

20th March 2022-Third Sunday of Lent

Today we see rejecting the idea that accidents and illness occur because God punishes people for their sin. The Old Testament reading reminds us of the sacred encounter between God and Moses—we realise that God enters a loving covenant with his people. During this time of Lent, we are walking through the metaphorical desert, just like the Chosen People. Moses was a very public sinner and fled from his life of luxury in the Court of Pharaoh to the quiet of the desert. Yet it was this very broken man that God chose to lead his people out of slavery. With Jesus we see the perfect man who leads us out of imperfection and wrongdoing.

The religious leaders of first century Palestine had no time for sinners—they should just be written off. Jesus, however, rejects this instant dismissal: Christianity is not about short-term gains, we are in it for the long-haul. Jesus tells a story about a fig tree planted in a vineyard—good soil was so rare that such mixed use would be very common. This fig tree is planted in a very special place, but it will take time for it to bear fruit. Even after three years the farmer finds no fruit, and so the temptation is to chop it down as it was drawing nourishment from the ground. Jesus is about the bigger picture and urges even greater care for the fig tree so that it has the potential to produce wonderful and tasty figs.

Jesus wants religious people to have that same patience with sinners: if God could use Moses, all of us have some hope of redemption. All of us are barren fig trees, yet with support, trust and hope, we can lead good lives. God is patient with each of us, despite failure. The challenge of the gospel today is that we too, can have a share in that divine patience. We should have the

patience and trust of Albert Einstein's parents. Arguably one of the greatest minds the world has seen, he did not start to talk until he was two. His worried parents took him to doctors who told them that, as a late developer, he could not amount to much! We need to believe in our young people and listen to their stories—we need patience. At the start of his public ministry, Jesus asked his new disciples to take risks. We need to be a trusting and more open Church to see great things done.

Today: show one of your friends that that you trust them

God invites us to take a leap of faith, we can pray with Thomas Merton:

When we step out in faith and just completely trust God, this produces a chain reaction of action that dissolves fear. Fear is really all about the unknown and the more you fail to take action, the more the unknown grows and the more fearful you become. When you start taking action that produces results, your fear starts to crumble, and your faith grows until fear is eventually destroyed. But for this process to take place you have to take the first step. You have to take that leap of faith.



The Vine Dresser and the Fig Tree (Le vigneron et le figuier) - James Tissot

21st March 2022—Monday of Third Week of Lent

In Luke's Gospel today, we see Jesus going home: he is among those very people he played with as a child on the hills around Nazareth; he is with those who probably ordered tables and chairs from the carpentry shop of his father, Joseph. He is well known, and it is precisely because he is so familiar that the people cannot accept his words of healing and calm. Jesus is preaching a gospel of total inclusion that 'enraged' those in the synagogue; their anger spilled out into wanting to do him physical harm by throwing him off the local cliff—Jesus realised very strongly that 'no prophet is ever accepted in his own country'!

There is an old saying that tells us 'Familiarity breeds contempt'. It is so easy to pick on the ones we know so well; we can verbally bully and abuse, and if we are not challenged, that verbal taunting can lead to physical harm. Therefore, it is essential that the Church call out bullying, no matter how powerful the source. John of God followed in the tradition of the healing ministry of Jesus. More than ever, in these divided times, we need to promote the balm of patience, understanding and care. We need to stand up for those who have been in ICU wards and on ventilators—they, literally, do not have a voice. Yet, we still see people, perhaps among our own friends, who tell us that Covid-19 is no more than a flu. They continue to promote all kinds of reckless conspiracy theories that show a deep disdain and lack of respect for the victims and for those caring for them. We should continue to wear a mask, observe physical distancing and make sure you wash your hands frequently and thoroughly—people know more about you through your iPhone and social media than they possibly can through any vaccine. Please do what you can to stop the spread and listen to our modern prophets; stop other viruses too, like the virus of racism, the virus of entitlement, the virus of exceptionalism.

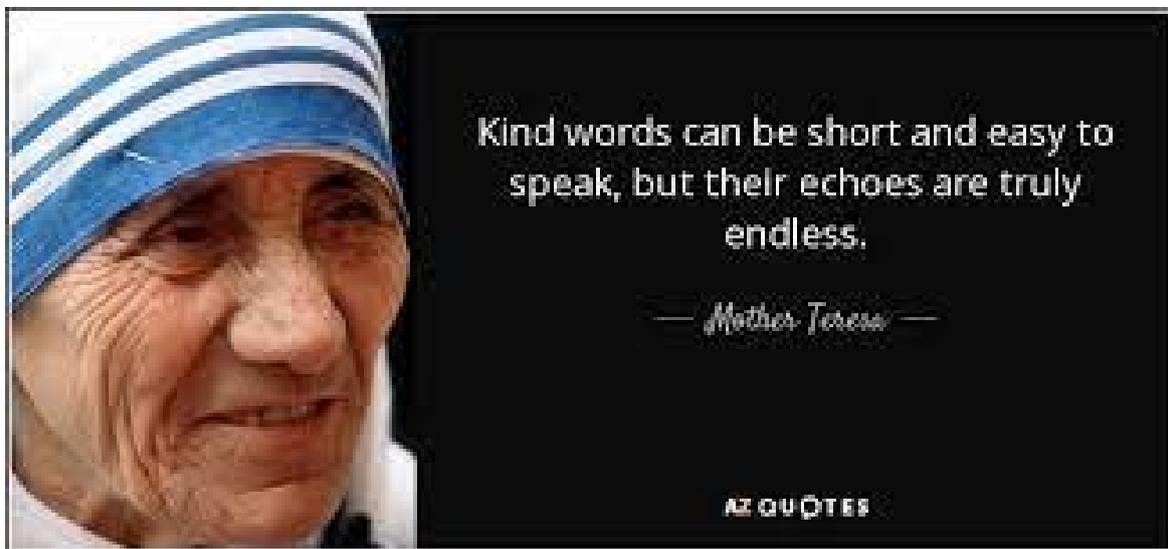
Pope Francis watched the Epiphany Day riot in horror, as we all did: a global beacon of democracy was severely compromised by those claiming to be 'patriots', while leaving five dead. In his interview with Mediaset's Canale 5 TV channel in Italy, the Holy Father held nothing back; we all have the right to our political standpoint, but the storming of the Capitol was totally unacceptable and would not meet the standards of loyal opposition:

In the most mature reality, there is always something that doesn't work, people who take a path against the community, against democracy and against the common good. Thank God this exploded into the open so it can

be seen, so it can be remedied. This must be condemned, this movement, regardless of the people involved. (Mediaset Canale 5 interview with Pope Francis, 10/01/2021)0)

Today: use your words to encourage and build up your family and friends— words do matter.

We can pray: Catholics, we need to do better. Priests and deacons, if you did not speak about radical justice, love and peace from the pulpit; if you did not guide your flock toward building a more just world with a full range of life issues, take responsibility now and find courage. Your ability to serve in this way is a privilege that women who dare to speak out will never have. Please do not waste it ... I am struck by the span of Jesus' arms. Jesus' arms reached that far—to all of us. The arm span is bloody, but it conquered the darkness, not with an attack but with boundless love ... I am still asking what it means to love as Christ loves. Love means something more in the face of this moment, this woundedness, and violence. I still do not know how to hold this moment. But I know who is holding us. (Prayer written by Tinamarie Stolz, Chaplain at St Joseph's University, Philadelphia for 'America Magazine' 09/01/2021, in response to the Capitol Hill insurgency)



22nd March 2022-Tuesday

In the media today, journalists like to ask the so-called 'gotcha' question—a question that will unnerve their interviewee and catch them out. It is a way to ridicule and belittle and should play no part in professional and newsworthy interviews. In some ways, this is what Peter is asking of Jesus today: he wants

to show that he has understood the notion of forgiveness, and questions if he should forgive the brother who has wronged him **‘as often as seven times seven?’** However, as we have seen with the scribes and pharisees, Jesus is well able for any ‘gotcha’ question, no matter how far out of left field it comes. Jesus speaks of forgiving **‘seventy-seven times.’** Now, before this turns into a maths lesson, we must realise that Jesus is talking about unconditional forgiveness—something that a lot of us find exceptionally difficult. When we have been wronged, when our name and reputation have been trashed, when we have been thrown under the bus by the very people we trusted and admired, somehow forgiveness does not come easy. We soon come to realise that forgiveness is a gift from God; our forgiveness does not depend on anything we have done, but on what Christ has done, for **‘By grace are we saved through faith, and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God’** (Eph. 2:8).

God has forgiven us so much that we have no reason not to forgive. No amount of hurt should make us forget God’s forgiveness or make us retaliate in return. Joseph had every reason to be hurt, as his own brothers sold him into slavery when he was still a teenager. He was wrongly accused by the wife of Potiphar and put in prison. Despite all he suffered, Joseph forgave them all. When his brothers expected him to take his revenge on them after their father’s death, they did not know the power of forgiveness. Joseph had forgiven them and told them that he was not in the place of God and that the actions they had meant for evil against him, God had meant for good. He told them that God had used them to save many people during the time of famine. Forgiveness allows God to turn around what people have meant for evil into something good. Who do we need to forgive today?

Today: reach out to someone who really needs your forgiveness; if you find that too hard, then please pray for them.

We can pray: **The mark of Cain is stamped upon our foreheads. Across the centuries, our brother Abel was slain in blood which we drew and shed tears we caused by forgetting Thy love. Forgive us, Lord, for the curse we falsely attributed to their name as Jews. Forgive us for crucifying Thee a second time in their flesh. For we knew not what we did.** (The prayer of St Pope John XXIII begging for forgiveness from the Jewish people for the Church’s sin of antisemitism.)



23rd March 2022-Wednesday

Matthew, the evangelist who writes especially for the Jewish people, is keen to present Jesus as the fulfilment of Jewish law and prophecy—he is the long-expected messiah; God’s full and total glory is seen in him and his works. Thus, as the Jewish scholar Amy Jill Levine points out, Jesus is not a revolutionary who is going to get rid of Jewish teaching and replace it with his own! Jesus clearly states that he will not abolish Jewish law and prophecy, rather **‘I have come to complete them’**. Law is there for the good of society; the prophets preached so that society can be made better. In his words and actions, Jesus might be seen to challenge the law, but never change it; as a prophet Jesus is called to ask those awkward questions: why are you more concerned about the type of vestments you wear at prayer? Why do you act like hypocrites? Why do you condemn others? Those questions are addressed equally to us today; we can feel safe in the fact that we have been to mass, abstained from meat on a Friday or attended a prayer group. However, are we just looking at the superficial? Is an hour in church or online on a Sunday going to transform my life? Surely, I must do more than just follow a law that mandates my presence at mass on a Sunday. We are invited to be more than ‘Sunday Catholics’ our faith and following the law of Christ must lead to the world being a better place—the law demands action. At the end of the mass, the deacon tells us plainly, ‘go in peace to love and serve the Lord!’ In other words: make those words and actions of the mass mean something. You can be the difference that

somebody desperately needs today. You might not be able to change the whole world, but your words and actions will change the world of your family, friends and those you meet today.

Today: love and serve the Lord!

We can pray: **God of All Things New, I believe that through You, I can achieve change in my life because You are doing a new thing! Now it springs up; I pray that I perceive it, I pray that I acknowledge that You are the source of my change. Thank You, Father, for making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland! Lord, I thank You for the changes that have occurred in my life and the changes that are about to happen, Amen.** (Based on Isa. 43:19)



24th March 2022—Thursday

In today's gospel we see Jesus the prophet, showing how the reign of God has come into the lives of people, as he **'resolutely took the road to Jerusalem'** (Lk 9:51). True to the proclamation that he shared in Nazareth; Jesus wants to bring **'liberty to captives'** (Lk 4:18). Jesus meets the man unable to speak and he is cured, but the people are amazed, with some thinking that **'it is through Beelzebul, the prince of devils that he casts out devils.'** They refuse to recognise the goodness of Jesus and accuse him of being evil; we have rightly seen many evil people condemned in society, but what about those

condemned on hearsay? What about good and honest people whose lives have been turned upside down by innuendo, rumour and gossip. It was that innuendo, rumour and gossip that led to Calvary and a real manifestation of what evil can do to overpower goodness, yet even this ultimate blasphemy of crucifixion and horrendous death, could not overpower the goodness of the Christian message. The man in today's miracle wanted to proclaim a truth that many do not want to hear. In our Church today, we see some very vocal enemies of Pope Francis; sadly, they come from the both the laity and clergy, even from the College of Cardinals who oppose what they see to be a 'liberal' message.

The truth is, of course, that Popes are products of their personal histories and do not plop down to earth from 'planet Pope'. There are people in the Church family who were not enamoured by the ministry of Pope St John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI—this is human nature, but **'every kingdom divided against itself is heading for ruin'**. I urge you to remember these words the next time you see a Facebook post critical of Pope Francis. He has been given to us, as leader and guide, and his job is made harder by those who constantly compare him unfavourably to previous popes. Jesus calls for unity today and we can choose to be part of the solution or part of the problem. The Holy Father has urged us all to work for unity in facing the global pandemic; it seems to me that we have far greater priorities in our Church than to spend endless hours feuding over who occupies the Chair of Peter; we have a Pope in Francis, and we owe him not only respect, but loyal support in this wonderful Catholic Church that we belong to. We can join his plea to bring life to our world:

The new year begins under the sign of the Holy Mother of God, under the sign of the Mother. A mother's gaze is the path to rebirth and growth. We need mothers, women who look at the world not to exploit it, but so that it can have life. At the beginning of the New Year, then, let us place ourselves under the protection of this woman, the Mother of God, who is also our mother. May she help us to keep and ponder all things, unafraid of trials and with the joyful certainty that the Lord is faithful and can transform every cross into a resurrection. (Pope Francis 01/01/2022)

Today: pray for Pope Francis—pray for those who support him and those who work against him.

We can pray: Mary, Undoer of Knots, pray for me. Virgin Mary, Mother of fair love, Mother who never refuses to come to the aid of a child in need, Mother whose hands never cease to serve your beloved children because they are moved by the divine love and immense mercy that exist in your heart, cast your compassionate eyes upon me and see the snarl of knots that exists in my life. You know very well how desperate I am, my pain, and how I am bound by these knots. Mary, Mother to whom God entrusted the undoing of the knots in the lives of his children, I entrust into your hands the ribbon of my life. No one, not even the evil one himself, can take it away from your precious care. In your hands there is no knot that cannot be undone. Powerful Mother, by your grace and intercessory power with Your Son and My Liberator, Jesus, take into your hands today this knot ... [mention a problem you are facing]. I beg you to undo it for the glory of God, once for all. You are my hope. O my Lady, you are the only consolation God gives me, the fortification of my feeble strength, the enrichment of my destitution, and, with Christ, the freedom from my chains. Hear my plea. Keep me, guide me, protect me, o safe refuge! Mary, Undoer of Knots, pray for me. Amen.



(Mary, undoer of knots, by Johann Georg Schmidtner)

25th March 2022—Friday: ANNUNCIATION

In this crazy world that we live in, the danger is that we might use words that some marketing companies could use today as an advertising gimmick: ‘only nine months to Christmas!’ It is clear when he wrote his account of the annunciation, Luke intended our minds to go back to all sorts of different portions of the Old Testament and see in this story about Mary and the angel, and the fulfilment of promises that God had made of old. One of those deep connections that Luke hopes we might spot is undoubtedly with the story of the Garden of Eden. For both in Genesis and at the Annunciation, we see a dialogue between God and humanity. At the heart of that dialogue is a decision—a decision made by Eve and Adam and a decision made by Mary. The difference is this, however. In today’s Gospel, Mary does not hide herself in shame and nakedness like Adam and Eve, but rather willingly cooperates with God’s purposes.

The history of the Christian imagination is full of theologians making connections between Mary and her ancestor Eve. For God offered to Eve and Adam perfect communion with him, which they lost through their sin and lack of trust. As the first Eve rejected that communion with God, the second Eve, Mary, accepts it and joyfully embraces it. In a strong link to our Camino prayer yesterday, we can look to St Irenaeus, writing in the second century says, **“the knot of Eve’s disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary untie and set free through faith.”** If we are supposed to hear echoes of the Garden of Eden in the Annunciation, then this tells us something very important. The Annunciation is itself a sort of creation story. It represents God’s loving purposes for humankind taking root in human history again as God begins the recreation of his world in Christ.

In that simple ‘yes’ of Mary, we see a deep act of faith that we are all invited to share. Some of us might remember the Abba hit, ‘Take a chance on me!’—God is asking the same of Mary and of us. Like our Mother, we are invited to take risks in our Camino of life: to go down roads that we might not normally go. For if ever we felt we were in a world in need of recreation and rebirth, now is that time. We see the effects of the Fall not just as we usually do in human sin and failure, but uniquely in the way in which our whole world has fallen victim to a Pandemic of epic proportions. We have been cut off from the things that

make us flourish as humans—contact with others, especially during those times of extended lockdown. There will still be some in your family or parish who will find the stress of public worship hard—we need to be gentle with them.

God offers us the possibility of nothing less than participating in his divine life through the real birth of the Messiah. It is a life we start to experience in this world when we are baptized. It is something we taste every time we receive communion. It is a reality that changes us bit by bit as we are forgiven and formed through the sacraments of the church. The only reason all that is possible is because of the freely offered, loving answer that Mary gave today to the angel. A response of obedience rather than disobedience. Her ‘yes’ to God and to new creation.

Today: say ‘yes’ when you are inclined to say ‘no’!

We can pray:

Today I say yes to you, God.

I say yes to your love for me.

May I receive your love.

May I rest in your love.

I say yes as well to your

loving will for me.

I say yes to all you would

teach me and change in me.

I say yes to you, my Love, my Life.

Watch and reflect: www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZgoOxTjG-Q



(‘Annunciation’ by © Sorin Dumitrescu)

26th March 2022—Saturday

Luke offers another important parable to reflect on in today’s gospel; it is a parable that we can readily identify with—and perhaps even offer names for the two main characters. The Pharisee represents so many ‘churchy’ people that we know, especially as depicted in popular media. ‘Dot Cotton’ on the popular BBC soap opera, ‘Eastenders’, could quote scripture from memory, but was often seen as scheming and hurtful. The ‘Ivy Brennan’ character in ‘Coronation St’ may well have been a mass-going Catholic but was spiteful and mean. The pharisee in the story sees himself as superior to the tax-collector; in his narcissistic ranting, he sees himself as better than the public sinner beside him in the Temple—he equates goodness with his ability to belittle others, especially this man who has failed.

We all know Christians who can see the sins of others, while conveniently forgetting their own major faults. It is far easier to point the finger at others, than to open our hearts to accept our need for forgiveness. This is exactly what the tax collector does: he sees his faults and failures as he repeats, **'God be merciful to me, a sinner.'** He knows his status and it is this man whom Jesus praises for his honesty so that he can go **'home again at rights with God.'** This time of Lent has allowed us to come face to face with our own selves; just as we are called to love ourselves, so we are called to be totally and truthfully honest with ourselves. A good Lent will be one where we can root out some of that selfishness and narrow mindedness. It will be a time to be honest.

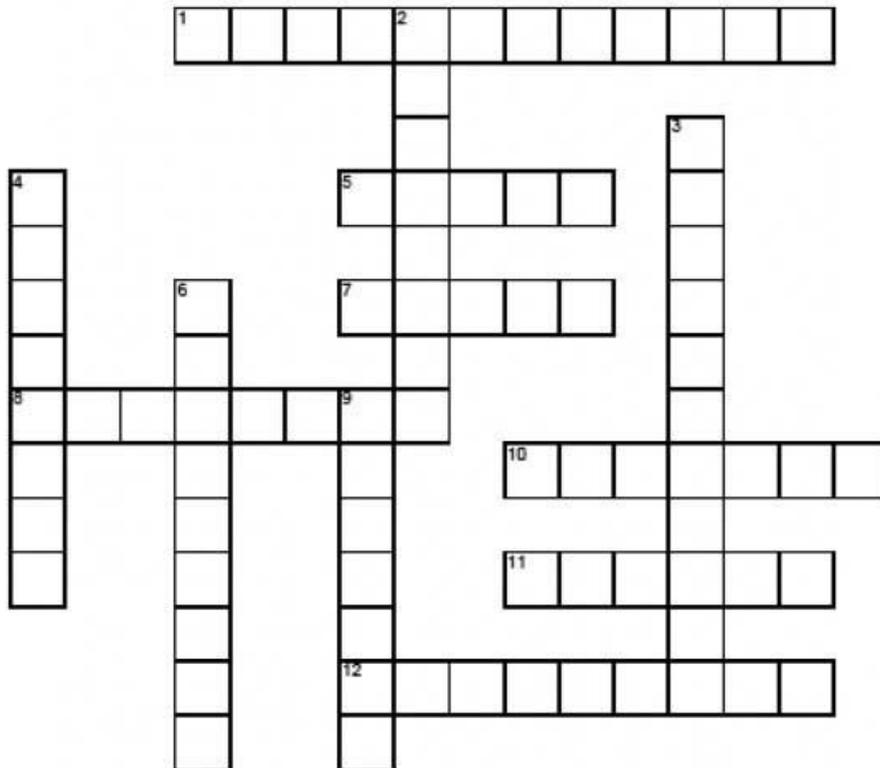
Today: Take time to reflect on WHO you are. Open your heart to accept the total love of God offered to you today.

We can pray: **Father, I have made a mistake and stumbled in my walk with You. I humbly come to You because You have asked me to always come to You when I am burdened. I ask You to completely forgive me in Jesus Name. All the ways I fell short I cast at Your feet. I receive Your forgiveness and mercy right now. I thank You for wrapping Your loving arms around me in this moment. Thank You for sending Your Son to take my place and paying the price in full in order that I might receive forgiveness and cleansing from all unrighteousness whenever I ask. Thank You for Jesus who has given me the gift of eternal life. I believe and I receive all that You have for me through Jesus. Thank You for setting me free. Please give me the grace and strength to make right decisions going forward from here. I look to You as my Helper. I need You in my life and look to You first in all that I do. AMEN**

For children:



The Annunciation



ACROSS

- 1 Catholics normally celebrate this feast on March 25.
- 5 Joseph was of the house of ____.
- 7 The angel said Mary was to call her Son this name.
- 8 "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the ____." (two words)
- 10 "Of His ____ there will be no end."
- 11 The angel told Mary not to be ____.
- 12 Mary's cousin; the angel said that she had conceived a son.

DOWN

- 2 Town in which the angel appeared to Mary
- 3 "Hail, ____, the Lord is with you." (three words)
- 4 Mary said, "Behold, I am the ____ of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word."
- 6 Mary was ____ to a man named Joseph; means engaged to be married.
- 9 Name of the angel that appeared to Mary

