the cushion, asleep. They woke him and said to him,

'Master, do you not care? We are going down!' And he woke up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Quiet now! Be calm!' And the wind dropped, and all was calm again. Then he said to them, 'Why are you so frightened? How is it that you have no faith?' They were filled with awe and said to one another, 'Who can this be? Even the wind and the sea obey him.'

Faith over fear

Jesus' disciples feared for their lives as they faced the threat of the heavy storm. Seeing Jesus sleeping peacefully in the stern with His head on the cushion, they woke Him and accused Him, "*Master, do you not care? We are going down!*"

Before we become critical of the disciples, let us look at ourselves first. Many times, we too are like Jesus' disciples. When we face our personal storms - betrayal of a loved one, job loss, financial crisis, illness, etc. - we often panic. Giving in to our emotions of fear, we wonder why Jesus is not helping us to remove our painful and depressing storms. We question and start to doubt Jesus when we see Him helping others in their needs, but He seems to be asleep in ours. Couldn't He at least help us to get out of our mess? Doesn't He care for us to help us?

Jesus never abandons us. He is with us when we face the storms of adversity and sadness. He has those same simple but powerful words to say to us as

He did with His disciples, *“Why are you so frightened? How is it that you have no faith?”*

Faith moves our hearts to trust in Jesus, and gives us the confidence to hope in His unfailing love.

Today, Jesus invites us to a greater faith, and to bring our fears and worries to Him. Let Jesus be the one to calm our storms.

“Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark.”

(Rabindranath Tagore)

Lord, increase my faith. Help me to face my storms with greater faith, not fear!

Questions for reflection:

- 1) In what areas of my life am I tempted to respond with fear rather than faith?
- 2) How can I grow more in my faith in Jesus?

Sunday, 28th January, Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deuteronomy 18:15-20, 1 Corinthians 7:32-35, Mark 1:21-28

Jesus and his followers went as far as Capernaum, and as soon as the Sabbath came he went to the synagogue and began to teach. And his teaching made a deep impression on them because, unlike the scribes, he taught them with authority. In their synagogue just then there was a man possessed by an unclean spirit and it shouted, ‘What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: the Holy One of God.’ But Jesus said sharply, ‘Be quiet! Come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions and with a loud cry went out of him. The people were so astonished that they started asking each other what it all meant. ‘Here is a teaching that is new’ they said ‘and with authority behind it: he gives orders even to unclean spirits and they obey him.’ And his reputation rapidly spread everywhere, through all the surrounding Galilean countryside.

Jesus, Son of God

In today’s gospel, we enter again into the reality that Jesus is the Son of God who has power over all.

We, like the man possessed by an unclean spirit, are often burdened with our personal 'unclean spirits' like struggles with an addiction, enticement to pleasures, anger that hurts us and others, etc. Jesus invites us to lay all these aside and let Him be our Lord and God of our lives. With Him, we can have the strength to change, the peace to let go, the courage to stay firm, etc.

Simply listen and allow Jesus to touch and heal all that prevent us from living life with God and others.

Questions for reflection:

- 1) Are there 'unclean spirits' within me that lead me away from God and others?
- 2) Can I trust Jesus enough to draw close to Him and allow Him to touch and heal me?

Monday, 29th January

2 Samuel 15:13-14, 30; 16:5-13, Mark 5:1-20

Jesus and his disciples reached the country of the Gerasenes on the other side of the lake, and no sooner had he left the boat than a man with an unclean spirit came out from the tombs towards him. The man lived in the tombs and no one could secure him anymore, even with a chain; because he had often been secured with fetters and chains but had snapped the chains and broken the fetters, and no one had the strength to control him. All night and all day, among the tombs and in the mountains, he would howl and gash himself with stones. Catching sight of Jesus from a distance, he ran up and fell at his feet and shouted at the top of his voice, 'What do you want with me, Jesus, son of the Most High God? Swear by God you will not torture me!' - For Jesus had been saying to him, 'Come out of the man, unclean spirit'. 'What is your name?' Jesus asked. 'My name is legion,' he answered 'for there are many of us.' And he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the district. Now there was there on the mountainside a great herd of pigs feeding, and the unclean spirits begged him, 'Send us to the pigs, let us go into them'. So he gave them leave. With that, the unclean spirits came out and went into the pigs, and the herd of about two thousand pigs charged down the cliff into the lake, and there they were drowned. The swineherds ran off and told their story in the town and in the country round about; and the people came to see what had really happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his full senses - the very man who had had the legion in

him before - and they were afraid. And those who had witnessed it reported what had happened to the demoniac and what had become of the pigs. Then they began to implore Jesus to leave the neighbourhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed begged to be allowed to stay with him. Jesus would not let him but said to him, 'Go home to your people and tell them all that the Lord in his mercy has done for you'. So the man went off and proceeded to spread throughout the Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him. And everyone was amazed.

My name is legion

Deep within each one of us, we too identify ourselves with the Gerasene demoniac. Possessed by our demons of addictions, disordered affections, pride, lusts, etc., we allow them to define who we are and what we do. We have no control over these demons in us. We seek to live a purposeful and meaningful life but instead, we feel bitter, anger, shame and unhappiness.

Jesus is the answer to our anguish. He approaches us as we tussle with all our fetters and chains of sin, and gazes at us with love. Jesus is here to save us and not to hurt us. We must never be afraid to let Him take everything that burdens us to live life with true freedom and joy.

The man in today's Gospel, after he was healed, did not head back to the tombs but went off to spread his story, his experience of what Jesus had done for him. His joy was born from the certainty that He was deeply loved by God.

"Thanks solely to this encounter – or renewed encounter – with God's love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being. Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?" (Pope Francis)

Today, let us have a renewed encounter of Jesus' saving love that has the power to liberate us from our fetters and chains. We must never forget the loving moments of having meaning restored to our lives. Thus, we go off joyfully and tell others all what Jesus has done for us.

Questions for reflection:

- 1) What 'demons' control me and prevent me from truly living a life in accordance to the Gospel?
- 2) What is Jesus invitation to me in this time of prayer?

Tuesday, 30th January**2 Samuel 18:9-10, 14, 24-25, 30-19:3, Mark 5:21-43**

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a large crowd gathered round him and he stayed by the lakeside. Then one of the synagogue officials came up, Jairus by name, and seeing him, fell at his feet and pleaded with him earnestly, saying, 'My little daughter is desperately sick. Do come and lay your hands on her to make her better and save her life.' Jesus went with him and a large crowd followed him; they were pressing all round him. Now there was a woman who had suffered from a haemorrhage for twelve years; after long and painful treatment under various doctors, she spent all she had without being any the better for it, in fact, she was getting worse. She had heard about Jesus, and she came up behind him through the crowd and touched his cloak. 'If I can touch even his clothes,' she had told herself 'I shall be well again.' And the source of the bleeding dried up instantly, and she felt in herself that she was cured of her complaint. Immediately aware that power had gone out from him, Jesus turned round in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' His disciples said to him, 'You see how the crowd is pressing round you and yet you say, "Who touched me?"' But he continued to look all round to see who had done it. Then the woman came forward, frightened and trembling because she knew what had happened to her, and she fell at his feet and told him the whole truth. 'My daughter,' he said 'your faith has restored you to health; go in peace and be free from your complaint.' While he was still speaking some people arrived from the house of the synagogue official to say, 'Your daughter is dead: why put the Master to any further trouble?' But Jesus had overheard this remark of theirs and he said to the official, 'Do not be afraid; only have faith'. And he allowed no one to go with him except Peter and James and John the brother of James. So they came to the official's house and Jesus noticed all the commotion, with people weeping and wailing unrestrainedly. He went in and said to them, 'Why all this commotion and crying? The child is not dead, but asleep.' But they laughed at him. So he turned them all out and, taking with him the child's father and mother and his own companions, he went into the place where the child lay. And taking the child by the hand he said to her,

'Talitha, kum!' which means, 'Little girl, I tell you to get up'. The little girl got up at once and began to walk about, for she was twelve years old. At this they were overcome with astonishment, and he ordered them strictly not to let anyone know about it, and told them to give her something to eat.

Only have faith!

"Do not be afraid; only have faith." How many times in our life, do we need to hear these exact words? In life, we often face situations where we are afraid as things seem to be out of control. These are moments when we need to cling onto God, to the one who assures us that we never need to be afraid. We can face the uncertain future, the family problem, the worries, the heartaches etc. with Jesus because He lives in us. He comes with us to our homes, to bring life and hope, in ways we do not expect or understand.

The world can dishearten us with messages that tell us that life is not worth the fight, that no one can help us, etc. Let the voice of Jesus be stronger than all these voices that pull us away from faith. Today, let the voice of Love calm our fears with His words, *"Do not be afraid; only have faith."*

Wednesday, 31st January, St John Bosco

2 Samuel 24:2,9-17, Mark 6:1-6

Jesus went to his home town and his disciples accompanied him. With the coming of the sabbath he began teaching in the synagogue and most of them were astonished when they heard him. They said, 'Where did the man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been granted him, and these miracles that are worked through him? This is the carpenter, surely, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joset and Jude and Simon? His sisters, too, are they not here with us?' And they would not accept him. And Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is only despised in his own country, among his own relations and in his own house'; and he could work no miracle there, though he cured a few sick people by laying his hands on them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.

Love has no limits

"On a flight from Johannesburg, a middle-aged, well-off white South African Lady had found herself sitting next to a black man. She called the cabin crew attendant over to complain about her seating. "What seems to be the problem Madam?" asked the attendant. "Can't you see?" she said. "You've sat me next to a kaffir. I can't possibly sit next to this disgusting human. Find me another seat!" "Please calm down Madam." the

stewardess replied. "The flight is very full today, but I'll tell you what I'll do - I'll go and check to see if we have any seats available in club or first class." The woman cocks a snooty look at the black man beside her. A few minutes later the stewardess returns with the good news, which she delivers to the lady, who cannot help but look at the people around her with a smug and self-satisfied grin: "Madam, unfortunately, as I suspected, economy is full. I've spoken to the cabin services director, and club is also full. However, we do have one seat in first class". Before the lady has a chance to answer, the stewardess continues, "It is most extraordinary to make this kind of upgrade, however, and I have had to get special permission from the captain. But, given the circumstances, the captain felt that it was outrageous that someone be forced to sit next to such an obnoxious person." With which, she turned to the black man sitting next to her, and said: "So if you'd like to get your things, sir, I have your seat ready for you in first class up at the front..." At which point, apparently the surrounding passengers stood and gave a standing ovation while the black guy walks up to first class in the front of the plane." (Unknown)

The crowd in the synagogue had a rather unhealthy attitude towards Jesus. He was looked down by the people in His own hometown because they saw Jesus as merely the carpenter's son. Thus, they were so blinded by their own prejudices that they could not welcome Jesus in their midst.

We too might experience unloving moments when we look down on others and push them out of our lives. Focussing on putting labels on others, we tend to forget the true dignity of each person as a child of God.

Today, let Jesus expand our hearts and learn to let His love open our eyes to recognise each person, especially those whom we find it hard to love, as God's beloved child.

Questions for reflection:

- 1) How can I allow Jesus to heal me from my closed heart that tends to build walls that separate me from others?
- 2) Who can I try to love more today?