Breaking the Word: Weekdays
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Tuesday November 1st
Solemnity of All Saints

Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14
Psalm 24:1-6
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

Today, appropriately enough, we open November, month of the dead, by celebrating the Solemnity of All Saints, the feast of all those who have gone before us and are now with God. These ‘saints’ knew the same temptations and frailties that we know, and that is the message of today’s readings. The first, from the book of Revelation, follows immediately after we have been given a glimpse into the heavenly liturgy, which is intended to give us hope in a broken world: our eye is to be caught by the unbelievably large number of those who are ‘sealed’ as God’s servants, first 144,000 from the people of Israel, and then an even larger number: ‘an immense crowd, whom no one could count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing before God’. This crowd is standing and singing liturgically; they are identified to us as ‘those who come out of the Great Tribulation and have washed their stoles...in the blood of the Lamb’. So their frailties include mortality. Then the psalm demands a high standard of those who are to climb the mountain of the Lord, and it seems that there is not much room for frailty here. After that, the second reading brings the whole story back to where it must always be, to the question of love, and to the invitation to become ‘children of God’. The gospel, finally, is the spectacular opening to the Sermon on the Mount, possibly Matthew’s greatest gift to us; and then we look in astonishment at the unlikely people who are congratulated: the ‘destitute, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful, the pure and heart and the peace-makers’. However we have all known people who had these remarkable qualities, even though they also had their faults; and once you have seen it, you recognise their sanctity as unmistakably the real thing.

Wednesday November 2nd
All Souls

Isaiah 25:6-9
Psalm 27:1, 4, 7-9, 13-14
Romans 5:5-11
Luke 7:11-17
Today we commemorate all the faithful departed, precisely when it should be done, on the day after All Saints. There is a wide range of choices of readings, and I have selected three that are frequently heard on this day. The underlying question, of course, is whether our God can cope with the death that is coming to us all. The first reading is stoutly of the view that God can cope, and offers us the wonderful image of ‘a feast of rich food and choice wines’, and asserts (without quite knowing how this can be true) that ‘the Lord will destroy Death forever’, and, in a beautiful maternal gesture, ‘will wipe away the tears from all faces’. The psalm is simply obsessed with God (‘the Lord is my light and my salvation’), and the poet who wrote it wants only one thing: ‘to dwell in the Lord’s house, all the days of my life’, and he concludes, ‘I believe I shall enjoy the Lord’s goodness in the Land of the Living’. The second reading is from that part of the Letter to the Romans where Paul is giving his Roman readers their grounds for optimism, and insists to them that ‘hope is not put to shame, because the love of God is poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us’. God can cope even with death, because ‘we were reconciled to God, through the death of his Son’. Finally the gospel is a beautiful demonstration of God coping with death, in the form of Jesus, who encounters a widow burying her dead son. Luke reports that ‘he was gutted for her, and told her not to weep’. Then he does what he should never do, namely to touch the coffin (because that made him ritually impure), and told the young man, ‘I’m telling you - be raised up’. And to our astonishment, ‘the young man sat up’, and, like Elijah before him, Jesus ‘gave him to his mother’. The key thing here is the reaction of the eyewitnesses: ‘God has visited his people’. Our God can indeed cope with death, it seems.

Thursday November 3rd
St Martin de Porres
Blessed Rupert Mayer

Philippians 3:3-8
Psalm 105:2-7
Luke 15:1-10

The letter to the Philippians is by some way Paul’s most joyful letter, though today’s first reading starts with a somewhat joyless snarl at those who think Christians have to be circumcised (‘the dogs, the evil-doers, the Circumcision’). And we must be grateful to those at whom he is snarling, because it is only when Paul gets cross that he does autobiography; so we learn here, what we should not know from any other source, that he is a good Jew (‘circumcised on the eighth day, of the race of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin, an Aramaic speaker, a Pharisee with regard to the Torah…’). But the only thing that matters, he tells us, is ‘the surpassing worth of knowing Christ my Lord, for whose sake I have lost everything’. And that, rather than the objections of his religious opponents, is what matters to Paul. The gospel reading today is likewise dealing with opponents (‘the Pharisees and scribes’, a combination which always means trouble in the gospels), who are complaining of Jesus’ terrible friends: ‘this man gives hospitality to sinners and has meals with them!’ To deal with
this complaint, Jesus tells two stories of people who celebrate and throw a party for
friends because of having recovered what they had lost. The first concerns a rather
improbable shepherd, who abandons the greater part of his flock in order to find a
single dim-witted sheep that had got lost, and then invites 'friends and neighbours'
to a party to celebrate. The second story concerns a woman who has lost one of the
measly ten drachmas that her husband allowed her for the housekeeping, finds it by
diligent sweeping, then throws a party for her girlfriends to celebrate; the party may
well have cost more than the recovered drachma, but that is not the point. And there
is, of course, a third story of celebration, which concludes this chapter 15, but does
not appear in today’s reading. It is the story of the Prodigal Father and his two
grasping sons. But that is another story.

Friday November 4th
St Charles Borromeo

Philippians 3:17-4:1
Psalm 122:1-5
Luke 16:1-8

If there is anything at all in Christianity, it has something to do with putting God and
Christ at the centre of our gaze. This is what Paul wants his Philippians to do, when
he asks them to ‘become fellow-imitators of me’, rather than following the ‘enemies
of the cross of Christ’, and those ‘whose God is their belly, and their glory in their
shame’. The key thing here is the question of where we belong, and Paul uses the
discourse of the Roman Empire (which is currently holding him in prison) when he
says that ‘our citizenship is in heaven’ and when he says that ‘we are waiting for a
Saviour - the Lord Jesus Christ’. This is revolutionary language, given that the Roman
emperors were at this time proclaiming themselves as ‘Saviour’, and it means that
Christ, rather than Julius Caesar, has to be at the centre of our gaze. This is also the
moral of today’s gospel, which is a very shocking one. It starts with ‘a rich man’, and
we know that in Luke’s gospel this is not a good beginning. Then we discover that
his steward ‘was slandered to him’, and he is dismissed without an enquiry; so our
sympathy is entirely with the steward, and we listen sympathetically to his
deliberations about what to do next. When he gets his master’s creditors to change
what is written in their bills, we are invited to applaud him; indeed Luke says that
‘the Lord’ [and he does not make it clear whether this is Jesus or the steward’s
master; either way it is shocking] ‘praised the steward for injustice’, on the startling
grounds that ‘the sons of this age are wiser than the sons of light’. We have to be
serious about what we put at the centre of our lives.

Saturday November 5th

Philippians 4:10-19
Psalm 122:1-2, 5-6, 8-9
Luke 16:9-15
We are almost at the end of the lovely letter to the Philippians now, and Paul is expressing his gratitude to them for their generosity. He insists, however, that he is not in it for the money, but his eyes are on God and on Jesus: ‘My God will fill up your every need, in accordance with his wealth in glory, in Christ Jesus’. The gospel also carries some reflections on money, with Jesus advising his disciples to ‘make friends for yourselves of the Mammon of iniquity, so that when it fails they may welcome you into the eternal tents’. There are two ways of taking this, which on the face of it is a rather shocking teaching. Either we are to see it as bitter irony, given that Jesus could not possibly believe that the mammon (an Aramaic word for ‘that which you rely on’) is something to make a friend of; or it is a rather startling way of telling us to be serious about what we put at the centre or our lives. Either way, the heart of the matter is what he says a few verses later: ‘you cannot serve God and Mammon’. Money is profoundly seductive, but it turns too easily into a god that enslaves us, turns us away from the God whose aim is to set us free.

Monday November 7th

Titus 1:1-9
Psalm 24:1-6
Luke 17:1-6

What kind of person should a Christian leader be? Today’s first reading is the opening of the Letter to Titus, which may or may not be written by Paul himself. It has some instructions on what ‘presbyters’ (the word from which our word ‘priest’ is taken; it means ‘elders’) should be like: ‘irreproachable, only married to one woman, with children who are believers, not…out of control’. Then he talks about the episkopos (from which comes our word ‘bishop’; it means something like ‘overseer’); this person must also be ‘irreproachable…not self-willed, or quick-tempered, given to wine-drinking, or a bully, or prone to financial greed. Instead [they should be] good to immigrants, loving what is good, prudent, moral, holy, and continent…’ And there is a challenge here for all of us, whether or not we have an official role in the church. In the gospel we are warned not to be a person ‘through whom scandals come’. And we have to forgive those who offend us, if they repent. We are also supposed to have faith, even to be able to tell a fig-tree to ‘be uprooted and planted in the sea’. Christian leaders should, it seems, be different.

Tuesday November 8th

Titus 2:1-8, 11-14
Psalm 37: 3-4, 18, 23, 27, 29
Luke 17:7-10

The letter to Titus is written at a time when the church is developing as an institution, and therefore starting to see the problems that come with institutionalisation. In today’s first reading, Titus is told what kind of person male and female elders should be (we note in passing that the assumption is that both
men and women can hold office in the church): ‘sober, dignified, prudent, healthy in faith, hope and stamina...not slanderers or enslaved to much alcohol, good teachers’. And above all they must have their eyes on God and on Jesus Christ. If they do that, then, like the slave in today’s gospel, they are not going to expect to be allowed to put their feet up. ‘So with you, when you have done all that you were told to do, you are to say, “We are useless slaves - we have done what we were supposed to do”.’ Are you prepared for that kind of upside-down service in the Church?

Wednesday November 9th

Dedication of the Lateran Basilica

Ezekiel 47:1-2, 8-9, 12
1 Corinthians 3: 9-11, 16-17
Psalm 46:2-3, 5-6, 8-9
John 2:13-22

Today the Church celebrates the dedication of the Lateran Basilica, a magnificent church, and the oldest basilica in the world, the mother church of Rome, which takes precedence even over St Peter’s. The readings, however, offer a rather more subversive picture. For the first reading has Ezekiel contemplating the waters of life coming out of the Temple, bringing health wherever they flow; but we need to remember that at the moment when he is writing, far away in Babylon, the Temple has been utterly destroyed, and no longer exists. So the picture is of what God is able to do even when destruction has happened. In the second reading, Paul is talking about the ‘Corinthian church’ as a building: but of course there were no church buildings until the 4th Century, and the ‘building’ is that which the Corinthians were failing to construct because of their quarrelling, namely the body of Christ: ‘if someone destroys God’s Temple, God will destroy that person’. So we are not talking of demolition but of Christian disunity. In the gospel, we watch Jesus’ Temple, on Passover (and we must recall that it would be on a later Passover that Jesus was to die in Jerusalem); as he does so, he proclaims ‘You are not to make my Father’s house into a house of commerce’. When they interrogate him: ‘a sign - because you are doing these things?’, he makes his well-known response: ‘undo this Temple, and in three days I shall raise it up’. Our gospel is not about buildings, no matter how beautiful, but about the life that God brings, the unity that we all too easily shatter, and the Resurrection that is at the heart of our gospel.

Thursday November 10th
Leo the Great

Philemon 7-20
Psalm 146:7-10
Luke 17:20-25
If you look about the world as it is today, it can seem very hard to detect any evidence of the Kingdom of God; you will have your own list of instances of hatred or violence from today's news. But there is another way of looking at it. Today's first reading is from the Letter to Philemon (which hardly ever gets a mention in church). The scenario is that a runaway slave called Onesimus (= 'Useful') has visited Paul in prison, and now Paul is publicly asking his owner, Philemon, to take him back, and treat him as 'a beloved brother', which is a very subversive demand in that society. But that is what the gospel asks of us; it is what the kingdom is made of. In the gospel, the Pharisees want evidence of this 'kingdom', and have to be told that 'the kingdom of God does not come with watching'; what they (and we) have to learn is the profoundest truth of all, that 'the Kingdom of God is within you'. But it will not be comfortable: 'for first [the Son of Man] has to suffer many things, and be rejected by this generation'. That is the world in which Jesus lived, and it is the world in which you and I have to find the kingdom.

Friday November 11th
St Martin of Tours

2 John 4-9
Psalm 119:1-2, 10-11, 17-18
Luke 17:26-37

We have to have an eye for the things that really matter. That is what both today's readings are telling us. In the first reading we are given one of our rare glimpses into the second letter of John; and here there are two things that matter. The first is the command to 'love each other', and the second is that we must 'admit that Jesus Christ comes in the flesh' (the heresy that Jesus only seemed to be human was an early one, and is still with us today). Both of these are summed up in terms of 'remaining in the teaching of Christ'. Then the gospel warns us against giving importance to things like 'eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage', not to mention 'buying and selling, planting and building'. We have to keep an eye out for the signs of the times, of course. However we may not feel especially helped by Jesus' final word in today's gospel 'where the body is, there the vultures will gather'. The things that really matter are those which endure, under God.

Saturday November 12th
St Josaphat

3 John 5-8
Psalm 112:1-6
Luke 18:1-8

Today's first reading gives us a glimpse of life in the early church, since 'beloved Gaius', the recipient of this letter, is congratulated for his kindness to fellow-Christians who are 'foreigners' or 'immigrants', who have attested to his kindness to people who had not got any help at all from non-Christians; and they are 'just the
kind of people whom we ought to help’. The gospel is slightly different, a story encouraging us to be persistent in prayer; and Jesus achieves this point by telling the story of the persistent widow who gets what she wants from the ‘unjust judge’ (and remember that it is God we are talking about. Jesus sometimes shocks us.), who only gives her what she wants because he is afraid that otherwise ‘in the end she’ll come and give me a black eye!’ But the story gets back on track as Jesus draws the lesson: ‘God will give a favourable verdict to his elect who cry to him day and night’. But the gospel ends with a question to which we shall do well to pay attention: ‘But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?’

Monday November 14th

Revelation 1:1-4; 2:1-5
Psalm 1:1-4, 6
Luke 18:35-43

As the church’s year declines towards its end (rather sooner than that of the calendar year), the readings introduce an appropriately apocalyptic note; the gospel story takes place almost at the end of Luke’s journey to Jerusalem, and the Book of Revelation casts its light over the gathering darkness. People panic about Revelation, but it is important to get it right; what we are about here is God giving us a glimpse of what is going on in our broken world: the sentence ‘happy is the one who reads out, and happy are those who listen to the words of the prophecy’, should remind us of its basic optimism. Then the reading jumps straight to the first of seven letters, the one to the Christians in the magnificent city of Ephesus, who are warned ‘because you have abandoned your first love’. The gospel, set as Jesus approaches Jericho, tells the story of the blind man (whom Mark named as Bartimaeus), who demands healing: ‘Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!’, despite the hushing of the ‘leaders’. Quite calmly, Jesus orders him ‘recover your sight; your faith has saved you’. The upshot, inevitably, is that ‘straightaway he recovered his sight, and started to follow him, glorifying God’. That is what we have to do in these difficult times.

Tuesday November 15th
St Albert the Great

Revelation 3:1-6, 14-22
Psalm 15:2-5
Luke 19:1-10

Our first reading today offers two letters to early churches, Sardis and Laodicea; if you are one of those who are inclined to dismiss the Book of Revelation as unreal, then notice that these letters are addressed to real groups of Christians. Sardis is chided for not ‘staying awake’, and the Laodiceans for being lukewarm, and for taking comfort from the undoubted wealth of their city. We are free to ask how the Lord would address us today, in our city. The gospel may offer a clue; for it introduces us to Zacchaeus, who (except that he is given a name) has several strikes
against him, being a ‘chief tax-collector’ and ‘rich’. However he wins our sympathy because he is anxious to see Jesus, and because in his enthusiasm he climbs a sycamore-tree, where he finds himself trapped, quivering, when Jesus bellows ‘Zacchaeus!’. Then, instead of the religious abuse he was doubtless expecting, he hears Jesus inviting himself to supper, at which point Zacchaeus ‘hurried down, and joyfully gave him hospitality’, with all sorts of promises about a new way of life. When people complain at Jesus’ choice of friends, he simply says ‘today’ (a word that is very important in Luke’s gospel) ‘salvation has come to this house’, followed by the wholly unexpected comment that ‘this one too is a son of Abraham’. There is food for thought here.

Wednesday November 16th
St Margaret of Scotland
St Gertrude

Revelation 4:1-11
Psalm 150:1-6
Luke 19:11-28

In today’s gospel we are inching closer to Jerusalem; and we know what is going to happen there: Jesus is going to die. But how are we to cope with death, our own as well as that of Jesus? In the first reading we get a glimpse, for a window opens in heaven, and we watch the heavenly liturgy, which, as all good liturgy should, explains to us what God is doing. We see ‘One Sitting on A Throne’, who is clearly God, a dazzling vision surrounded by twenty-four elders, as well as lightning and thunder and thunder-claps; there are four animals, singing ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’ to the presence of God. This liturgy is meant to assure us that whatever is going on in our world, God is in charge. That is presumably also what we are to glean from the story that Jesus tells in today’s gospel. Luke gives a heading to the passage, indicating that the story is to deal with the idea that ‘the Kingdom of Heaven is about to appear’. He tells us about a ‘nobleman’ and his ten slaves, who are given one mina each as he goes off to gain his Kingdom. In the meantime, we gather, his citizens send a message (to Rome?) to the effect that they don’t want him as King. Then we watch as the slaves (only three of them, not all ten) give their accounts, and two of them have made a useful profit. The third, however, had simply taken the mina and wrapped it up in a sweat-cloth: ‘Because I was afraid of you, because you are a strict man’. The king then proves the truth of this allegation by confiscating the one mina and giving it to the one who had ten of them! Then he has his enemies (who did not want him to have the Kingdom) slaughtered in his presence. So clearly Jesus is not that kind of a king; God is at work in him, but in a very different way from what you expect with ordinary kings. The story ends, tellingly, ‘When he had said these things, he began to journey onwards, going up to Jerusalem’. There he is not going to grab his kingdom, but to be put to death by the politically powerful. Where, do you think, is God in all this?

Thursday November 17th
St Elizabeth of Hungary

Revelation 5:1-10  
Psalm 149:1-6, 9  
Luke 19:41-44

There is weeping in both today’s readings. In the first reading, John the visionary weeps because ‘no one was found worthy to open the scroll’; and the scroll, we presume, contains the mystery of what God is doing in our world. However he is then told, ‘Don’t weep. Look! The Lion of the Tribe of Judah has conquered’, which may not enlighten us a great deal, until we are shown ‘a Lamb, standing like one slaughtered, with seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God’. And this Lamb ‘came and took from the right hand of the One Sitting on the Throne’, which leads to a massive outpouring of singing (‘a new song’) in the heavenly liturgy: ‘you were slain and you purchased for God from every tribe and language and people and nation; and you made them into a kingdom and priests for our God’. We may not fully understand this, but clearly God is in control, and we are to dry our tears. In the gospel, the tears are those of Jesus, weeping over Jerusalem because the city did not know ‘on this day the things that make for peace’. This is followed by the vision of Jerusalem destroyed: ‘and they shall not leave stone upon stone within you, because you did not know the time of your visitation’. The way to stop the tears is for us to recognise what is happening in our world.

Friday November 18th  
Dedication of the Basilicas of Saints Peter and Paul

Revelation 10:8-11  
Psalm 119:14, 24, 72, 103, 111, 131  
Luke 19:45-48

In today’s first reading, the visionary at last gets to do something; he is told to take ‘the opened scroll which is in the hand of the angel which stands on the sea and on the land’. We may not be quite sure what is going on; but clearly God is in charge. This does not make it particularly comfortable, however, for as the seer was (correctly) warned, ‘in my mouth it was like sweet honey; and when I ate it, my belly became bitter’, and, like Jeremiah before him, he is given the uncomfortable mission to ‘prophesy over many peoples and nations and languages and kings’. In the gospel we encounter the discomfort, for Jesus has at last arrived in the Temple, where Luke’s gospel began, and instead of being overawed by its fittings, ‘he began to expel the sellers’, because what Isaiah had seen as ‘a house of prayer’ has now become (in the words of Jeremiah) ‘a cave of brigands’. The result, of course, is that ‘the Chief Priests and scribes and the Number Ones of the people were looking for a way to destroy him’. But, by contrast, ‘the whole people hung on his words’. We know, however, that the discomfort is for real; Jesus’ enemies will succeed in destroying him.
Saturday November 19th

Revelation 11:4-12
Psalm 144:1-2, 9-10

Being a follower of Jesus does not mean that everyone will be nice to us (as you may already have discovered). In today’s first reading, we watch in horror as the visionary is told that God’s two witnesses are to be murdered, even though they have ‘authority to close heaven, so that no rain comes during the days of their prophecy, and authority over the waters, to turn them into blood’. For ‘the beast which is coming up out of the abyss will make war on them and conquer them and kill them’. Worse than that, their bodies will be ‘on the square of the great city...where their Lord was crucified’ (so we are talking about Jesus here). And the enemies of God ‘will rejoice over them and celebrate and send each other presents’. It sounds like the end; but God is in charge. That is the moral of today’s gospel, which comes at a point when Jesus enemies are lining up to get him, in the aftermath of his prophetic gesture in the Temple: High Priests, scribes, elders, fake-righteous, all trying (unsuccessfully) to trap him. Today it is the turn of the Sadducees, the priestly aristocracy who run the Temple, and who deny that there is any life after death. So they invent a clever/silly story about a woman who had seven husbands, to prove that she cannot possibly be married to all of them in the Resurrection. Effortlessly Jesus rebuts their argument by quoting Exodus (one of the few books of the Old Testament which the Sadducees accepted), about ‘God of Abraham and God of Isaac and God of Jacob’, to show that God is ‘not the God of corpses, but the God of the living - for they are all alive to him’. Jesus wins this battle - but will he win the war?

Monday 21st November
Presentation of Our Lady

Zechariah 2:10-13
Luke 1:46-55
Matthew 12:46-50

One of the reasons for celebrating the Presentation of Our Lady is to remind us that, like her Son, she was a good Jewish girl, who had been presented in the Temple within a few days of her birth, as Moses had commanded. So we are invited to imagine the words of the first reading as spoken to her, a reminder that all depends on God: ‘Sing and rejoice, daughter of Zion. Look - I am going to come and live in the midst of you’. And, more than that, it is not just a matter of Jews obeying the Law, for ‘many nations shall join themselves to the Lord on that day - and they shall be my people’. This is revolutionary talk, that the invitation to ‘be silent, all people, before the Lord’ extends beyond the Chosen People to the Gentiles. That is the revolutionary doctrine also of the Magnificat, which is our responsorial for today; and it is the teaching likewise of today’s gospel, when Jesus’ ‘mother and brothers’
come looking for him’, and Jesus redefines his ‘brother and sister and mother’ as ‘whoever does the will of my Father in heaven’. Does this include his mother? Need you ask?

Tuesday 22nd November
St Cecilia

Revelation 14:14-19
Psalm 96:10-13
Luke 21:5-11

We are now in the last week of the Church’s year, and in the readings (never mind what is going on in the world just at present) you can feel the world falling apart. But it does not matter, if only it can be that God is in charge. Notice, though, how they focus on the presence of God in the disaster, which is the only possible grounds for hope. In the first reading God’s presence is signalled by ‘a white cloud, and on the cloud One Sitting, like a Son of Man’; that may sound comfortable, but then see the instructions he is given: ‘send forth your sickle and reap the harvest’. Now we hear the result: ‘the angel sent forth his sickle onto the earth and harvested the vineyard of the earth and threw it into the Great Winepress of the Wrath of God’. And we notice that the two angels are emerging from the Temple, that uncomfortable and sometimes ambiguous symbol of God’s presence. That same Temple, so important in Luke, provides the setting for today’s gospel. Jesus deals quite sharply with those who exclaim at the beauty of Herod’s Temple, predicting a time when ‘there will not be left a stone upon a stone that will not be destroyed’. His hearers want a bit more information: ‘When will this be, Teacher, and what is the sign when this is about to happen?’ It must be admitted that they do not get much of an answer, beyond ‘the end does not immediately take place’. All we are told is that there will be discomfort: ‘nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, great shakings, famines and plagues, and there shall also be fearful things and signs from heaven’. However bad things may seem to be at the moment, God is in his Temple, and God is in charge.

Wednesday November 23rd
St Clement
St Columbanus

Revelation 15:1-4
Psalm 98:1-3, 7-9

No matter how awful things may get, God is in charge, and all shall be well. That is what today’s readings seem to be saying to us. The first reading is grim enough, in all conscience, with seven angels administering seven plagues, ‘because in them the wrath of God was fulfilled’; this is followed by a vision of ‘a glass sea mixed with fire’. However we are permitted to glimpse, standing on the seashore, ‘those who
have won out over the Beast and his Image’, who are ‘singing the song of Moses, God’s servant, and the song of the Lamb’. So all will be well. The gospel will demand an extra act of faith: ‘they will lay hands on you and persecute you, hand you over to synagogues and prisons, take you before emperors and procurators for the sake of my name’. However it will be well, ‘for I shall give a mouth and wisdom that they shall not be able to resist or contradict, those who oppose you’. It will not be easy: ‘you will be handed over by children and brothers and kinsmen and friends, and they will kill some of you. And yet: ‘not a hair of your head shall be destroyed’. God is in charge.

Thursday November 24th
Saint Andrew Dung-Lac and companions

Revelation 18:1-2, 21-23, 19:1-3, 9
Psalm 100:1-5

No matter how awful things may seem, God is (as I keep saying) in charge. Or, as our first reading for today puts it, ‘happy are those who are invited to the Lamb’s Supper’. Not that it is going to be easy. For what we see in our first reading is the fall of ‘Babylon the Great’, which in this work is code for ‘Rome’, but for us can stand for all the powers that threaten God’s project today, and we watch in horrified astonishment as an angel throws ‘a stone like a great mill-stone into the sea’, which is an indicator of what the fall of ‘Babylon’ will be like, with the sudden cessation of all the sounds of the busy city and its artisans, and of its social life; then, quietly at first, but getting stronger, we hear the sound of God’s heavenly choir singing to God, ‘because he has condemned the Great Whore who corrupted the earth with her whoring’. Only then do we hear the welcome invitation to the Lamb’s Supper. The gospel depicts the fall of another city, in this case Jerusalem, which happened only a generation or so after the death of Jesus. It is a frightening account, but we are not to worry because God is in charge, as is indicated by the ‘signs in the sun and moon and stars’, and, at the end, we hear the encouragement: ‘when these things begin to happen, stand up straight and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near’.

Friday November 25th
St Catherine of Alexandria

Revelation 20:1-4, 11-21:2
Psalm 84: 3-6, 8
Luke 21:29-33

One thing that the human race needs above all, especially perhaps in our age, is a vision; that is something that today’s readings offer us. We see ‘an angel with the key of the abyss, who arrests ‘the dragon, the ancient snake, who is Diabolos and Satan’ and throws him into the abyss (only for a thousand years, but that is another
story); and there are thrones and judgement, so God is in charge, and the dead stand before his throne, and scrolls are opened. Best of all is the vision of the ‘new heaven and new earth’ and ‘the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, like a bride made up for her husband’. We need to hold onto this spectacular vision, and be encouraged by it. Which is perhaps the message of today’s gospel, Jesus’ parable of the fig-tree, and the way we know when summer is coming, and how we must also recognise that ‘the Kingdom of God is near’. We should pray for this vision today.

Saturday November 26th

Revelation 22:1-7
Psalm 95:1-7

Today is the last day in the Church’s year, for tomorrow another Advent starts, with all its freshness. Our first reading, from almost the very end of the Book of Revelation, which we have been following for a couple of weeks now, offers us the freshness of ‘the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, coming out of the Throne of God and of the Lamb’, and God’s servants ‘will worship him and see his face; and his name shall be on their foreheads, and there shall be no more night’. It is a very cheering picture. Today’s gospel is our farewell to the gospel of Luke, which we have been reading for some months now, and is a warning (suitable, perhaps, for Luke’s wealthy readers) ‘not to have your hearts made heavy with hangovers and drunkenness and worldly cares’, because ‘That Day is suddenly upon you’, so we must be on the alert: ‘stay awake at every moment, asking to be able…to stand before the Son of Man’. There is a powerful note of challenge here, as we move into Advent.

Monday November 28th

Isaiah 4:2-6
Psalm 122:1-2, 4-9
Matthew 8:5-11

So now we are into Advent, when we look to the Lord’s coming; and we do not mention the C-word (‘Christmas’, since you ask) because our task is to learn to see things with God’s eyes and not worry about the feast that we shall be celebrating several weeks from now. As often in Advent, today’s first reading is from Isaiah, a vision of the Day of the Lord, when we shall see the ‘Branch of the Lord, beautiful and glorious, the pride and glory of the remnant of Israel’; and we are reminded of the Exodus, with ‘a cloud by day...flaming fire by night’ on Mount Zion. And we shiver. The gospel is an extraordinary interchange between Jesus and a centurion whose servant is ‘paralytic, terribly tormented’; but this gallant Gentile soldier knows that Jesus is different and asks for a healing by remote control, because ‘I am not worthy that you should come in under my roof’ and he knows about command, and recognises that Jesus has it. Jesus is stunned: ‘Amen I’m telling you, I have found
faith like this in nobody in Israel’. And the slave is healed immediately. We need to have our eyes open, it seems.

Tuesday November 29th

Isaiah 11:1-10  
Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17  

Advent offers us the vision of a new world that our Lord wishes to usher in. In today’s first reading it is the wonderful vision of the ‘shoot from the stump of Jesse’, a royal offspring who ‘is going to judge the poor with righteousness’, but also will inaugurate the restoration of creation, when ‘the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, the leopard with the kid…and a little child shall lead them’ (which of course is quite against the principles of Health and Safety). The important thing is that ‘they are not doing any harm or destruction on all my holy mountain - for the land is filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea’. The gospel has Jesus rejoicing, after the return of his 72 emissaries, and thanking his Father ‘because you hid these things from the wise and the intelligent, and revealed them to infants’. It is the Father’s decision about who receives the revelation, and he has chosen us: ‘happy are the eyes that see what you see, for many prophets and emperors wanted to see what you see - and they did not see it’. Here is a vision to keep us going through Advent.

Wednesday November 30th  
St Andrew

Romans 10:9-18  
Psalm 19:2-5  
Matthew 4:18-22

Today we interrupt our Advent meditations with the celebration of St Andrew, patron saint of Scotland, and brother of Simon Peter. The first reading has Paul working out what happens to his fellow-Jews, given that the gospel has gone out to the Gentiles; and for him the vital thing is ‘to confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe with your heart that God raised him from the dead’. But, he goes on, that means that people (like Andrew, and you, Dear Reader) must be sent to preach the gospel. Otherwise people cannot encounter Jesus. And that, of course, is what happened to Andrew on that never-to-be-forgotten day when Jesus called two sets of brothers; and of them, Andrew, was with ‘Simon called Peter’ casting their nets into the sea. They are told (without any explanation): ‘come here, after me, and I am going to make you fishers for human beings’. And they did! Now comes the question: at the end (and the story is that they were martyred) do you think that they regretted having set out to follow Jesus? The question is yours to answer.

Thursday December 1st
St Edmund Campion and companions

Isaiah 26:1-6  
Psalm 118:1, 8-9, 19-21, 25-27  
Matthew 7:21, 24-27

Jesuits today will be pondering the mystery of those 16th Century brothers of theirs who died so cheerfully at Tyburn for the capital crime of being priests; but the rest of us continue our Advent reflections; and today the invitation is to ‘trust in the Lord forever; for in the Lord God you have an everlasting rock’. The idea of ‘rock’ is there also in today’s gospel, just at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, for Jesus concludes his teaching by speaking of ‘the wise man, who built his house on rock’, a mode of construction that guaranteed its security against ‘the rain…the rivers…the winds’, so that ‘it did not fall’. Building on sand, by contrast, is a most inadvisable procedure. And what is the point of this? That listening to Jesus’ words ‘and performing them’ is the wisest and most secure way of proceeding. And what are you doing, as Advent goes its way?

Friday December 2nd

Isaiah 29:17-24  
Psalm 27:1, 4, 13-14  
Matthew 9:27-31

In the Northern hemisphere, we are coming now into the darkest time of the year, and the readings perhaps reflect this fact; today we are asked to meditate on the restoration of sight to the blind. In the first reading, Lebanon is going to become fertile, the deaf will hear, and ‘out of their gloom and darkness, the eyes of the blind shall see’. Best of all, the most needy shall exult in the Holy One of Israel, for the tyrant shall be no more’. In the gospel, Matthew tells the story of two blind men (when Mark told the story there was only one) who follow Jesus, yelling ‘Have mercy on us, Son of David!’. Then, remarkably, Jesus ‘touched their eyes, saying, “Let it happen to you, in accordance with your faith”. And their eyes were opened!’ Jesus’ power is limited in one respect, however, because he ‘snorted at them: “Make sure that nobody knows”. And they went out [as you might expect] and they made him known in all that land’.

Saturday December 3rd  
St Francis Xavier

1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23  
Psalm 117  
Mark 16:15-20

For the feast of St Francis Xavier, we interrupt our Advent reflections, and reflect on our task of preaching the gospel. For the first reading, we listen to Paul reflecting
out loud on this vocation of his: ‘My salary is that I should put the gospel, free of charge, so as not to abuse the authority that I have in the gospel’, and on the need to pay attention to his audience: ‘to those who were sick I became sick, in order to win over those who are sick: I became all things to all…I do everything because of the gospel message, in order that I might have some solidarity with it’. The gospel for the feast is perhaps a late addition to Mark, but gives us our mission: ‘off you go, into the whole world and preach the gospel to all creation’. That is our task; and what did those disciples do? ‘They went out and preached everywhere, with the Lord working with them, and confirming their message through the signs that followed them’. Francis Xavier took this text as his special challenge. And what are you going to do, today?

Monday December 5th

Isaiah 35:1-10
Psalm 85:9-14
Luke 5:17-26

If the gospel whose coming we are pondering during this season of Advent is of any interest at all, it should make a difference to our lives. Today’s first reading is almost certainly addressed to the Israelites in exile in Babylon, encouraging them to make the journey back home to Jerusalem across the long desert road. ‘The desert shall rejoice and blossom’, they are assured; but they may not be up to it, so have to be told to ‘strengthen the weak hands, make firm the feeble knees’. Then we are given a most beautiful vision of what it will be like: ‘the eyes of the blind shall be opened…the lame shall leap like a deer…waters shall break forth in the wilderness’. Then, in case they are worried about the journey, they are reassured: ‘there will be a highway; it shall be called “the Holy Way”…it shall be for God’s people’. The reading ends with this wonderful poetic vision: ‘The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing’. The gospel gives a little cameo of Isaiah’s vision, with Jesus healing a paralysed man, or rather not immediately healing him, but (once his friends have let him down through the tiles) telling him ‘Your sins are forgiven you’. This arouses the wrath of ‘scribes and Pharisees’, on the grounds that ‘he is talking blasphemy’. Jesus confounds them by completing the cure, commanding the man ‘arise, and take up your little bed and go to your house’. The result is what should happen to us during Advent: ‘amazement seized all of them, and they started glorifying God. And they were filled with awe, saying “We have seen strange things today!”.’ Look carefully for the awesome action of God, this Advent.

Tuesday December 6th
St Nicholas

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 96:1-3, 10-13
Matthew 18:12-14
Sheep do not always get a very good press, inaccurately dismissed as somewhat intellectually challenged; but today’s readings remind us of the Advent vision of a God who cares for his people like sheep. And one thing that you can say for sure about sheep is that they recognise (and trust) their shepherd. The image of a loving shepherd runs all the way through the reading, though the word does not appear until the very end; but the mood that underlies it is God’s passionate concern for his battered people, and the promise to do impossible things for them: ‘every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low...then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed’. The shepherd idea gets a new twist to it in today’s gospel, for we have a picture of someone doing what no Galilean shepherd in their right mind would ever do, namely, when one sheep out of a hundred goes wandering, ‘abandon the ninety-nine on the mountains, and go looking’. But the point is not the technical methods of pastoral farming so much as the passionate love of God for each of his people: ‘it is not the will, in the presence of your Father, the one in heaven, that one of these little ones should be lost’. That is the God of Advent.

Wednesday December 7th
St Ambrose
Isaiah 40:25-31
Psalm 10: 1-4, 8-10
Matthew 11:28-30

God is different; and God is unfailingly attentive to us. That is what today’s readings seem to be saying to us. The first reading comes from the anonymous poet whom we call ‘Isaiah of Babylon’, and he is insisting that God alone is God, and that Israel’s God has not forgotten them: ‘Why do you say... “My way is hidden from the Lord, my rights are ignored by my God?”’. Then comes a lovely image for God’s care for us: ‘he gives power to the weary and strengthens the powerless...they shall run and not be weary’. The gospel contains one of the loveliest lines of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus sounding like a rabbinic teacher inviting pupils to learn from him: ‘Come here to me, all you who are toiling and burdened, and I shall give you rest’. Then he picks up the notion of ‘burden’ and says ‘my yoke [a regular metaphor for rabbinic teaching] is kindly’. However, that word that I have translated as ‘kindly’ would have sounded in Greek like ‘my yoke is Christ, and my burden light’. This is a very different God.

Thursday December 8th
Immaculate Conception of Our Lady

Genesis 3:9-15, 20
Psalm 98:1-4
Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12
Luke 1:26-38

We are, all of us, hopelessly involved in the mystery of sin. Today’s feast, however, celebrates that Our Lady, by the power of what her Son did, was given the grace of not being thus involved. And her secret? It is primarily that God set her apart.
Consider today’s readings. The first reading displays the awfulness of the mystery of sin, that it makes us hide from God ‘walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze’, when it ought to be a pleasure to meet the Creator, but God has to call out ‘where are you?’. Then it all comes out, what the man and woman have done; so they blame each other, and the serpent, who has no one to speak up for him, has it all dumped on him. That is how sin works. God is not so easily thwarted, however, as the second reading makes clear; and God is the one who ‘blessed us…and chose us in him before the creation of the world…having set us apart as his children through Jesus Christ’. It is a lovely image; but lovelier yet is today’s gospel, the delicately drawn picture of the Annunciation, the angel bringing terrifying tidings to this unimportant virgin called Mary of Nazareth; but, as always with the mystery of sin, God wants his project to go ahead only through the free consent of human beings. So we breathe a sigh of relief when Mary indicates that she is not involved in the mystery of refusing God’s request. She does this by making the simple response, ‘Look - the Lord’s slave-girl: let it happen to me in accordance with your word’. That is our way out of the mystery of sin.

Friday December 9th
Isaiah 48:17-19
Psalm 1:1-4, 6
Matthew 11:16-19

The only thing that matters if we are to get our life right is that we should pay attention to God; today’s first reading expresses God’s passionate longing for us, as he sadly laments ‘O that you had listened to my commandments…your offspring would have been like the sand’. There is something of the same message in the psalm for today, which offers the image of those who pay attention to God’s commandments: ‘they are like trees, planted by streams of waters, which yield their fruit at the right time’. In today’s gospel, Jesus laments that his contemporaries refused to listen to either John the Baptist or himself, because neither of them conformed to the expected image of what a man of God should be like. They are, he says, ‘like children’ shouting ‘we played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we played mourning-tunes, and you did not weep’. Who is in charge here? They reject John the Baptist as ‘demon-possessed’ because he does not eat or drink, and Jesus as ‘a glutton and a wine-drinker’ because he did both. If we listen carefully to God, this Advent season, we shall come to realise that he is always beyond anything that we can imagine.

Saturday December 10th
Ecclesiasticus 48:1-4, 9-11
Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19
Matthew 17:9-13

The slightly alarming figure of Elijah, ‘man of God’, is an appropriate one for this Advent season; John the Baptist resembled him in some ways, and the beginning of
Mark's gospel stresses the similarity of their diet and clothing. So it is appropriate that today's readings invite us to meditate on the prophet. The first reading allows us to hear a Jew of a much later generation than either the prophet himself or the stories about him; this re-reading of the Elijah story by Ecclesiasticus makes the prophet a spectacular success, who wrought miracles wherever you might look, and was more powerful than kings, 'to calm the wrath of God'. Then the meditation concludes 'happy are those who saw you!' The gospel has Jesus' 'inner cabinet' of Peter, James and John coming down the mountain after their experience of the Transfiguration and asking about Elijah coming. Jesus' response is fairly enigmatic: 'Elijah has already come...they did whatever they wanted to him'. Then 'the disciples understood that he had spoken to them about John the Baptist' another slightly alarming figure, whom Herod has now executed. But there is more: 'so the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands'. It is not a comfortable thing, this discipleship to which we are invited in Advent.

Monday December 12th
Our Lady of Guadalupe

Numbers 24:2-7, 15-17
Psalm 25:4-9
Matthew 21:23-27

Who has authority in our Advent world? Only God; and unless we remember that, we shall be in trouble. In the first reading, Balaam had been asked by King Balak of Moab to stop the Israelites who were coming into his country on the way to the Promised Land, by cursing them, but he found himself unable to do so, could only stammer 'how good your tents are, Jacob, and your camps, O Israel' then lapsed into a prediction that spoke originally of David, and to us of Jesus: 'a star shall tread a path from Jacob, and a staff shall arise from Israel'. In the gospel, likewise, Jesus silences his opponents, 'the high priests and elders of the people', who are demanding to know the source of his authority for performing his prophetic gesture of expelling the commercial interests from the Temple. He refuses to answer unless they can tell him about the authority of John the Baptist, which traps them, because, like Balak, they failed to recognise the authority of God, and, like trapped politicians all down the ages, they refuse to answer. With massive authority, Jesus responds, 'And neither am I telling you by what authority I do these things'. As Advent rushes on, let us identify God as our sole authority.

Tuesday December 13th
St Lucy

Zephaniah 3:1-2, 9-13
Psalm 34:2-3, 6-7, 17-19, 23
Matthew 21:28-32
If we are to get Advent right, one thing that we have to do is to recognise our own utter dependence on God. This is what the temple aristocracy, whom Zephaniah is attacking in our first reading, completely failed to do; that is the danger of having religious authority, that we are unable to recognise that God is in charge. So they are roundly told ‘you shall no longer exalt yourself on my holy mountain’, while, by contrast, ‘I shall leave in the midst of you an oppressed and lowly people; and they shall take refuge in the name of the Lord’. In the gospel, Jesus is continuing his battle with the same Temple aristocracy, or their descendants, six centuries later, and asks them a riddle about two sons, known to all of you who have ever dealt with adolescents, whom a father asked to go and work in his vineyard. ‘Number One said, “I don’t want to”, but later on changed his mind and went. And he approached Number Two, and said the same. He responded, “Yes, Lord” but did not go.’ The point here is that the implicit claim of the religious leaders to be doing God’s will is false; they refuse to recognise both their dependence on God and their own disobedience. Are you getting Advent right?

Wednesday December 14th
St John of the Cross

Isaiah 45:6-8, 18, 21-25
Psalm 85:9-14
Luke 7:19-23

The first reading might, if you read it carelessly, sound a little chest-thumping, with all that talk of ‘I am the Lord - there is no other…I do all these things…I have created it… I created the heavens… I am the Lord, and there is no other’, and so on. That is, until you remember that the prophet is addressing his fellow-Jews who are living altogether too easily in Babylon. Perhaps they are also a bit over-impressed by the Babylonian deities such as Bel and Marduk, and need to recognise who is really God round here. Even John the Baptist (whom Luke says is a relative of Jesus) is having a crisis of faith, and sending messengers to Jesus to ask ‘Are you the Coming One, or are we to wait for another?’ The answer comes back to him ‘the blind recover their sight, the lame are walking, lepers are being made clean and the deaf are hearing, corpses are being raised up, the poor are being given good news’. Then comes the sting in the tail: ’And congratulations to those who are not scandalised by me’. As Advent rushes to its end, we are invited to see God and Jesus at work in our world.

Thursday December 15th

Isaiah 54:1-10
Psalm 30:2, 4-6, 11-13
Luke 7:24-30

It is not uncommon at this stage in Advent to feel a bit dead; and if that is your story just now, then these readings are for you. In the first reading, Isaiah of Babylon addresses Israel as a ‘barren woman’, who, in a metaphor taken from the people’s
nomadic past, is to expand her tent, and to look to conquer, for 'your husband is your Maker, the Lord of hosts is his name'. So she is to renew her courage: 'for a short moment I forsook you, and in great mercy I shall gather you...my love shall never leave you'. So if you are feeling dead, then things may not be as bad as you think. In the gospel, Jesus is talking about John the Baptist, whom many would have classed as 'dead', out there in the desert, not 'wearing luxury clothes...in palaces', but 'a prophet, and more than a prophet'. Then, in a great affirmation of John (for all that he has just been sending messengers to express his doubt about Jesus), Jesus says 'no one among those born of women is greater than John'. And yet - Jesus has something else to say: 'the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than him'. So perhaps you should, after all, feel the life stirring in you at this time.

Friday December 16th

Isaiah 56:1-3, 6-8
Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 7-8
John 5:33-36

Who is 'in' with God? Today's first reading roundly challenges the notion that only those who are part of the people of God are included in God's dispensation. So the prophet imagines immigrants saying 'The Lord has divided me from his people' and the childless saying, 'I am a dry tree'. For the Lord has a wider vision that we have. So the prophetic vision goes on: 'the immigrants who have joined themselves to the Lord and to love the Lord’s name as his servants...I shall bring them to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples'. This is a breath-taking vision of God's wide dispensation, one that we shall do well to reflect upon as Advent approaches its end. Today’s gospel makes the same point; Jesus is talking to those who are looking to kill him (because of his claims about his God as his Father). 'You sent to John, and he witnessed to the truth; but I do not take witness from any human being'. The point is that Jesus has 'a witness greater than John', namely 'the works that I do, which give evidence that the Father has sent me'. So instead of looking at who is 'in' with God, our task is to have a wider grasp of what the Almighty is about, his invitation to the entire human race, including those whom you most dislike.

Saturday December 17th
O Sapientia - O Wisdom

Genesis 49:2, 8-10
Psalm 72: 1-4, 7-8, 17
Matthew 1:1-17

We are now eight days before Advent's end, and the Church starts a countdown to the feast, with the great 'O' Antiphons, one for each day. The gospel for this day is the first seventeen verses of our New Testament, as it stands; and you would be amazed at the number of priests who gaze in horror at the succession of 'begats' and
pretend that today is a different day, in order to avoid preaching on the genealogy of Jesus. First, though, look at Jacob's farewell to his sons, in particular Judah, from whom Jesus, whose birth we shall shortly be celebrating, took his ancestry. Judah is told that he must survive by jungle-law, as a lion-cub. Then, in the psalm, there is prayer for the king, another descendant of Judah; but notice that the newly-enthroned monarch is warned that he must 'judge the oppressed...save the children of the poor', before the prayer goes up for him to 'rule from sea to sea'. Then what about all those 'begats'? Well, in the first place, Jesus is different, does not survive by jungle-law, does not need to be told about looking after the poor, but, astonishingly, sums up the whole history of God's dealing with his people, from the original promise to Abraham, to the apparent fulfilment of that promise in David, and its apparent cancelation in the terrible moment of the Exile to Babylon, and finally to the birth of the Messiah. And there is something more: Mary comes at the very end of the genealogy, just before we are told that Joseph was not, after all, the father of Jesus; but we have been prepared for her appearance by that of four other women, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Read up on their stories; like Mary, they all had odd domestic arrangements, unlike her they were or may have been foreigners, but all of them carry the important message that God's project works out through the unpredictable eccentricity of human beings. We might, after all, reflect profitably on this genealogy in the course of this week.

Monday December 19th
O Radix Jesse - O Root of Jesse
Judges 13:2-7, 24-25
Psalm 71: 3-6, 16-17
Luke 1:5-25

Both today's readings carry the annunciation of a birth; in the first reading it is the birth of Samson, announced to his mother, the wife of Manoah. She is told that she must prepare carefully and religiously for the birth of the one 'who shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines'. Samson is perhaps not a model for a saviour of Israel, with his odd tastes and his indiscretions with women; but he did fight powerfully for Israel, and he did, like Jesus, die with arms outstretched to save his people. In the gospel the annunciation is that of the birth of John the Baptist, to his father Zechariah. He is about his priestly duties (he and his wife step straight out of the pages of the Old Testament), and encounters the angel Gabriel 'at the right hand of the altar of incense', and is told that he will, after all, have a son. Zechariah, however, is unwise enough to ask for evidence, and gets temporarily struck dumb. For us, however, the model may be that of the 'people' (Luke's word for faithful Judaism), waiting prayerfully outside the Temple and discerning what was going on. We need that attitude above all this week.

Tuesday December 20th
O Clavis David - O Key of David
This last week of Advent may be a frantic one for you; but today's readings invite us to focus on the God whose coming we celebrate on Sunday: what is God doing? In the first reading, King Ahaz is invited to ask for a sign, but because he does not want to hear the prophet's message, he refuses, under the cloak of piety, and is given one anyway, the prediction of the birth of a child, presumably in the royal household, whose name shall be called 'God-with-us'. The gospel is one of Luke's loveliest paintings, the annunciation to Mary in Nazareth; read it through, and savour the details, but above all keep an eye on what God is up to. He approaches a very unimportant girl in a very obscure village in the remotest part of the Roman Empire, and tells her (who is not married) that she is going to have a son. Not only that, but this child will be called 'Son of the Most High'. Like Zechariah yesterday, she is puzzled; unlike him, however she does not demand evidence, but simply points to the fact that she has not had sexual intercourse. The answer, of course, is that 'nothing is impossible for God', and we applaud as we hear Mary say 'Look - the Lord's slave-girl; let it happen to me according to your word'. Can you say those words, this week?

Wednesday December 21st
O Oriens - O Rising Sun
(St Peter Canisius)

Song of Songs 2:8-14
Or Zephaniah 3:14-18
Psalm 33:2-3, 11-12, 20-21
Luke 1:39-45

We have some very lively readings today. The first reading is from the lovely erotic poetry of the Song of Songs, which Jews and Christians have learnt to read as an expression of the love of God for us: 'arise my beautiful one, and come'. Then there is an alternative first reading, from Zephaniah, presumably for those who find the Song rather strong medicine for this time of year, is an invitation to us to rejoice in the presence of God, who for this purpose is a 'victorious warrior'. The gospel is the wonderful story of the visitation, Mary, a young girl of 12, making the long journey from Galilee to the hill-country of Judah, to be rewarded by her cousin's recognition of her as 'the mother of my Lord'. God is present in all these encounters; and God will be present in the coming feast, if we get it right.

Thursday December 22nd
O Rex Gentium - O King of the Nations

1 Samuel 1:24-28
1 Samuel 2:1, 4-8 (responsorial)
All of today's readings remind us of God's 'tough love'. In the first reading, we see the sad moment of Samuel being taken off to boarding school, at a painfully young age; but we should not perhaps complain too loudly against God, who has simply taken Hannah at her word, that if she were to be given a son 'he will be given over to the Lord for as long as he lives'. Certainly Hannah shows no disposition to complain, for our responsorial is the song that she sings to God's 'tough love' in the very next chapter, which may be a model for today's gospel, or may come out of a similar moment in the journey with God. At all events, Hannah is heard singing 'My heart exults in the Lord...he exalts the poor'. And Mary sings a similar song of God's 'tough love': 'my soul sings out the praises of the Lord; and my spirit has exulted in God my Saviour'. Then at the end Luke gives a note of reality: 'Mary remained with [Elisabeth] about three months, and returned to her home'. The two kinswomen, one old, the other very young, have had their moment with God, and now must get on with living their lives. And so must we...

Friday December 23rd
O Emmanuel - O God With Us

Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24
Psalm 25:4-5, 8-10, 14
Luke 1:57-66

The feast is almost upon us, and that may mean that you are chasing your tail in ever-decreasing circles; or it may mean that you are lapsing into sentimental complacency about it. Neither of these responses is appropriate, however, as today's readings make clear. The first reading, right at the end of our Old Testament, and therefore begging for the new thing that is about to happen, speaks of God's 'messenger', who will 'suddenly come into his Temple...who can sustain the day of his coming?' That day is then described as 'the great and fearful day', and we might reflect upon that. But equally we are invited to recognise that God is indeed at work and there are grounds for rejoicing, for that is what Elisabeth's neighbours have come to do. But they are not prepared to listen to God; they simply know that the child must be called by his father's name of Zechariah. His mother insists that instead he is to be known as 'John' ('the Lord has acted graciously'); and when they check out this improbable proposition with Zechariah (for in their culture as in ours there was a tendency to neglect the witness of the women), he supports her and recovers his powers of speech. Not surprisingly the stunned comment is 'what is this child going to be?' Are you prepared to be stunned by the action of God, now that Advent is ending?

Saturday December 24th
Christmas Eve

2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-12, 14-16
Psalm 89:2-5, 27-29

Luke 1:67-79

So we can use the C-word now, for tomorrow shall be Christmas Day, and Advent will finally be over. And what are we to do about it, according to today’s readings? We are to be generous, of course; and in the first reading, David is visited with a desire to be generous, and build God a house. For this he is roundly told off, and reminded that he cannot treat God as a nice pet, for we are talking of ‘the Lord of hosts’, who took David from being a shepherd to being ruler of Israel; it is God who has brought him to where he is, and far from David making a house for God, it is God who is proposing to make a house for David. In the gospel, Zechariah has recovered from his moment of disbelief for which he was punished with silence, and is able to sing a song of praise and thanksgiving: ‘blessed be the Lord, God of Israel’. And the whole story, including the whole Christmas story, is all about what God is doing, not about our institutionalised generosity. God has ‘visited us, the dawn from on high to show those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, how to make our feet go straight on the path of peace’. We are to be generous only because we realise how much God loves us, how generous God has been.

Monday December 26th
St Stephen

Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-59
Psalm 31:3-4, 6, 8, 16-17
Matthew 10:17-22

It is an appropriate and ancient tradition that the Church celebrates the feast of the first martyr on the day after the birth of Jesus, for the life into which the Galilean was born was never comfortable, and, like Stephen’s, it ended in public execution. You may remember that Stephen was appointed as one of the seven ‘deacons’ after a bout of racial and religious tension in the Jerusalem church. To our astonishment, however, when we see him next (in our first reading) he is not waiting at table, but ‘full of grace and power, doing great signs and portents among the people’. This yields to a clash with some Greek-speaking (to judge by the names) synagogues, and a trial before the Sanhedrin on the grounds of speaking against the Temple and the Mosaic Law. This produces a not particularly tactful response from Stephen, as a result of which he is stoned to death (with a young man called Saul in compliant attendance, but that is another story…). All this is only what Jesus predicts in today’s gospel: ‘they will hand you over to Sanhedrins and flog you in their synagogues’; but they (and we) are to keep going: ‘the one who remains to the end is the one who will be saved’. There is our challenge for today.

Tuesday December 27th
St John the Evangelist

1 John 1:1-4
Psalm 97:1-2, 5-6
John 20:2-8

Today the Church has long celebrated the feast of the evangelist who produced the wonderful text that is the Fourth Gospel, and which has some (though maddeningly not perfectly clear) connection with the person of the Beloved Disciple. The heart of the matter, here in today's readings, is that the evangelist/beloved disciple has an intimate knowledge of Jesus. So the first reading is the dramatic opening of the first letter of John, which we shall be reading over the next few weeks, and which clearly belongs with John's Gospel, and it makes a clear claim to have 'heard and seen with our eyes, what we have beheld and our hands have touched'. And it is not just for him, but so that we the readers 'may have solidarity with us...and with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ'. Today's gospel tells how the beloved disciple came to faith: on Easter Sunday morning, Mary Magdalen discovered the empty tomb, and ran to tell Peter and the beloved disciple; they in turn ran back to the tomb, and there is a curious episode whereby the beloved one arrived first, but courteously allowed Simon Peter to go in first. Then he himself enters, and, we are told, 'he saw and came to faith'. There may be a challenge to us here today, an invitation to 'see and believe'.

Wednesday December 28th
The Holy Innocents

1 John 1:5-2:2
Psalm 124:2-5, 7-8
Matthew 2:13-18

Sometimes we feel a bit aggrieved because Christ has come, and things do not seem to be all that much better. Today's feast puts it rather more strongly. The first reading reminds us of the possibility that 'we are walking in darkness', and sharply indicates that 'if we say, “we do not have sin”, we are deceiving ourselves'. And the mystery of sin is at play in the gospel, where Herod is determined to do anything at all to save his throne against the menace of the child that has been born as 'King of the Judeans'. However, God is in charge, and for the third time in this gospel, a dream from God advances the narrative, as Joseph is told to 'flee to Egypt' (of all places!), because 'Herod is about to seek out the little child, to destroy it'. Obediently, Joseph does what he is told, 'by night' (this reminding us of that other Exodus, when Israel escaped from Egypt), and stays there until Herod dies. However the children of Bethlehem have no such luck, and Herod has them butchered, if they are less than two years old. So, as the prophet had it, 'Rachel is mourning her children...because they are no more'. It is a dreadful story, but even there, somehow, God is at work.

Thursday December 29th
St Thomas a Becket
1 John 2:3-11
Psalm 96:1-3, 5-6
Luke 2:22-35

At this time of the year in the Northern Hemisphere, there is something of a battle between the light and the dark, which can stand as a symbol of what is going on in our world. Today’s first reading speaks of this: ‘anyone who claims to be in the light and hates their brother or sister is in the darkness right down to the present moment’. The gospel, however, offers a dramatic account of how the light shines on those who are open to the Lord. It starts with Jesus’ parents coming to the Temple to make for him the offering prescribed for the poor. This now leads to a Spirit-filled encounter with Symeon and Hannah, who explain the meaning of this child: ‘your saving act...a light for the unveiling of the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel’. Hannah, good and pious Jewess, talks of Jesus in terms of ‘those waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem’, which is clearly what Jesus provides. But there is more, for Jesus is not going to be readily accepted; he will be, according to Symeon, ‘a sign that will be contradicted’, and, for Mary, ‘a sword shall pierce your heart’. The battle goes on at several different levels, and we must be alert to it, even in this Christmas season.

Friday December 30th
Feast of the Holy Family

Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14
Psalm 128:1-5
Colossians 3:12-21
Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

It is a wise dispensation of the Church to celebrate the Holy Family in the week after Christmas, a feast that (paradoxically enough) can put a good deal of strain onto our human families. This year, however, since the Sunday after Christmas is New Year’s Day, the feast is wisely brought back to the preceding Friday. But the readings can help us negotiate our troubled family relationships. In the first reading, a wise old sage reflects on the problem (more common in our age than in his) of elderly parents: ‘those who respect their mother are like those who lay up treasure...even if [your father’s] mind fails, be patient with him’. The psalm is a charming meditation on the joys of family life, and is also aware of the link between family and society, for it ends, ‘May you see your children’s children - peace be upon Israel’. Then the second reading gives a recipe for joyful family living: ‘put on the guts of mercy, kindliness, lowliness, meekness, patience, putting up with one another’, before going on to give a recipe for peace between husbands and wives, parents and children. Finally the gospel has us following Joseph, in silent obedience to God’s command, first rescuing his child and its mother by escaping to Egypt, and then getting them to Nazareth. Families can be a wonderful gift to us; and as we watch the plight of refugee families all over the world, we can pray for the grace to do what God asks us to do to help them.
Saturday December 31st
St Sylvester

1 John 2:18-21
Psalm 96:1-2, 11-13
John 1:1-18

Tomorrow begins another calendar year, and what will you do to celebrate? Well you might pay some attention to today's readings, for a start. The first reading continues our journey through the first letter of John, warning us that it is 'the last hour' and that 'many antiChrists have come', but we are not to worry because 'you have anointing [this word is connected with 'Christ'] from the Holy One'. Then the gospel is the majestic Prologue to the gospel of John, and you could do worse than spend the entire day (and indeed the year to come) reflecting on what it means to say 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was in relation to God'. Then you might reflect on the awesome claim that this 'Word became flesh - and pitched his tent among us!' Finally ponder this: 'No one has ever seen God. Only-Begotten God, the one who is in the bosom of the Father, that is the One who has expounded'. If you think that you have understood it, then look again. And let me wish you a very happy 2017.