Breaking the Word: Weekdays
Nicholas King SJ

Thursday September 1st
1 Corinthians 3:18-23
Psalm 24:1-6

What does it mean to be a disciple? In today’s first reading, Paul is trying to persuade his divided Christians that discipleship means above all building up the Body of Christ. The Corinthian church seems to have been divided between a ‘Paul’ faction and a faction who believed that the only apostle worth talking about was ‘Apollos’. Some of them also felt that Paul was not ‘clever’ (or perhaps ‘wise’) enough, and to them Paul says, ‘if someone thinks that they are ‘clever’ in this world, let them become a ‘moron’, in order that they may become clever’. The point is that it all comes back to God, not to individual apostles: ‘Whether Paul or Apollos or Kephas, whether the world or life or death, whether things present or things to come, everything is yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s’. The gospel for today is Luke’s version of the call of Simon Peter, where a disciple has to learn, first that he is a sinner (‘Get away from me, for I am a sinner’, gasps the exasperated fisherperson who has just seen the miraculous catch of fish, after a long and unproductive night’s work), and then that his sinfulness does not matter, for he has a job to do: ‘from now on, you are going to fish for human beings’. There is much for us to ponder here.

Friday September 2nd
1 Corinthians 4:1-5
Psalm 37:3-6, 27-28, 39-40

How do you deal with tiresome divisions in the Church? In today’s first reading, Paul is trying (not all that successfully) to bring to an end the Corinthians’ squabble about who is the Best Apostle. Here his point is simply that all that matters is this: we are ‘minions of Christ, and stewards of God’s mysteries’; and Paul very sharply disabuses the Corinthians of any idea that he is worried about being put on trial by them. All that matters is the verdict of ‘the Lord’, who ‘shines a light into the hidden places of darkness’. In the gospel, the issue is that Jesus and his disciples are not sufficiently religious. The answer is that his opponents have not realised that with Jesus we are living in a ‘new’ world; and that just as you don’t mend a new suit with old cloth, or put new wine into an old flask, so what Jesus is up to must be looked at with appropriately new eyes. But notice also that the Jesus story is the ancient story of God and the people of God, for the reading ends with ‘the old is good’, and the
word for ‘good’ here would sound like ‘Christ’ in Greek. So we are to cope with our divisions by recognising that the Jesus project is the old story told in a new way.

Saturday September 3rd
St Gregory the Great

1 Corinthians 4:6-15
Psalm 145:17-21

One of the tiresome things about religious people is that we tend to hurl reproaches at each other. In today’s first reading, Paul warns his divided Corinthian church against being ‘puffed up’. That is a word he uses for people who have conceited pretensions, lacking the solidity of love. Then he lays into them with bitter sarcasm: ‘we are morons on Christ’s account, but you are so shrewd! We are weak and you are strong! You are so distinguished while we are dishonoured’. There will have been a sharp intake of breath as this tirade was read out to them. In the gospel the accusation is that Jesus’ lot are insufficiently attentive to the Sabbath; and they are devastatingly refuted by some very sharp exegesis of Scripture on Jesus’ part, ending with the powerful statement that ‘the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath’. No further questions are reported.

Monday September 5th
1 Corinthians 5:1-8
Psalm 5:5-7, 12
Luke 6:6-11

Religious people can get up to the most extraordinary things. In today’s first reading, Paul (who has still, by the way, not answered any of the questions posed by the Corinthians in their rather complacent letter) is astounded by the fact that one of their community is in an incestuous relationship and that they apparently see nothing wrong with this. This letter is apparently being written at Passover time, and in that context Paul reminds them of the importance of getting rid of leaven, which he here uses as a metaphor for sexual impurity. In the gospel, we learn that the ‘scribes and Pharisees’ (never a promising mixture) ‘were watching [Jesus]’. The reason is that there was a man with a withered hand, and they are out to get Jesus, for working on the Sabbath. Jesus refutes them effortlessly, then, hardly turning a hair, heals the man. But his opponents are not so easily silenced, and the gospel ends with them ‘filled with fury - and they were discussing with each other what they would do to Jesus’. There may be a challenge to us here about how to respond to those with whom we disagree.

Tuesday September 6th
1 Corinthians 6:1-11
Psalm 149:1-6, 9
Luke 6:12-19
Being disciples of Jesus does not mean that we always get things right. In today’s first reading, Paul is absolutely horrified that some of the Corinthians were taking each other to court. Three times he uses the word ‘unjust’: to describe those before whom they go to law, then to describe the way the Corinthians are behaving, and, lastly, to indicate the kind of people who cannot ‘inherit the Kingdom of God’. Finally, to hammer the argument home, he reminds them of what has happened to them. He uses several metaphors: they have been ‘washed’, ‘consecrated’, and finally ‘justified’, all this to remind them how they should now behave. In the gospel, the beginning of Luke’s ‘Sermon on the Plain’, two things happen. First (after praying all night) Jesus selects the Twelve; and you may feel that a night’s prayer might have equipped him to choose a rather better team. Then, secondly, Jesus is standing in a ‘plain’, and people from everywhere come to him for healing, including ‘those annoyed by unclean spirits’. Jesus, however can cope, and ‘power was coming out from him, and he was healing them all’.

Wednesday September 7th
1 Corinthians 7:25-31
Psalm 45:11-12, 14-17
Luke 6:20-26

Seeing with the eyes of disciples means seeing things very differently indeed. In the first reading, Paul is trying to persuade his Corinthians that sex is not the be-all and end-all that they supposed. So (as always) he tries to get them to focus on the Lord, and on the fact of ‘the present necessity’; they have to realise that ‘the time has been shortened’, ‘for the shape of this world is passing away. In the gospel this different way of looking at things is expressed by way of ‘congratulations’ (to the poor, the hungry, the tearful and the objects of public hatred), and ‘woes’ (to the wealthy, those who have been filled, those who laugh, and the objects of public admiration). We may be challenged to read these texts slowly and thoughtfully.

Thursday September 8th
The Birthday of Our Lady

Micah 5:2-5 OR Romans 8:28-30
Psalm 13:5-6
Matthew 1:1-16, 18-23

At our worst, we Catholics can promote Our Lady into a kind of goddess; and today’s feast serves to counter that tendency. It is important that she was born, that she is utterly human, and that she felt all that we feel. For the first reading you can choose between two lovely pieces, from Micah and from Romans; however for today I suggest that you concentrate on the gospel, simply because people too often engage in headlong flight from Jesus’ genealogy. You will notice that it is divided into three groups of fourteen (though you should count the third group carefully), and that these three groups cover the whole of Israel’s history, from the first promise to
Abraham, to the apparent fulfilment of that promise in David, and the catastrophe, the apparent end of all God's promise, in the Exile to Babylon. Then, finally, for Matthew, Israel's history comes to its fulfilment under God in the birth of the Messiah. You will also be aware, if you know anything about any of the names in the genealogy, that Jesus' bloodline had as an unwholesome bunch of rogues as you could wish to meet on a dark night. You may also notice the four women who (unusually) are mentioned in the genealogy, and observe that each of them in their own way is on the margins. Finally, though, it all comes right, and at the end we exclaim, joyfully, 'Emmanuel - God with us'. And all that was only possible because Mary was prepared to bring forth the child of the Holy Spirit, and because Joseph was prepared to obey an angel's command. There is much to reflect upon here.

Friday September 9th
St Peter Claver SJ

1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-27
Psalm 84:3-6, 12

In today's first reading, St Paul is engaged in a rather unusual battle; for the Corinthians, it seems, have been complaining that he has not been accepting enough money from them. (When was the last time that you had to make that complaint about a pastor?). In response, he accepts that one who preaches the gospel is entitled to be fed by those to whom he is an apostle; but what his critics have not grasped is that the only thing that he wants to do is preach the good news about his beloved Jesus, and that it is his 'privilege to preach the gospel and not charge for it'. His sole motivation, in all that he does, is to have a share in that gospel. To that end he is training like an Olympic runner. The second reading has two illustrations from those who do not see quite as clearly as Paul. The first is (and we may reflect that the humour is slightly dark here) that of two blind men leading each other, and the likely catastrophe that awaits them. The second is the vaguely comical notion of my trying to get a tiny splinter out of your eye, when I have a huge plank of wood in my own eye. Let us pray today for a clear vision of the truth.

Saturday September 10th
1 Corinthians 10:14-22
Psalm 116: 12-13, 17-18
Luke 6:43-49

At this stage of his first letter to those squabbling Corinthian Christians, Paul is dealing with the tricky question of whether they were allowed to eat meat that had been offered to idols (this represented a cheap way of getting protein in the ancient world, for the priests in the pagan temples could make a little bit of money on the side by selling sacrificed animals on to the market). At one level, Paul is quite happy either way, because he knows perfectly well that these 'fake gods' do not exist. The
key thing, however (as always with Paul) is to keep our eyes firmly on ‘the Lord’. And that probably means it is unwise to eat such food. In the gospel we are almost at an end of Luke’s ‘Sermon on the Plain’, and he offers two images for those who listen attentively to Jesus’ teaching. The first is the idea of good fruit that comes only from good trees. And the second is the idea of building on solid foundations, ‘digging and going deep, and putting foundations on rock’. That way the house does not fall down. How are your roots and foundations feeling, this week?

Monday September 12th
(Most Holy Name of Mary)

1 Corinthians 11:17-26, 33
Psalm 40:7-10, 17
Luke 7:1-10

The New Testament is not always a matter of bland politenesses courteously exchanged. In today’s first reading, Paul (not for the first time) is furious with his Corinthians. They have written him a letter rather complacently enumerating how wonderful they are; here he is telling them that ‘when you come together as a congregation it is not for the better but for the worse…I hear that there are divisions among you…when you come together it is not the Lord’s Supper that you are eating’. And why not? Because they cannot be bothered to wait for each other, so that ‘some go hungry, and others are drunk’. Then he reminds them of that terrible death which the Eucharist commemorates: ‘for whenever you eat this bread and drink the cup, you are proclaiming the Lord’s death - until he comes’. Similarly shocking is the gospel for today. Jesus encounters a centurion (a Roman or Herodian oppressor, that is to say!) who has a ‘precious’ slave who is sick, and wants him saved; the locals persuade Jesus that the centurion is all right: ‘for he loves our people - and he himself built our synagogue’. The centurion tries to stop him: ‘just speak with a word - and let my slave be healed’. Jesus is stunned by his faith: ‘I’m telling you: not even in Israel have I found faith like this’. Naturally the slave is well again by the time they get home; but we have been moved outside our comfort zone by this story.

Tuesday September 13th
St John Chrysostom

1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 27-31
Psalm 100
Luke 7:11-17

In today’s first reading, Paul is once more tackling the appalling problems of the divisions in the Corinthian church. Here he does it by a slightly comical use of the idea of the body (and to get the full humour of it, you will have to look at the verses that are omitted in our reading, the idea, for example, of the foot declaring that it is not a part of the body, because it is not a hand). The fundamental insight for Paul is that Christians ought to be a unity, from whatever race or cultural background or
social or economic status; all their different gifts are given them to build up the body (and the Number One gift, of course, is that of being an apostle like Paul!). This leads him into the lovely hymn to love, which is Paul’s fundamental answer to all their divisions. You might read that to yourself today. The gospel shows the love of God at work in Jesus; and it favours the marginalised: a widow who has lost her only son (and therefore has no means of support). Jesus does not mess around. Luke describes him as ‘gutted’, tells the widow to stop crying, and commands her son, ‘Young man, I’m telling you - be raised up’. Then ‘he gave him to his mother’. We should notice the effect of this display of love: as so often in Luke, ‘they started to glorify God’ and then what we might call the ‘ripple effect’ by which the good news is broadcast: ‘this story went out in all Judea about him, and in all the area roundabout’.

Wednesday September 14th
The Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Numbers 21:4-9 or
Philippians 2:6-11
Psalm 78:13-17
John 3:13-17

Today we recall the discovery of Jesus’ cross in Jerusalem by the Empress Helena, and the readings (it is best to use all three) each give us a way of meditating on the significance of Jesus’ appalling death. The reading from Numbers has the Israelites complaining that God and Moses had ‘brought us up from Egypt’ (which is what they had been praying for!); to remind them of the facts, God sends serpents to bite them; and then in order to be healed they have to look at a copper serpent that Moses has made, to remind them of God’s saving love. The second reading is a hymn that probably predated Paul’s use of it, and Paul is trying to stop the Philippians from squabbling: they are to have ‘the mind-set of Christ Jesus’, who, far from thinking that his equality with God was a ‘snatching matter’, deliberately ‘emptied himself’ and accepted ‘death - death of the Cross’, and so was given ‘the name above all names…to the glory of God the Father’. The gospel offers yet another insight into the cross; in John’s gospel it is seen as something of a ‘throne of glory’. Here the evangelist picks up our first reading: ‘as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Son of Man has to be lifted up’; and the explanation of the horror of the cross is nothing else than that ‘God so loved the world…that the world might be saved’. That is a mystery to get our heads round.

Thursday September 15th
Our Lady of Sorrows

Hebrews 5:7-9
Psalm 31:1-5, 14-15, 19
John 19:25-27
Today, a month after the feast of her Assumption, and a day after that of her son’s Cross, we are very properly invited to contemplate Mary’s response to the crucifixion. Two possible gospels are assigned to the feast. The first depicts Jesus’ mother where no mother should be, standing watching him die the brutal death of the cross. But, to our surprise, just as she started him on his mission at the Wedding Feast of Cana, back in chapter two of John’s Gospel, so now he starts her off on her own mission ‘Woman, look - your son’, as the founder of a dynasty, as he tells the beloved disciple, ‘Look - your mother’. So the moment of tragedy is also a moment of glory. But we shall do well to remain with the mother and contemplate the appalling sorrow here. That appalling sorrow is also there in the alternative gospel for the occasion, the lovely scene with Symeon when Jesus is for the first time presented in the Temple; his parents are blessed, but his mother is given a very special message (and we know that it comes from God): ‘you yourself - your soul a sword shall go through it’. We do not fully understand Jesus unless we pay very close attention to his mother.

Friday September 16th
SS Cornelius and Cyprian

1 Corinthians 15:12-20
Psalm 17: 1, 6-8, 15
Luke 8:1-3

Resurrection may be difficult to believe in; but, make no doubt about it, if there is no such thing as Resurrection, there is no such thing as Christianity. That is Paul’s position, attacking those Corinthian Christians who have been denying the truth of the Resurrection; and he shows how it all unravels if the Resurrection is denied: ‘if Christ was not raised, then your faith is useless…empty’. Then he repeats his base position, and ours: ‘as it is Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who fell asleep’. In the gospel, Jesus is on the journey that will eventually take him to Jerusalem, and he is ‘preaching city by city and village by village, and the Twelve with him’. But they cannot do it on their own, and need the help of the ‘women who have been cured from evil and sick spirits’. The women are then named; at least one is from relatively high on the social scale (‘Susanna the wife of Chuza, Herod’s high official’). But notice the important fact about them: these capable women looked after the needs of these itinerant, and perhaps not entirely competent, males: ‘they helped to support them from their resources’.

Saturday September 17th
St Robert Bellarmine SJ

1 Corinthians 15:35-37, 42-49
Psalm 56:10-14
Luke 8:4-15
If we get it right, our Christianity is something that should utterly transform our lives. One metaphor for this transformation is the eminently agricultural image of ‘sowing’. In today’s first reading, Paul uses the image to help his Corinthian readers glimpse the reality of Resurrection, using the difference between the seed that you sow and the plant that emerges, the difference, he says, between ‘destruction’ and ‘incorruptibility’; then he switches to an idea that he also uses in the letter to the Romans, the difference between the ‘first Adam’ and the ‘second Adam’; in the Resurrection, he says, ‘we shall wear the likeness of the heavenly one’. The gospel is also about sowing, with a characteristic setting by Luke in a ‘journey’, where Jesus tells the story of the parable of the Sower, the seed falling into four different kinds of soil. As always, the disciples fail to understand what all this is about, and have to have it explained: ‘the seed that falls on good soil, that is the ones who have a good and beautiful heart when they hear; they keep the word, and bear fruit with patience’. What kind of seed are you going to be, today?

Monday September 19th
Proverbs 3:27-34
Psalm 15:1-5
Luke 8:16-18

Today we start a far too brief dip into the Book of Proverbs, which has much to teach us on how to live, both in the world and before God. Our reading for today offers six things that we are not to do in our relations to other people and four more positive statements offering reasons for confidence in the Lord. Sit with these for a while. When you have done that, you might want to meditate on today’s psalm, listing the sort of person who can be allowed into the Temple of God: ‘those who walk without blame…and honours those who fear the Lord’. The gospel after that offers some quite sensible, even comical, suggestions about how we are to behave: we are not to put our light under a bed but on a lampstand; and we are to listen carefully, and be slightly alarmed by the teaching: ‘whoever has, it will be given them; whoever does not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them’. We can, it seems, take nothing for granted.

Tuesday September 20th
St Andrew Kim Taegon and Companions

Proverbs 21:1-6, 10-13
Psalm 119:1, 27, 30, 34-35, 44
Luke 8:19-21

How are we to live our lives? Today’s first reading offers some hints: a warning against having ‘haughty eyes and a proud heart’ or being ‘rash’ or ‘lying’ or ‘shutting your ears to the cry of the poor’. This might sound like a perfectly ordinary piece of secular wisdom, but we should notice that ‘the Lord’ is mentioned three times in the first three verses; and that is the secret of life: ‘it is the Lord who proves hearts’. The psalm, the great meditation on God’s gift of the Law, and the longest hymn in the
entire Book of Psalms, brings together secular wisdom and the worship of God. Then the gospel reminds us what really matters: Jesus’ ‘mother and brothers’ are trying to reach him, but cannot, because of the crowds, and ‘they are standing outside, wanting to see you’. Then listen to, and be heartened by, Jesus’ response: ‘these are my mother and my brothers, who listen to God’s word and perform it’. That is the secret of life.

Wednesday September 21st
St Matthew

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13
Psalm 19:2-5
Matthew 9:9-13

Today is the feast of the evangelist Matthew. The first reading is an impassioned plea for unity from Ephesians; ‘eager to preserve the oneness of the Spirit...: one body, one spirit, as you were called in one hope of your calling...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all’. Then various offices in the church are listed, including those of ‘apostle’ and ‘evangelist’, both of which fit the Matthew whom we honour today, and which if handled wrong might lead to disunity. Today’s gospel recounts the calling of the tax-collector whom Mark and Luke call ‘Levi’, but in this gospel is given the name of the one to whom the gospel has been for centuries attributed. The important thing here is what the tax-collector did, what we all must do: ‘he arose and followed him’. And the other thing that Matthew apparently does is to throw a party; and then the religious people complain about Jesus’ terrible friends, ‘tax-collectors and sinners’. We are today invited to do all we can to preserve the precious unity of Jesus and his beloved sinners.

Thursday September 22nd

Ecclesiastes 1:2-11
Psalm 90:3-6, 12-14, 17
Luke 9:7-9

Today we start a too-brief tasting of the extraordinary book known as ‘Qoheleth’ or ‘the Preacher’. The amazing thing about this text is that it made it into the Hebrew Bible at all, such is its agnostic despair: ‘vanity of vanities’ says the author, twice, at the very beginning, ‘what is the use of anything?’ And, gloomily, he adds ‘there is nothing new under the sun’. What we have here is the deep questioning that came about when the Hebrew culture encountered the Greek; and it is always good for us to ask ‘but what is the point of it all?’ That is the question implicitly posed by Herod the tetrarch in today’s gospel, ‘and he was puzzled because some people were saying that John had been raised from the dead’. Herod knows that he had chopped the Baptist’s head off, and, we learn, ‘was looking to see [Jesus]’. He gets his chance, later in the gospel, when Pilate sends Jesus to him, but he cannot make head or tail of the Galilean. However God is at work, and although Jesus will be executed, like John the
Baptist, God will raise him from the dead. There is where we shall find the answer to Qoheleth’s question: the point of life lies in what God did in Jesus.

Friday September 23rd
(Padre Pio)

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11
Psalm 144:1-4

Today’s first reading is perhaps the best-known passage from Qoheleth, ‘a time for everything’. In its way, the passage points to God as the answer to all our questions; it is not that we are in control and decide when to ‘weep’ and when to ‘laugh’, but that we have to find God in everything. That is something glimpsed by the author of our psalm for today, who proclaims ‘Blessed be the Lord’ and in the same sentence argues that human beings are ‘only a breath, their days like a passing shadow’. The gospel offers an answer; it starts with Jesus praying alone (as in Luke’s gospel he does at all the key moments of his life), and then inviting his disciples into the all-important question of who Jesus is. Peter comes up with a correct answer, ‘the Messiah of God’; but then the disciples have to be told what this means: ‘the Son of Man has to suffer many things, and be rejected from the elders and High Priests and scribes, and be killed. And on the third day to be raised.’ That is almost beyond our grasp; but if we can hold onto the thought, it will give meaning to life.

Saturday September 24th

Ecclesiastes 11:9-12:8
Psalm 90:3-6, 12-14, 17
Luke 9:43-45

The oddest fact of all about our life, the one that we must grasp if we are to understand the meaning of it, is that we are all going to die. Today our brief encounter with Qoheleth ends by facing us with the fact of death, and its contrast with the youthful vigour of life. It offers a wonderful description of old age, with the mantra ‘Remember your Creator in the days of your youth’ as a counterpoint to the grim symptoms of growing old, ‘before the silver cord is snapped and the golden bowl is broken’. He concludes with his old slogan, ‘vanity of vanities...all is vanity’; but God is in there somehow. The same pattern is there in today’s gospel, where for the second time Jesus’ disciples are invited to recognise that their Lord ‘is going to be handed over into the hands of humans’. But they cannot make head or tail of it: ‘they did not know what he said - and they were afraid to ask’. But he is predicting that dread event that alone makes sense of our lives.

Monday September 26th
Ss Cosmas and Damian
Today we start a brief journey through that extraordinary work, the Book of Job. Here we are given the background: Job is prosperous and successful, and utterly loyal to God; and then there is the situation, virtually a bet between God and the Adversary about how real is Job’s piety. The Adversary is given permission to afflict Job, and he loses all his possessions, all his camels, and all his children. At this point (as we should have predicted), ‘Job did not sin - nor did he show disrespect to God’.

In the psalm, we hear the poet lamenting because he has been falsely accused; but he remains absolutely faithful to God (‘show your great love, you who save with your right arm those who seek refuge from their enemies’). In the gospel, the disciples are behaving quite unlike those commendable Old Testament figures, squabbling over who is Mr Big; and they have to be taught that children are more important than they are: ‘Anyone who receives this little child in my name receives me, and anyone who receives me receives the One who sent me’. Our task is to allow the Almighty to turn our concept of God quite upside down.

Tuesday September 27th
(St Vincent de Paul)

Today Job speaks for many people who share his plight, and wishes, in the most poetic terms possible, that he were dead: ‘perish the day on which I was born’; and the psalmist is rather of the same view. It is the only psalm in the book that offers not a glimmer of hope: ‘my soul is filled with pain, my life approaches Sheol...because of you my friends avoid me’. All we can do is notice that the poet can at least talk to God, even though he gets no answer at all. The gospel likewise looks at adversity; for Jesus has ‘fixed his face for the journey to Jerusalem’, and we know already that he is going to die there. Not only that, his ‘messengers’ are refused hospitality in a Samaritan village, ‘because his face was journeying to Jerusalem’.

James and John, Galilean terrorists, want to bomb the place, but Jesus rebukes them ‘and they journeyed to another village’. We notice that the mood here is different from that of either Job or the psalmist, and we wonder why; but they we realise that Luke has started the story with the words ‘when the days of his taking up were fulfilled’; and of course that simply means that God is in charge, and Jesus can trust the outcome. Might that help you, on days when you are feeling like either Job or the psalmist?

Wednesday September 28th
(St Wenceslas; SS Lawrence Ruiz and companions)
God is different; and that is what causes Job’s pain in today’s first reading. Job is answering one of his critics, and complaining that one cannot argue against God: ‘he gives orders to the sun, and it does not rise...if he comes near, I do not see him’. And the psalmist feels the same: ‘why do you reject me, Lord?’, he cries, ‘why do you hide your face from me?’ In today’s gospel, Jesus is equally disconcerting. He has started his journey to Jerusalem, and has to deal with three potential followers. The first is told ‘foxes have holes, and birds of the air have places to live - but the Son of Man does not have anywhere to lay his head’. The second wants to bury his father first, and is told, rather sharply: ‘let the dead bury their dead - but you are to proclaim the Kingdom of God’. The third wants to say goodbye to his family, but is not allowed. The Lord is very demanding indeed; but there is no other way to go.

Thursday September 29th

SS Michael, Gabriel and Raphael

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 or
Revelation 12:7-12
Psalm 138:1-5
John 1:47-51

Today we celebrate the rich mystery of what we call the ‘archangels’, created beings who are pure spirits, close to God, but free to rebel if they choose. The three whom today’s feast celebrates are given the names of ‘Who-Is-Like-God’, ‘God-Is-My Warrior’ and ‘God-Has-Healed’, and they tell us something of what our God is like. Today’s first reading offers a vision of the ‘Ancient of Days’, seated on the divine throne, and ‘one like a Son of Man’, who is presented to God; and we have a sense that, somehow, all is going to be well. Or you might prefer to read the alternative second reading, from Revelation, the vision of ‘Michael and his messengers at war with the Dragon’, and in the background a beautiful liturgical chant that tells us that all will be well: ‘Now has come Salvation and Power and the Kingdom of our God and the Authority of his Christ...they have conquered because of the Lamb’s blood’. The gospel for today is the climax of the first chapter of John’s gospel, giving us a glimpse of the rich mystery of Jesus: ‘Rabbi, Son of God, King of Israel’, because he has told Nathanael the truth about himself. But there is more to come: ‘you are going to see heaven opened and the angels of God going up and coming down upon the Son of Man’. We hardly understand this extraordinary vision; but we know that it is there for our encouragement.

Friday September 30th

St Jerome
Job 38: 1, 12-21, 40:3-5
Psalm 139:1-3, 7-10, 13-14
Luke 10:13-16

Today we celebrate the memory of perhaps the greatest biblical scholar in the history of the church, and it may be appropriate that the readings (of the day rather than the feast) are so rich. In the first reading, Job gets the answer to his complaints: God finally makes his appearance, and asks some tricky questions: ‘have you gone into the sources of the sea or walked about in the deep?’, and Job realises that he cannot argue: ‘I put my hand over my mouth’. The psalm is a hymn to God’s profound knowledge of each of us: ‘you know when I sit and when I rise...where can I hide from your Spirit?’ And the gospel is a reproach to three cities in Jesus’ Galilee where he did his miracles, namely Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum, for their failures to repent. Then the disciples are warned that, just like Jesus, they will sometimes be heard, and sometimes rejected: ‘but the one who rejects me rejects the One who sent me’. Our task is to glimpse the mystery of God, and not suppose that we know it all. St Jerome would applaud.

Saturday October 1st
St Therese of the Child Jesus

Job 42:1-3, 5-6, 12-17
Psalm 119: 66, 71, 75, 91, 125, 130

It is appropriate that as we celebrate the memory of the ‘Little Flower’ our readings come to something of a joyful resolution. First we come to an end of the adventure of Job, with the hero of the book recognising that ‘I have dealt with great things that I do not understand...now my eye has seen you’; his prosperity is utterly restored, and he dies, ‘old and full of years’, which at that stage of the bible’s development is the best that one could hope for. In the gospel the joy is that of the disciples who come back to Jesus, wagging their tails after their first missionary expedition, boasting ‘Lord we even saw the demons were subordinated to us in your name’. Jesus responds, possibly with a twinkle in his eye, ‘I was watching the Satan falling like lightning from heaven’; but he reminds them of the real reason for joy. It is not that ‘spirits are being subordinated to you, but that your names are written in heaven’. And the real reason for joy (how well this fits St Therese) is that the Father has ‘hidden these things from the clever and intelligent, and revealed them to infants’. Our joy must consist precisely in our smallness and God’s greatness.

Monday October 3rd

Galatians 1:6-12
Psalm 111:1-2, 7-10
Luke 10:25-37
What is at the heart of the gospel? Today we start reading the text that has a claim to be considered Paul’s least good-tempered letter. His argument with the Galatians is that you have ‘transferred from the one who called you in Christ’s grace, to a different gospel!’ He insists, against them, that his gospel comes, not from human beings but from God, ‘through a revelation of Jesus Christ’. In the gospel, there is a ‘lawyer’ (always a bad start in Luke’s gospel) who is ‘testing’ Jesus, and asks him for the secret of ‘eternal life’. Jesus throws the question back at him, and asks ‘what is written in the Torah? How do you read it?’ The lawyer gets it right, and quotes the great Jewish prayer of the ‘Shema’ (‘Hear O Israel’); the answer is that we are to love God and our neighbour. Jesus commends him for his knowledge of the scriptures, but the lawyer is reluctant to leave it there, and asks, possibly a shade disdainfully, ‘Who is my “neighbour”?’ Then he gets more than he had bargained for, as Jesus tells the shocking story of the Good Samaritan. Go carefully through this parable, reading for ‘Samaritan’ any group that you particularly dislike; and notice that at the end, when Jesus asks him ‘Which of these three [Priest, Levite, Samaritan] seems to you to have been a neighbour to the one who fell among thieves?’, the lawyer cannot bring himself to mention the hated name, but describes the Samaritan as ‘the one who did the mercy on him’. What is your equivalent today?

Tuesday October 4th
(St Francis of Assisi)

Galatians 1:13-24
Psalm 139:1-3, 13-15
Luke 10:38-42

We have to be grateful to those who annoyed Paul, because it is only when he is cross that he ‘does’ autobiography. In today’s first reading, in pursuit of the argument that he received his teaching from God, not from human beings, he tells of his time before he encountered Jesus (‘I used to persecute the church of God, and ravaged it, and was ahead of my peers, being more enthusiastic about the ancestral traditions’). Then he met Jesus, and discovered his calling to ‘gospel the Gentiles’; after that he seems to have gone into retreat, possibly in Petra. Finally, three years later, he meets up with Kephas and James the brother of the Lord in Jerusalem, ‘and they glorified God in me’. That was evidently an important moment for him. Equally important, in a quite different way, is the lovely story in today’s gospel, where Martha gives Jesus hospitality, on his journey towards his death in Jerusalem, while her sister Mary sits at his feet, listening to ‘his message’ (which is a different kind of hospitality, of course). Martha’s patience snaps; and she gives Jesus orders: ‘don’t you care that my sister has abandoned me alone to serve?’ Jesus’ response is beautifully gentle: ‘Martha, Martha’, the repetition of her name robbing it of any sharpness. But Mary has chosen the ‘good portion’. And that is what we are invited to do.

Wednesday October 5th
Galatians 2:1-2, 7-14
Psalm 117
Luke 11:1-4

Paul in our first reading is continuing the argument about his gospel being from God, not human beings. Obviously, however, it is pointless if it is a totally different gospel from that which the other apostles preach. So here he reports a meeting in Jerusalem ('fourteen years later') where his 'gospel among the Gentiles' is approved by the Jerusalem church, James and Kephas and John ('the so-called pillars'): ‘I have been entrusted with the gospel of uncircumcision, as Peter has been with that of the circumcision’. And they want him to ‘remember the poor - which [Paul irritably comments] was precisely what I was keen to do’. The gospel for today, following the stories of the Good Samaritan and Martha and Mary, has Jesus teaching his disciples the Lord’s Prayer; Luke’s is a slightly different version from the one with which we are more familiar, and delivered at a different spot. Matthew presents it as part of the Sermon on the Mount, back in Galilee. For Luke, however, we are on the way to Jerusalem. It is recognisably the same prayer, although it does not end (as Matthew’s does) with the word ‘evil’, and is in general rather shorter. Pray it anyway, today, and imagine Paul joining in with you.

Thursday October 6th
(St Bruno)

Galatians 3:1-5
Luke 1: 69-75
Luke 11:5-13

Paul starts today’s first reading in a way that people have no doubt often wished to address their fellow-Christians: ‘You stupid Galatians’ (one colleague suggests here ‘crazy Celts’) ‘who has bewitched you?’ The point is that they have abandoned the freedom that Christ crucified had given them; and ‘having begun with the Spirit are you ending up with the flesh?’. It was God who ‘generously gives you the Spirit’, and as far as Paul is concerned they are abandoning God. The Spirit also makes an appearance in the gospel for today. It is a mildly humorous tale that presents God as a friend who is reluctant to get out of bed in the middle of the night. The moral is: ‘ask and you will receive…’, and where Matthew’s version ends with God giving ‘good things’, Luke, being the gospel of the Holy Spirit, concludes ‘how much more will your Father from heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?’ We should pray today for the Holy Spirit.

Friday October 7th
(Our Lady of the Rosary)

Acts 1:12-14
Luke 1: 46-55
Luke 1:26-38
Today’s feast, of the Rosary, was originally instituted to celebrate the great victory of the Battle of Lepanto; but it points (and many Catholics like to emphasise the Rosary during this month) to a well-tried way of praying. It is for that reason appropriate that we have quite a dose of Luke, the gospel of prayer, to celebrate the feast. We start with the prayerful presence of Mary and the other women in the early church, waiting for the coming of the Spirit. The responsorial for today is then, unusually, the subversive song of the Magnificat, which Luke puts on Mary’s lips at the visitation. The gospel is then the loveliest of Luke’s pictures, which a thousand artists have endeavoured to paint, the Annunciation, ending with Mary’s prayerful assent: ‘Look! The Lord’s slave-girl: let it happen to me in accordance with your word’. Let us today gaze at these Lucan pictures and allow them to speak to us.

Saturday October 8th

Galatians 3:22-29
Psalm 105: 2-7

What matters is not our ability to ‘keep the rules’, but paying attention to what God is asking of us. In today’s first reading, Paul is trying to explain to the Galatians his understanding of what God has done in Christ; and what counts, he is arguing, is not keeping the Torah, which he sees as a temporary disciplinarian that we have grown out of, but the maturity of being under faith, ‘in order that we might be justified as a result of faith’. And this has the very important consequence that there are no possible class-distinctions among the baptised: ‘no such thing as Jew or Greek, no such thing as slave or free, nor such thing as male and female. You see - you are all one in Christ Jesus’. Today’s gospel makes this point slightly differently. A woman in the crowd greets Jesus’ latest speech with a remark that in effect means ‘your mother must be proud of you’. Jesus, in return, without denying the importance of his mother, instead commends ‘those who hear God’s word - and do it’. That, precisely, is the challenge to us today.

Monday October 10th
(St Daniel Comboni)

Galatians 4:22-24, 26-27, 31-5:1
Psalm 113
Luke 11:29-32

The letter to the Galatians is a difficult one, and today’s first reading comes from one of the more difficult bits of it. The secret here is to latch on to the last line of our reading: ‘for freedom Christ has set us free’. Paul feels that the Galatians, in buying his opponents’ argument that they have to observe the whole Torah, circumcision, dietary laws and all, are rejecting the freedom that Jesus offers. The gospel, from Luke, which is very much the gospel of repentance, points to another failure in
freedom, the demand for signs which makes this an 'evil generation'. What they should be doing instead is what Nineveh did (to Jonah's fury) in response to Jonah's preaching: they repented. Is this the call to you, today?

Tuesday October 11th
St John XXIII

Galatians 5:1-6
Psalm 119:41, 43-45, 47-48
Luke 11:37-41

On this feast day of the great Pope John, with his awareness of the need for the Church to be in touch with the modern world, it is good to hear St Paul in our first reading making precisely that point, with regard to the law of circumcision, of which his opponents could quite correctly claim 'it is what the Bible tells us'. Paul has to get them to see (and how difficult John XXIII found it to persuade some in the Church of this) that 'obeying the Law' meant being 'alienated from Christ'. What matters is not what the regulations say, but 'faith working through love'. Today's gospel offers us a dramatic enactment of this truth; it is one of Luke's 'disastrous dinner-parties', at which Jesus' Pharisee host criticises him (as John XXIII was frequently criticised) for failing to obey the regulations (in this case about washing before meals). Jesus clearly believes that attack is the best form of defence, and tells the host that what really matters is not external actions but what goes on inside, such as 'thieving and wickedness'. Our task is to pay attention to what God is saying to us. We shall do well, today, to ask for the intercession of St Angelo Roncalli that the Church may continue to listen.

Wednesday October 12th

Galatians 5:18-25
Psalm 1:1-4, 6
Luke 11:42-46

Something that we urgently need in the Church today is to be able to tell the difference between what the good spirit is saying to us, and the way of the evil spirit. Paul offers us some clues in today's first reading, where he marks out the difference between the 'works of the flesh' (from fornication to drunkenness) and the 'fruits' (notice the tellingly different metaphor, indicating fertility) of the Spirit: 'love, joy, peace...'. He sums up with the exhortation: 'if we are living by the Spirit, then let us also conform to the Spirit'. That is evidently what Jesus finds lacking in the 'Pharisees' and 'lawyers' on whom he pronounces several 'woes' in the gospel for today: instead of following the Spirit, they follow minute regulations, and demand public demonstrations of respect, and 'pile difficult-to-bear burdens on people without moving a finger to touch them'. Let us pray to learn the art of discerning the spirits. Today.
Thursday October 13th

Ephesians 1:1-10
Psalm 98:1-6
Luke 11:47-54

What we have to do above all is to keep our eyes on Jesus. That is something that is managed in the opening sentence of the magnificent Letter to the Ephesians, which we start reading today. The sentence that begins ‘Blessed be God...’ has the honour of being the longest in the entire New Testament, though oddly the compilers of the lectionary have ended it some verses before its conclusion. If you count the number of references to Jesus or Christ or Christ Jesus, including all the pronouns that refer to Jesus, you will find that they come to no less than eighteen. This number includes four mentions of the Pauline idea ‘in Christ’; this phrase is immensely important in grasping the mystical element of our religious stance. Whatever it means, it is the opposite of what Jesus’ opponents have in mind in today’s gospel. Their anger is pardonable, since Jesus has accused them of plotting murder against those whom God sends. Their reaction? They began to hold it against him and to catch him out from his own mouth, laying ambush for him, to hunt him down...’ This is not the kind of attention to Jesus in which we are called to engage.

Friday October 14th
(St Callistus)

Ephesians 1:11-14
Psalm 33:1-2, 4-5, 11-12, 18-19
Luke 12:1-7

Today’s first reading twice uses the phrase ‘praise of his glory’, the effect of which is to underline the extent to which Jesus picks up Old Testament themes. There are several such words and phrases in this reading: the idea of being ‘allotted’, for example, or the ‘purpose of God’s will’, ‘the word of Truth’, the ‘gospel of our salvation’, ‘sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise’, ‘the pledge of our inheritance’, or ‘the redemption of the possession’; all these make it clear that in Christ the God of the Old Testament is being revealed. In the gospel, Jesus is explaining to the crowds how the revelation is before our very eyes, and how we are to pay careful attention to what God is doing. So we have to watch out for the ‘leaven, which is fake-piety’ of Jesus’ religious opponents; and we have to be free about proclaiming what we have heard: ‘it will be heard in the light...it will be proclaimed on the house-tops’. Then he addresses our fears; and (contrary to what you may have supposed) we are not to worry about ‘those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing worse’. Our fear should be for the one who can put us ‘in Gehenna’. The fact is that ‘not a single sparrow is forgotten in God’s presence. No - every hair on your head [a lovely image, this] has been counted. Don’t be afraid’.

Saturday October 15th
St Teresa of Avila

Ephesians 1:15-23
Psalm 8:2-7
Luke 12:8-12

Today is the feast of the great St Teresa; everyone knows the story told of her (I gather its status is that of ‘legend’, but it is a good one, nevertheless), that when a wheel broke on her cart, upending her into the river, she protested to the Lord at this event. The Almighty said, ‘But that is how I always treat my friends’, to which her response was ‘That is why you have so few of them’. True or not, it points to the important truth that gratitude, deep gratitude to God, is the safest way to sanity. As in nearly all the Pauline letters, today’s first reading expresses this deep gratitude for all that God has done in Christ. The gospel is an invitation to express the gratitude that we should all feel, by way of ‘acknowledging the Son of Man’, refusing to insult the Holy Spirit, and not getting worried when hauled before the authorities, ‘for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that hour what you have to say’. There are grounds for gratitude here.

Monday October 17th
St Ignatius of Antioch

Ephesians 2:1-10
Psalm 100
Luke 12:13-21

It is essential that we grasp the deepest realities; and for Paul that deepest reality is God’s victory over the hostile forces. So in today’s first reading he reminds his audience what God has done for them: ‘God is rich in mercy, because of the much love with which he has loved us...has made us alive with Christ...and raised us up too, and given us seats in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus’. He speaks of the ‘surpassing richness of his grace [the word can also mean ‘thanks’]...the gift of God...we are his poem’. But, alas, it is seductively easy to go for the less-than-real, and that is the scenario faced in today’s gospel. It starts with someone asking Jesus to referee over a family inheritance dispute. Jesus refuses, and simply warns them to ‘watch out - steer clear of all greed’, and then tells the chilling parable of the ‘rich fool’. The point is not that you get punished for having too much; it is more that Money, seductive as it is, will not provide us with the deepest reality for which we thirst.

Tuesday October 18th
St Luke

2 Timothy 4:10-17
Psalm 145:10-13, 17-18
Today we celebrate the feast of that supreme artist, the evangelist Luke. We know very little of the author of the Third Gospel, though in today’s first reading, taken from almost the very end of 2 Timothy, there is a mention of a ‘Lucas’, who is apparently one of the few who have not abandoned Paul in his time of trial. There are some charming details here about a cloak and some scrolls and a parchment; there are also some less charming details about the lack of support the apostle received when he was defending himself. And, above all, how the Lord supported him ‘and gave me power…and I was delivered from the mouth of the lion’. That of course is the clue, for Paul and Luke and anyone who preaches the gospel; as we go on our mission of preaching we should recite today’s psalm, a lovely song of praise to God ‘just in all your ways...near to all who call upon you’. Or consider, in the matter of evangelical style, the instructions in today’s gospel, as Jesus sends out the ‘seventy’ [or possibly seventy-two], ‘like sheep among wolves’; they are to travel light, with no credit-card or sandals (are you ready for your mission?). And their task is a daunting one, to ‘cure the sick and say to them, ‘the Kingdom of God has drawn near upon you’.’ Are you up for it?

Wednesday October 19th
SS John de Brebeuf, Isaac Jogues and companions SJ

Ephesians 3:1-12
Isaiah 12:2-6

Today we celebrate the memories of those brave French martyrs who were horribly tortured and butchered in what is today Canada and the North-Eastern part of the United States, whose apparently pointless deaths turned out to be the beginning of the first real flowering of the faith in those parts. The readings offer some reflections to help us meditate on these courageous ones. In the first place, Paul is ‘a prisoner on behalf of you Gentiles’, and he must have felt pretty much what those early Jesuits felt. Secondly, he speaks of a ‘mystery’, which is the only way we can understand their fertile deaths. Thirdly, these ‘outsiders’ are now, because of what God has done in Christ ‘sharers in the inheritance and sharers in the body and sharers in the promise’, all summed up as ‘the untrackable riches of Christ’, which gives us ‘confidence and access’. Or think of the canticle, taken today from Isaiah, ‘God is indeed my Saviour...shout aloud, city of Zion, for the Holy One of Israel is great in the midst of you’. That is language the martyrs would have understood. And so is the gospel for today, of which the motto is ‘stay awake’, and look after God’s people, with various threats about corporal punishment. No one said it would be easy.

Thursday October 20th

Ephesians 3:14-21
Psalm 33:1-2, 4-5, 11-12, 18-19
Luke 12:49-53
We often need to be reminded how radical is the demand of the gospel. In today’s first reading, the author is praying for his audience to be utterly taken over by God in Christ: ‘that Christ may dwell through faith in your hearts, so that you are rooted and founded in love’ (we notice the characteristic metaphors, from gardening and building)... ‘to grasp the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the surpassing worth of the love of Christ’. This is radical indeed. Likewise the gospel, though the tone is different: ‘I came to throw fire on the earth...Do you think that I came to give peace on earth? No, I’m telling you, but division!’ Then Jesus lists how a family is likely to be divided (‘father against son, son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against the bride, the bride against mother-in-law’). Naught here for our comfort.

Friday October 21st

Ephesians 4:1-6
Psalm 24:1-6
Luke 12:54-59

Christianity has something to do with the way we behave (you may be relieved to know), and especially with unity among Christians. Today's first reading emphasises this, encouraging us to ‘walk worthily of the calling with which you were called, with all humility and gentleness and patience, putting up with each other in love’. But the key here is unity; just count the number of times the author uses ‘oneness’ or ‘one’ in this passage - I make it eight. There is a challenge for us today. The gospel invites us to pay attention to the way things are: ‘when you see a cloud rising in the West...the wind blowing from the South’, they know what to do, but they cannot ‘read the signs of the times’. So Jesus gives an example of appropriate behaviour for the present moment, which we shall do well to imitate: ‘when you are going to the magistrate with your opponent, on the way work at getting reconciled with him’. That is not the way we normally think of things, but it may be what we are called to do.

Saturday October 22nd
(St John Paul II)

Ephesians 4:7-16
Psalm 122:1-5

Everyone in the Body of Christ matters, as today’s first reading makes clear: ‘to each one of us grace is given’, then the author offers a list of different possible gifts: ‘apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers’. But it is all for ‘the building up of the Body of Christ’, so that we are not ‘tossed around and carried here and there by every wind of human teaching and gaming’. The aim is to have the Body, ‘fitting together and united together...to build up the Body in love’. That is our
awesome task, not dismissing people because they have the wrong gifts. That is the challenge offered to Jesus in today's gospel: what about the 'Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices'? Jesus, perhaps remembering that he is a Galilean whose blood is shortly to be shed by the same Pilate, insists that it does not mean that they are sinners, and poses another question, concerning those 'on whom the skyscraper fell at Siloam, and killed them'. The answer is that all of us have to 'turn it around' or 'repent'; and Jesus offers a helpful Galilean illustration of looking after a fig-tree, even if it seems to be unfruitful. Everyone matters in the Body of Christ.

Monday October 24th
(St Anthony Mary Claret)

Ephesians 4:32-5:8
Psalm 1:1-4, 6
Luke 13:10-17

The only thing that matters is love. As you read these words, you roll your eyes and say 'there they go again'. But it is true; our world is a better place if, in the words of today's first reading we are 'kindly to each other, merciful, gift-giving...walking in love, just as Christ loved us'. Then the author makes a list of all the qualities opposed to love: 'fornication and all kind of impurity or greed...obscenity, stupid talk, smutty jokes'. And what should we really display? 'Thanksgiving' - and then we are to 'walk like children of the light'. It is obvious, once you see it. And that is what Jesus' opponents in today's first reading fail to see, when, effortlessly, he cures the woman who has been crippled for eighteen years, with the result that she 'was straightened up again - and she started to glorify God'. But the 'jobsworth' who knows the rules, but has no idea about love or about glorifying God, is 'furious', and attacks, not Jesus, but 'the crowd', telling them that there are six other days for being healed, not the Sabbath. Jesus tears strips off him for not recognising the love that this 'daughter of Abraham, whom Satan held chained for (look!) eighteen years, needed to be set free of this chain on the Sabbath day'. And the result? 'All his opponents were put to shame' while 'the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the glorious things done by him'. Once you see it, love is its own justification.

Tuesday October 25th

Ephesians 5:21-33
Psalm 128:1-5
Luke 13:18-21

Our task is to glimpse, sometimes with astonishment, God at work in our lives; this is how, in today's first reading, the relationship between men and women is presented, not as superiors to inferiors, as it is sometimes understood, but by 'mutual subordination in reverence to Christ', where husbands are taught to 'love their wives (a radical view in the Graeco-Roman world), as Christ loved the Church -
and handed himself over for her’. Husbands, that is to say, are to be ready to die for their wives, and ‘each one love your own wife as though it were yourself’. That is how God works. The gospel for today offers two illustrations (two of Jesus’ characteristic parables that make his teaching so memorable). First God’s work is compared to that of ‘a man’ who plants ‘mustard-seed in his garden’, which turned into a tree, and, secondly, to a baker-woman who ‘took leaven and hid it in three measures of wheat-flour, until the whole lot was leavened’. God’s work is unobtrusive, but immensely powerful, once we spot it.

Wednesday October 26th

Ephesians 6:1-9
Psalm 145:10-14

Do we have rights over God or each other? Emphatically not, as both of today’s readings point out. In the first reading, we listen to the instructions given to children, and we imagine their parents asking if they are listening as the preacher-tells them to be obedient, only to be horrified as they in turn are told not to provoke their children. Then the same thing happens to slaves, who are also told to be obedient, only to applaud as the ‘slave-lords’ are reminded that they are insignificant compared with the one who is really ‘Lord’, and who ‘is not a snob’. In the gospel, a question about how many people get saved is turned into one about how to go about it: ‘through the narrow gate’, and not by complacently giving orders to God ‘Lord - open up for us’, and reminding the Almighty of how much we have done for him. Jesus concludes, warningly, ‘and look! The last are going to be first - and there are those who are first who are going to be last’. God does not see things as we do.

Thursday October 27th

Ephesians 6:10-20
Psalm 144:1-2, 9-10

Being a disciple does not mean that we shall not have any opposition; but nor does it mean that we are left helpless. In today’s first reading, we are told how to survive the opposition: ‘be empowered in the Lord and in the strength of his might’, and then comes an elaborate metaphor about ‘spiritual armour’ that has seized the imagination of Christians ever since: ‘the helmet of truth, the breastplate of righteousness…the shield of faith…the headband of salvation…the sword of the Spirit’. Above all, we have to ‘pray at every moment, in the Spirit, for all the saints, and for me’. In the gospel, we encounter a series of opponents. First there are the Pharisees; but for once it seems that they are being helpful, warning Jesus that ‘Herod is out to kill you’. Then there is Herod himself, and the message to him (‘that fox’) is that ‘it is not possible for a prophet to be killed outside Jerusalem’. There is a
quality here to Jesus’ words that puts him way above the level of those who are out
to get him. Finally there is Jerusalem, ‘you who kill the prophets and stone those
who have been sent to you’, and we should hear Jesus’ motherly sadness over the
holy city: ‘how often I wanted to gather your children, like a bird gathers her brood
under her wings - and you did not want it’. There is distress here, but also a sense
that God’s victory lies ahead.

Friday October 28th
SS Simon and Jude

Ephesians 2:19-22
Psalm 19:1-4
Luke 6:12-19

Today we celebrate the memory of two of the more obscure apostles, Simon, to
whom Jesus seems to have given the teasing nickname of ‘Zealot’, and Jude, whose
only fame is to be the ‘patron saint of lost causes’. Our task is not to be famous, but
to ‘belong’. That is the message of the first reading for the feast: ‘you are no longer
foreigners or immigrants, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and belonging to God’s
household, built up on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus
himself as the corner-stone’. In a world where many people seem utterly adrift, that
‘belonging’ is something to hope for. The gospel gives us a bit more of a clue about
this sense of belonging; we are called and named (and affectionately nicknamed)
after Jesus has spent a night in prayer. And we are invited to accompany him as he
cures the sick and ‘those troubled by unclean spirits’, with the crowd ‘wanting to
touch him’. It is no good our suggesting that Jesus might have done rather better
with his choice of obscure apostles; for that would exclude us, too.

Saturday October 29th

Philippians 1:18-26
Psalm 42:2-3, 5
Luke 14:1, 7-11

Do you find yourself thinking, sometimes, that you really deserve the best place at
the show? If so, then look at today’s readings. The first reading is from Philippians,
which is one of Paul’s more joyful letters, even though it is written from a prison
from which he does not know whether he will emerge alive. ‘I shall rejoice’, he
insists, ‘…Christ will be magnified in my body’. His longing is ‘to dissolve and be with
Christ’. And that is all that matters. The gospel for today is one of Luke’s ‘disastrous
dinner-parties’, where Jesus is (somewhat surprisingly) invited to have a meal with
‘Pharisees and lawyers’; he then spoils it all by healing someone on the Sabbath. Not
content with the discontent that this arouses, Jesus then lectures his fellow-guests
on not insisting on the best places at dinner-parties; rather they should deliberately
opt for the inferior seats. He concludes his little speech with something he says on
other occasions: ‘everyone who lifts themselves up will be brought low - and vice
versa’. It is really common sense; but there is more to it than that, for grabbing the
top posts or salaries always brings unhappiness. We are really not made that way.

Monday October 31st

Philippians 2:1-4
Psalm 131
Luke 14:12-14

We have a terrible tendency to label each other, normally in order to build ourselves
up and put other people in their inferior place. By way of counter to that, in today’s
first reading Paul invites us to ‘think of others as better than yourselves’. The reason
is that the Philippians have been doing quite the opposite, and squabbling over the
tea-cups. So his prayer for them is ‘the consolation of love, the solidarity of the
Spirit, compassion and mercy’ (which are all the opposite of labelling each other). In
the gospel, Jesus is still causing havoc at a senior Pharisee’s dinner-party, by
recommending how to construct a proper guest-list: ‘not your friends or your
brothers or your relatives or your affluent neighbours’. So who (we ask nervously)
are we to invite to our parties? The answer comes, challenging all our labelling, to
our grave discomfort, ‘the destitute, the crippled, the lame, the blind’. And as we
digest this, he gives it to us with the other barrel: ‘you are to be congratulated,
because they have no way of repaying you - you see, you will be repaid at the
resurrection of the dead’.