



# FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

## Fifth Sunday of Lent - 21 March 2021 -



*Photo: Shutterstock*

The setting for today's gospel (John 12: 20-33) is the great Temple in Jerusalem, a place noted for its welcome to all. In the 'Courtyard of the Gentiles', a group of Greek tourists approach Philip, one of the Twelve; their request is simple, **'we would like to see Jesus.'** The message of Jesus is not confined to a particular culture, religion, or time: the message of salvation is universal. Together with his friend Andrew, Philip goes to share this news; John then uses the encounter as a springboard to reflect on the importance of 'the hour.' Jesus talks about his upcoming glory and this would be music to the ears of his disciples, especially those who believed that the Messiah would come in his chariot of power to rid Israel from all its enemies, especially the Romans.

However, Jesus confuses them by talking about death: the road to true glory will be complicated. He uses the imagery of the seed having to be buried deep into the ground—the seed sitting on your table will produce nothing. However, if it is planted deep into the ground, it can produce a rich and living harvest that can be shared. This is the harder way; if you are like me, we tend to go for the easy way; many of us do not want to follow this path of suffering, leading us deep into pain.

Jesus invites us to be strong along the path of life. He wants us to be where he is. So, we must be ready to endure as he did. We must be ready to die as a grain dies in order to regenerate. Practically speaking, we die every day when we stand up against injustices, when we stand for the truth and when we say no to sin, corruption, and immorality. These "daily deaths" exhaust us physically, but they strengthen us spiritually. Therefore, as we continue our walk with Christ this season, the thought of his own suffering and death must

strengthen us daily. Also, we must constantly remind ourselves that to suffer for others, and for Christ, is an honourable thing.

In his strong and visible witness, Pope Francis, the pope of the small car, the one who carries his own briefcase, the one who reaches out, is known as the 'Pope of the Periphery'. Not only does he come from the ends of the earth, as he said when he introduced himself to the crowds following his election, he also speaks and enacts the call to go to the edges of society. Against opposition from all sides, he is simply unwavering in his solidarity with the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised. Indeed, it has been a constant feature of his papacy. He challenges the whole Church to abandon the security of the status quo and to embrace the risk of vulnerability.

This is also the call of God's word to us today. The powerful statement of the Pope's visit to Iraq, earlier this month, shows a pope living what he preaches; St John Paul II talked about such a visit back in 1999, but the security situation was far too tense. Why would Francis want to visit places like Bagdad and Ur, synonymous in Western media with violence and killing? Why, in the midst of a global pandemic that has hit poorer nations especially hard, would a Roman Pontiff want to go to Iraq?

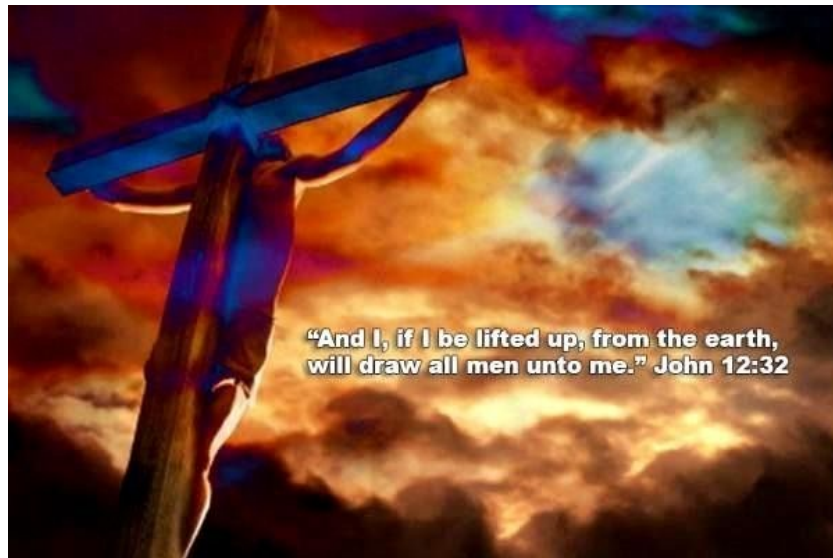


*Pope Francis prays for peace in the ruins of Church Square, Mosul, Iraq (Photo: ANS)*

Iraq is a sacred country. It was inhabited by prophets, the oldest of whom was Abraham, who headed from Chaldean Ur to the Holy Land, where the era of prophecy began in the old times. Iraq is the country of the Prophet Jonah, who lived in Nineveh and called for repentance and a permanent return to God. It is also the country in which the people were exiled in the Old Testament during a merciless trip known as the exile to Babylon. Pope Francis wants to promote dialogue and peaceful coexistence between all the religious communities living in Iraq, whether at the ecumenical level between sisterly Churches, or through Islamic-Christian relations. It is well-known that there is not only Christian-Sunni dialogue, but there is also Shiite-Christian dialogue. In the land of Iraq, there is an historical presence of Sabeen-Mandean, Yazidis and Baha'is, as well as other religions and traditions.

As followers of Jesus, we are challenged by his message and example, and Pope Francis reminds us of our need to live on the edge. The Lenten journey requires of us to live more

intensely the rhythm of dying and rising. What does it mean for us to be a wheat grain that is willing to die? How do we lose our lives in order to gain them back? These questions can only be answered as we each endeavour to imitate Jesus, who lived his life fully for others. As disciples, we recognise that life worth living is life poured out for others: life that embraces pain, suffering and even death for the sake of the ones we love. This is what we call the *paradox of the Gospel*. Paul writes 'For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified' (1 Cor 1:22-23). The cross is at the heart of Christian discipleship: '**when I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all to myself**' (John 12: 22).



Jesus knows that the courage and determination needed to keep going often go unrecognised by others. He knows the secret struggles we sometimes face, especially in this time of pandemic; he understands the wobbles that we experience. He is well aware of what it is like when people have unrealistic expectations of us, and what it is like to have constant demands made of us—made even harder in times of lockdown. I see Jesus as living these days at the absolute limit of what he can cope with and lonely in the knowledge that no-one understands what he is doing. Jesus makes his choice and faces the cross.

Today is our invitation to make some choices about how we live this approaching Passiontide. Once again, we are brought face to face with the power and reality of Christian incarnation, as Michael Winstanley SDB wisely reminds us:

**It shows the depth of his humanity, his being one with us. It reveals the implications of the Word becoming flesh. Whether we are anxious and fearful about physical pain, surgery, illness, aging, or whether we are struggling with difficult decisions which we would rather avoid, or with failure and humiliation ... we can find comfort in knowing that Jesus has been there.**

*'Lenten Sundays' p.108*

**Today:** reach out to those friends or family members who are 'on the edge'; the ones you might have forgotten about, the ones you never include in a zoom call.

**We can pray:** God of suffering and glory, in Jesus Christ you reveal the way of life through the path of obedience. Inscribe your law in our hearts, that in life we may not stray from you, but may be your people. Amen. (*Revised Common Lectionary*)

## Monday 22 March 2021



*Christ and the Sinner by Andrey Mironov,  
[CC BY-SA 4.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons*

The gospel today is the powerful meeting between Jesus and the terrified woman with a crowd baying for her blood. Jesus is caught in another 'gotcha' moment: the woman is 'caught in the very act of committing adultery.' Even as a precocious child, I found this accusation hard: it takes two to commit adultery, so why is the man not brought before this crowd who demand that the law of Moses be fulfilled and that she be stoned to death? The life-giving Law can, if we are not careful, be turned into an agent of death. Only the woman is chased down, only the woman has to face the bitterness, the taunts, and the cruelty of this crowd of bullies, eager to point the finger. Naturally, these bullies want to taunt Jesus too: if he is so clever and wise, if he is so holy and close to God, surely, he would want her punished too?

We see his wisdom in his words, **'if there is anyone here who has not sinned, let him be the first to cast a stone at her.'** Jesus realises that at the heart of the Law is mercy; Jesus realises that we all fail, we all make mistakes. The crowd disperses, starting with the oldest—is that because they have had time to commit more sin? Jesus has no time for these self-righteous narcissists who see everything in the extremes of black and white; real life and true law deal with the messy grey areas in between. It is in this grey area that the woman finds herself; of course, she has done something wrong, but Jesus is not about condemnation and pointing the finger of blame; Jesus is about acceptance, care and giving people another chance—and another and another. In fact, he suggests that we be prepared to forgive as often as **'seventy times seven.'** The words of Jesus to the woman are spoken to all of us, **'go and do not sin any more'.**

**Watch and reflect:** Jesus of Nazareth – Woman caught in adultery

<https://youtu.be/JOGWa3YVNrQ>

**Today:** do not point the finger of blame; today, be a person of real reconciliation. Forgive yourself above all.

**We can pray on this day, as God says to us:** My child, not only do I refrain from condemning you, I ask that you not even judge or condemn yourself. What I want for you is conversion. Many think of conversion as being something unpleasant, rigorous, and harsh. But true conversion is an experience of freedom, true peace, and deeper love. Conversion is something beautiful, and I want to give this to you every day. Let your conversion begin by becoming free of judging and rejecting others. The weight and responsibility of judgment is not yours, nor is it asked of you to treat others according to their culpability. Be merciful even if the person does not deserve it. Mercy includes showing kindness and forgiveness to those whom it is seemingly within one's right and capacity to punish. Punishment rarely leads to conversion. Do not, My child, punish others through unforgiveness. Those who are most difficult to love are the ones that need love the most. Mercy always gives the offender a second chance. [www.prayerforhelp.com](http://www.prayerforhelp.com)

**Tuesday 23 March 2021**



*Image: Marcello Cerrato via Qumran2.net*

Today we see Jesus deep in conversation with the pharisees once again, **'I am going away ... where I am going you cannot come.'** He is pointing to the events that will come to pass on Good Friday, deep in discussion with the very people who want to get rid of him. He identifies closely with the Father, **'he who sent me is with me'**; Jesus wants to help his critics have some comprehension of the depth of his unique relationship with the Father. While John is keen to affirm the reality of incarnation, he also wants to show that Jesus's divinity will help to raise us up to the truth that God offers to each of us: **'the one who sent**



**me is TRUTHFUL and what I have learnt from him I declare to the world.'** Jesus points to the need to **'be lifted up'** on Calvary—only then will people come to fully believe.

**Today:** really LISTEN to what your friends and family are saying to you.

**We can pray:** Lean into the good. Find the sparkle in the normal. Speak with kindness, freely; let go of labels. See the beauty behind the busy: dare, greatly. Love others without conditions; get caught up in the gift of life, TODAY. (*Rachel Marie Martin 'The Brave Art of Motherhood'*)



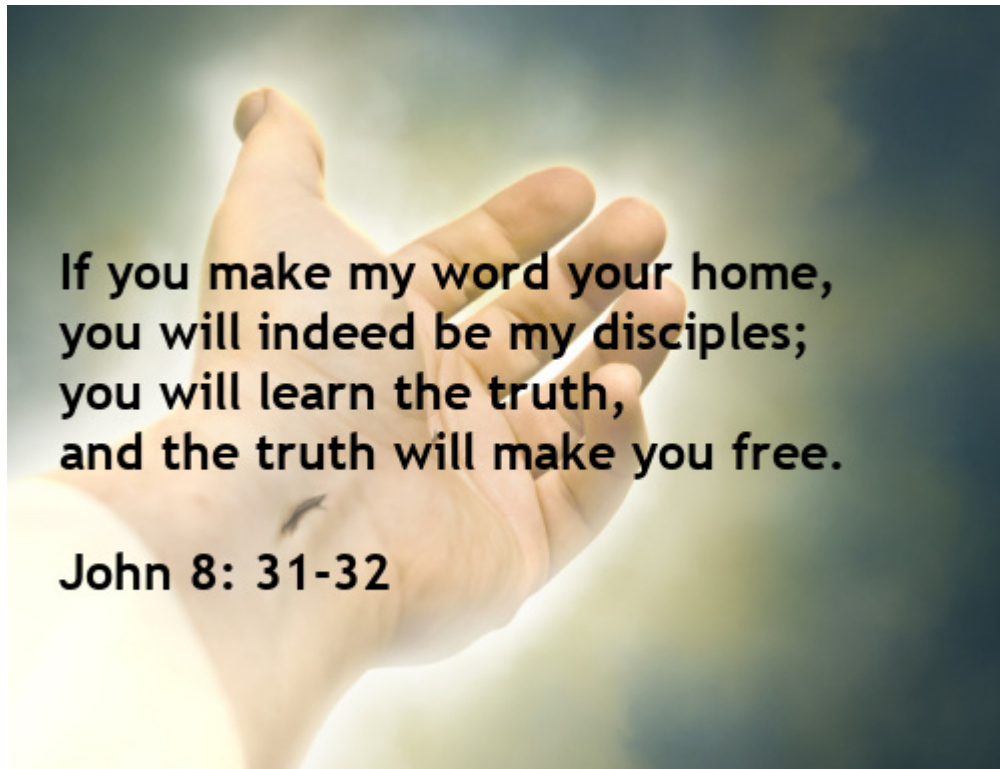
Photo by James Chan on Pixabay

## Wednesday 24 March 2021

We live in a world that seems to have problems with the truth at times: we are told that 'alternative truths' are acceptable and 'fake news' is all around. We have seen royalty and popular television presenters facing difficulties as they try to present their version of the truth. We are told that official news sources cannot be trusted as they show a political bias; we are seeing an increasing reliance on 'opinion led' news programming, with American-style news channels becoming the norm.

Jesus is telling his audience today that the 'TRUTH' will set us free; we are called to share the truth of the Gospel and to ensure that truth is seen in our lives. If we are people of the truth, then it will be seen in our actions: how we treat each other; how we care for each other; how we spread the truth of the gospel. Jesus encourages his followers to avoid sin, as this will make us slaves—'if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.'

Today we are invited to live in true freedom, as followers of the truth of Jesus. May that freedom be fully experienced and shared among your family and friends.



**Today:** speak words of TRUTH and build up the life of a family member or friend.

**We can pray:** We don't realize all the good we can do. A kind, encouraging word or helping hand can bring many a person through dark valleys in their lives. We weren't put here to make money or to acquire status or reputation. We were sent here to search for the light of Easter in our hearts, and when we find it we are meant to give it away generously.

*John O'Donohue 'Reflections at Corcomroe Abbey'*

### Thursday 25 March 2021 - The Feast of Annunciation

In the depth of Lent, the Church offers us this feast of Mary's acceptance of the will of God—no matter how difficult and hard it must seem. Today is more than just a reminder that it is nine months to the celebration of Christmas: as we move towards remembering the death of Jesus Christ, we are given this feast to see the impact of incarnation on a teenage girl, her beloved and her family. **'The Lord himself will give a sign to the House of David'**, says Isaiah--a sign not asked for but freely given. **'The young woman is with child and will bear a son and she will name him Immanuel'**.

Do you suppose that when Ahaz heard this, he had even the slightest inkling of the events being foretold by Isaiah? This prophesy is fulfilled in Luke's gospel account of the Annunciation. The angel Gabriel comes to Mary to tell her that by the power of the Holy Spirit, she will conceive and bear a son and she shall name him Jesus. In Luke we read that Gabriel **'came to her'** but we have no other information as to how that transpired. Did Gabriel suddenly appear, did he drop out of the skies, did he come waving his wings and

stirring up a cloud of dust? He was God's messenger, did he have a loud trumpet fanfare, or did he approach with reserve, quietly, so as to soften the shock? In the Bible, most angels



*The Annunciation by Henry Ossawa Tanner, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons*

seem to have looked human when they appeared. Is it possible that Gabriel looked a lot like every other man in Nazareth or did he indeed appear as a holy and triumphant messenger in heavenly splendour? We simply do not know.

We do know Mary's response: a 'YES' of trust: 'let what you have said be done to me!' Down through the ages we have seen many charismatic leaders follow her lead. Nano Nagle could have easily stayed with the bright young things of Paris, enjoying the city lights; instead, she said 'yes' and worked in the slums of Cork. Don Bosco said 'yes' to the thousands of young working people who needed somebody to be their inspiration and guide. His academic and social brilliance would have opened so many career choices, yet he chose to live in the slums of Turin, —two strong examples of the power of Mary's 'yes'. What strikes me most, though, in the story of The Annunciation, is the calmness and complete obedience with which Mary accepts the responsibility.

Think about that for a moment. This young woman accepts God's will for her, she says yes to this amazing idea that God the Son would be born into the world and she would be his mother! And, as amazing as that sounds, add the fact that the consequences of her acceptance would almost certainly have included stoning. Faced with a truly incredulous proposition, accompanied by the virtual certainty of the most severe physical punishment, she accepts in full and complete obedience. The easiest thing for her to do would have been to run away either literally or emotionally but she stands fast, **'Here am I'** This is one of the most profound scriptural statements about holding the course when things get rough, standing with God even in the face of great fear and uncertainty.



In the heart of this Lent, this wonderful feast helps us to look at our own ability to say 'yes'—or are we more willing to do just what we want, whatever the cost, no matter how many people's lives we might ruin? We are reminded that true love involves going beyond ourselves in the mission to make our world a better place for all. As Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us:

**The hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbour as the self - to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enrol, convince, or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself if you will allow it.**

*An Altar in the World*

What are you going to do when your angel comes? God's call to us is usually more subtle than an Angel suddenly appearing or dropping through our living room ceilings. I think it more likely that God will call us through the angels of everyday life—the angels without wings. We must remain especially vigilant and always be on the lookout for God's angels. Is it the homeless woman with four children, living in an abandoned car, who tells us she is blessed? Is she our angel? Could be! Is it the teenage girl forced into sexual slavery who looks at us with pain-filled eyes that beg, 'please do not let this happen to anyone else'? Is she our angel? Could be! Is it a friend who cares deeply enough about you to tell you when you are headed down the wrong path? Is that your angel. Could be. Is it the nurse in a hospice who shows us how to serve with love and grace in the face of death? Is that your angel? Could be. If we want to be obedient to God's call and reflect the obedience shown by Mary then we must start by being open to that call, acknowledging that call and, whether we like what we hear or not, saying simply, **'Here am I; let it be with me according to your word.'**

This 'yes' of Mary leads us straight to the upcoming feast, linked deeply as it is with the 'yes' of Jesus. Not for him the Messiah of glory and wealth, but the Messiah of service, the Messiah who will bend down to wash feet. This is the example we can follow if we are ready to say 'yes'. Pope Francis reminds us today:

**The passage from Luke's Gospel that we have heard tells us the decisive moment in history, the most revolutionary. It is a turbulent situation, everything changes, history turns upside down. It is difficult to preach about this passage. And when at Christmas or on the day of the Annunciation we profess the faith to say this mystery we kneel down. It is the moment that everything changes, everything, from the root. Liturgically, today is the day of the root. The Antiphon that marks the meaning today is the root of Jesse, "from which a shoot will be born". God lowers himself; God enters history and does so in his original style: a surprise. The 'God of Surprises' surprises us yet again.**

*20/12/2018-Sermon at Casa Santa Marta*

**Today:** say YES to something difficult in your life

**We can pray:** O most holy Virgin Mary, to whom God sent the Angel Gabriel to announce that you should be the mother of His Son, pray for us who have recourse to you. Holy, lovely Mary, we give our all to you What is past and present, And the future, too. Blessed be the holy and Immaculate Conception of the most blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God. AMEN. (*Missionary Society of St Columba.*)

## Friday 26<sup>th</sup> March 2021

Today our gospel forces us to see the downside to following Jesus, as the crowd '**fetched stones to stone him**'; they want to be rid of him despite the '**many good works**' he has done for them. Jesus, the man of goodness and care, is branded a blasphemer by the very people whom he was trying to help. Jesus is doing the work of his Father. This union between Father and Son produces the good works of healing and soothing words; we are invited to be caught up in this union of care, to be caught up in the loving union of God. The bitter crowd wanted to 'arrest him, but he eluded them' and goes 'to the far side of the Jordan.' In crossing the Jordan, not only does Jesus remind us of the place of John's baptism of reconciliation, but also of the journey of the Chosen People in crossing the threshold into freedom (see Jos. 4). It is in this most deserted and unlikely of places that reconciliation and freedom meet in a missionary outreach, '**as many of them believed in him.**'

**Today:** offer soothing words to another.

**We can pray and watch:** Lent prayer: Come to the water | CAFOD

<https://youtu.be/xP-w0kGjAMl>

Loving God, we hear your call to all who thirst for a brighter future:

Come to the water.

Pour out your Spirit upon us and lead us to walk alongside one another.

Let a desire for change well up within us.

May we overflow with compassion and love.

And as a stream wears away stone,

may we reshape our world together to reflect your kingdom of hope for all. Amen

*Cafod 2021 Appeal Prayer*

## Saturday 27 March 2021

Today's Gospel comes in the aftermath of Jesus' visit to Bethany and his miracle at the tomb of Lazarus. In offering their sympathy to Martha and Mary, many witnessed the miracle of new life and came to believe in the message of Jesus; however, some chose to go the



*The House of Caiaphas by Gustave Doré, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons*

Temple officials and report this man of action. We see the deep political intrigue that the Chief priests were involved in; they recognised that any popular movement following Jesus could destroy the relationship they shared with the army of occupation. Pontius Pilate and the Roman civil service lived in the luxury of Caesarea that enjoyed a Mediterranean climate and was miles away from the crowded, smelly streets of Jerusalem. These religious leaders were worried that their time of power could be over and that the Roman would take over their sacred spaces and deny them authority. It is Caiaphas who famously seals the fate of Jesus when he slyly suggested that **'it is better for one man to die for the people, that for the whole nation to be destroyed.'**

The stage is set for the amazing events of Holy Week, that begins tomorrow, as we hear that this group 'were determined to kill him.' As for Jesus himself, he moves away from Jerusalem to 'Ephraim', often identified with a Christian Arab town in the West Bank Palestinian territory now called At-Taybe. Jesus seems to need peace and quiet for the tumultuous, world-shattering events that our Camino will take us to tomorrow. We all need that peace and quiet in our busy lives; it is my hope that you can gain that peace today. Caiaphas wanted to use Jesus to advance his own political ambitions; remember those victims of jealousy and intrigue, even within the Church. Let us pray for honesty and openness in all our dealings, so that we do not have to live in negativity.

**Today:** create your special space for Holy Week and Easter

**We can pray:** Lord, I pray that I can be open with others and with myself; I pray that I do not want to blame others for my own mistakes. May I have the honesty and trust to admit that I am not a miracle worker—I simply work for him. May I live in peace and use this day to prepare for the events of Holy Week. AMEN.

**For children:**



**'Rallegrati' is Italian for 'Rejoice'**

*From Qumran2.net*



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## ON THE ROAD TO EASTER WORD SEARCH



|            |               |              |
|------------|---------------|--------------|
| Ash        | Holy Week     | Palm Branch  |
| Wednesday  | Holy Thursday | Forty Days   |
| Sacrifice  | Good Friday   | Jesus        |
| Almsgiving | Holy Saturday | Passover     |
| Prayer     | Easter        | Foot Washing |
| Fasting    | Palm Sunday   | Resurrection |
| Lent       | Purple        | Love         |



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