

# Spiritual Reflection Guide



St Vincent de Paul Society  
*good works*

September – December 2023



***“Go to the poor: you will find God.”***



3 Sept  
2023

# Take up your cross

## 22<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Jer.20:7-9

Rom 12:1-2

**Mt 16:21-27**

I am sure that many of us have heard the phrase “take up your cross” or “this is the cross I must bear.” This is a powerful and heartbreaking sentence to say. It is one that brings with it a deep sense of pain. It is also one that invites us into an opportunity.

Spiritual mystics in the Catholic faith like Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross even talk about this invitation. We can delve into an opportunity of redeeming suffering, that whatever it is we are going through could have a redeeming function to it. It must be for some good.

I remember my wife suffering through her leukaemia where she had chronic pain especially through her treatments. She hated it. She knew she had to endure it, and she, like many, questioned “is this my cross?” After one intense treatment, Anne told me that she was over it all but the only reason she would keep going was for the love she had for our children and even me. I don’t know if this is what St Paul meant by “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” but I definitely understood the profound love that the cross embodies.

I do believe this is the very meaning of the cross. This human act of sheer terror and cruelty became an instrument of compassion and profound love. This is not something that comes through pouring over books or reciting wrote prayers all the time. It is a love that comes from our own vulnerability, traumas, pain and sufferings. These words are sensitive to the secular ear as we are always relieving the tears rather than walking in those tears with the other.

When we look at the life of Jesus, He was never disconnected with the mind, body and spirit. He knew and taught that faith is not just a lofty idea, or an intellectual exercise; it is one that is lived, one that is felt (physically and emotionally), and one that is ever evolving and growing.

Each time we are confronted with a cross that we may have to bear, can we honestly look at it as an opportunity to being “transformed by the renewing of our minds” as mentioned in the first reading from Jeremiah?

What about when we are confronted with the crosses of those around us? Especially those who we are supporting in the Society? How do we allow for our compassion to be with them in the crosses they bear?

*(Reflection from Corinne Lindsell)*

**What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “take up your cross”?**

## THIS WEEK...

*Strive to preserve your heart in peace; let no event of this world disturb it.*

– St John of the Cross

## PRAYER

*Heavenly Father,  
Be with us as we enter into our suffering world, and help us to be ever compassionate. Amen.*



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# As we gather

10 Sept  
2023

## 23<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Ezek 33: 7-9

Rom 13: 8-10

Mt 18: 15-20

Sadly, the St Vincent de Paul Society is not perfect. Each week there is a small “fire” lit by one or two of our Members, Volunteers or Staff. Generally, it is relational issues; he said/she said or sometimes it is philosophical issues; I do not like the way it is or where money is being spent etc. Each party stands fixated in their position and unfortunately are not open in hearing any other way or any other point of view. At the height of the differences, the Mission and Spirituality of the Society becomes either a weapon to action or a shield of protection.

Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel this week opens a path of sharing, collaboration and reconciliation. This passage is found in between the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. It, at best, joins two losses: loss of the vulnerable and loss of the way of mercy. However, as always, hope lingers in the background. For Jesus continues to remind his faithful friends of the loving support of our Father and the presence of Jesus as we gather.

I believe that this last point of the Gospel is crucial to Vincentians. Finding Jesus in our gatherings in the words, reflection, prayers, lives and experiences of each other continually nourishes, supports, shares wisdom, reconciles and provides a depth of hope for our work and our growth in faith. We must remind ourselves why the First Conference in Paris gathered. It was not to build a charity but to discern, debate and pray. Their faith was the reason to gather and that through these conversations, prayer and fellowship they were moved to charity. Unfortunately, I have spoken to some Conferences who tell me that we only meet when they receive a call for assistance and, even worse, they meet without a thought for prayer and reflection! This reduces the Society to simply welfare or as Pope Francis once said a “compassionate NGO.” The Society did not begin with charitable works but with debates, prayer and reflection in formation of faith and spirituality. This simple fact gets lost on many occasions!

**What is it for you to be a member of the Society?**

## THIS WEEK...

*To follow Christ through service to those in need and bear witness to his compassionate and liberating love (The Rule 1.2)*

## PRAYER

*O that today you would listen to his voice! Harden not your hearts.*



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# Leading lives in forgiveness

17 Sept  
2023

## 24<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Sirach 27:30-28:7

Rom 14:7-9

Mt 18:21-35

I read recently a little book by Pope Francis on the Our Father, simply called *Our Father - Reflections on the Lord's Prayer*. In this, he shared a wonderful reflection at a Mass in the prisons when one of the prisoners misread "Let us pray to God our solderer" and he flashed a memory of his own father soldering two pieces of metal together. What a great image of God as mender of relationships, bringing the broken pieces together! The Pope also shared these words "Forgiveness, forgiveness. It is so difficult to forgive...You will be able to forgive if you have had the grace of feeling forgiven." One can never ask for more in life than to be forgiven. I have heard from people who have attended psychic mediums that one thing their loved one's ask is for forgiveness. Interesting thought!

The heart of this prayer of Jesus is a discovered treasure echoed in these words of the Book of Sirach or other known as the book of Ecclesiasticus from this week's first reading. "Forgive your neighbour the hurt he does you, and when you pray, your sins will be forgiven" is echoed later by Jesus as, "And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

These words of Sirach and the prayer of Jesus need to remind us in leading lives in forgiveness rather than in judgement of each other and of those we assist, especially those we continually assist! This is not easy work, to be non-judgmental, and may at times challenge all fibers of our being, principally when forgiveness comes from our "thoughts and in our words, of what we have done and what we have fail to do."

May we pray together the Lord's Prayer, opening our hearts, minds, words and actions to the compassionate and unconditional love of a God who calls us to life each day.

**What is "being non-judgmental"?**

## THIS WEEK...

*"How often must I forgive?"  
Gospel of Matthew*

## PRAYER

*Our Father who art in heaven,  
holy by your Name.*



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# Turning back to God

24 Sept  
2023

## 25<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Is 55: 6-9

Phil 1: 20-24, 27

Mt 20: 1-16

This week's Gospel narrative from Matthew is a hard pill to swallow! The parable expresses at first a very generous landowner offering a day of work but the generosity fades when the landowner pays the workers the same agreed amount whether they were working a full day or just called at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour. The workers feel robbed or even tricked into working a full day in the heat with only receiving the same as those who strolled in for the last hour. Moreover, in a practical and rational way, I would agree.

Personally, I find it hard to be charitable to those who cut in on a line that I have been patiently waiting in and do not get me started on those who cut in during long traffic queues on the M4 in Sydney.

So apart from frustrating the reader with this as a notion of the kingdom of heaven, what is Jesus teaching us?

The words of Isaiah and the Gospel of Matthew may hold a key to our reflections. Isaiah calls each of us to simply turn back to God for God is rich in mercy and forgiveness. The Gospel parable in Matthew expresses a God who is generous to all but in ways that are beyond our thinking or even our full understanding. Both Isaiah and Matthew express a God who is unconditional in love and mercy. This notion alone is difficult to understand in our simple human terms, just as is the conception of the kingdom of heaven as a place of eternity. Yet a place which we call our true home.

May we this week be open to this living hope in our lives as we share such life with others who feel they walk in the dark of hopelessness.

**When have you known the mercy of God in your life?**

## THIS WEEK...

*It's the illusion of religion brokers blind to the reality that all is sacred. God is free and immediate! (Noel Davis)*

## PRAYER

*Lord, let me see your face, know your heart and experience your love in my life. Strengthen in me the precious gift of faith. I believe Lord; Help my unbelief. Amen*



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# The Gift of Humility

1 Oct  
2023

## 26<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Ezek 18: 25-2

Phil 2: 1-11

Mt 21: 28-32

Our readings this week highlight to us the gift of humility. One of the humblest people that I have known was the first bishop of the Parramatta Diocese, Bishop Bede Heather. I remember speaking to Bede a couple of months before his death initially asking his permission to dedicate our Social Housing project in Katoomba to his legacy as “Heather Place” which he thankfully agreed to especially as we had already had the plaques completed. He was greatly honoured by this gesture not with any sense of pride but in a very quiet and gentle sense of deep thanks. Bede Heather was a remarkable churchman and friend. One word that was spoken, several times throughout Bede’s funeral, was humility. It was even said that Bede was humility on steroids!

So, I was reflecting on humility in leadership and as Spirit-led leaders.

The Gospel chosen for Bishop Bede was an unusual one for a funeral. It was the inspiring moment when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. People often talk about how rough and dirty the disciple’s feet would have been and how this was an act of great service and love of Jesus. This is true, but having had my feet washed before, personally what I experienced was humbling.

In this, I am reminded of the action of Pope Francis who a couple of years ago, at the end of meetings with several of the leaders of war-torn South Sudan, came into the room and met each leader by humbly kissing their feet, urging them to keep peace in their lands as their people are so tired of war. The pope spoke no words and could not be stopped in this gesture of humility and great compassion. Compassion not just for these leaders but for the people struggling in conflict in South Sudan. I can’t imagine how they felt by this extraordinary gesture but many in the room were moved to tears.

In our competitive world, we tend to put leaders on a pedestal, but I believe that’s the wrong way to think about leadership. Humility and service, that’s the path to a leadership that Jesus radically models for each of us and none more so than through the events of coming of Easter. That’s a challenging thing to consider, but I think it is one of the most important lessons in the scriptures.

*(Reflection from Corinne Lindsell)*

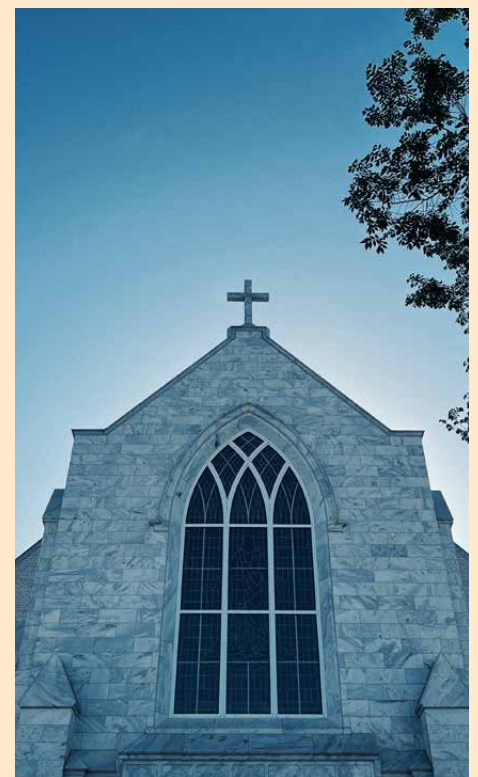
**What strikes you most about the gift of humility?**

## THIS WEEK...

*“Let us do whatever good lies in our hands” Frederic Ozanam*

## PRAYER

*Loving God, show us the way, Amen.*



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# God in relationship with us

8 Oct  
2023

## 27<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Is 5:1-7

Phil 4:6-9

Mt 21:33-43

We connect here to a parable where Jesus is presenting some imagery symbolising God's relationship with humanity, and our relationship with one another. Our readings this week in Isaiah and the Gospel are intimately linked to be able to portray this image. In Isaiah, the poetry of God owning this beautiful vineyard destined to be fertile and produce rich fruit, and in contrast we see that it will be mistreated.

I think for this parable it's important to see who is represented for the story to have any impact. God, being the landowner who planted a vineyard, representing His Kingdom where He has put it in the hands of the tenants – who represent the religious leaders of that time. However, instead of fulfilling their responsibilities, the tenants abuse their power and mistreat the landowner's slaves – who represent God's people, even going so far as to kill his son, which we know is Jesus.

This reflects the mistreatment and rejection that society often inflicts upon those who are deemed to not fit into the ideals as seen by those religious leaders. Those who have been judged as wrong, weak, tainted, less than. Taking us straight back to a deeply Vincentian scripture "Whatever you do to the least of these you do unto me" (Matthew 25:40).

By highlighting these actions, Jesus confronts the religious leaders and emphasises the importance of recognising the inherent worth and dignity of every individual. He challenges them to examine their own attitudes and behaviours towards those considered outcasts in society.

This indeed is a powerful call to embrace inclusivity, compassion, and justice. It reminds us that God's Kingdom is not limited to a select few but is open to everyone, regardless of their social status, ethnicity, gender, background or ability. It urges us to break down the barriers that separate us and to stand against any form of mistreatment or discrimination.

As Vincentians, we are called to emulate His example of love and acceptance. We are challenged to actively seek out those who have been rejected, marginalised, or oppressed, and by doing so all of humanity will share in the fruits of the vineyard as we create a society that values and uplifts every individual, promoting a world where all are welcomed, included, and treated with dignity.

*(Reflection from Corinne Lindsell)*

**Reflecting on this vineyard, how are you tending the vineyard for your own life and those around you?**

## THIS WEEK...

*"Whatever you did to the least of these, you did unto me"*  
Matthew 25:40

## PRAYER

*Lord, grant us the wisdom and strength to faithfully tend to the vineyard of your Kingdom, nurturing love, inclusivity, and justice. Amen*



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# Reflecting the nature of God

15 Oct  
2023

## 28<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Is 25: 6-10

Phil 4: 12 -14, 19-20

**Mt 22: 1-14**

Once again, we delve into a parable where Jesus is calling out behaviour that is not upholding the nature of God. His audience again is to the chief priests and the Pharisees (the religious leaders at the time). The parable of this wedding feast should be one that stirs within us a deep sense of injustice, as it is what we advocate for within the Society today.

The initial invitees to this wedding were the privileged and the wealthy, and they simply dismissed the king's invitation to his son's wedding, while those gathered from the streets, symbolising those experiencing poverty and oppression, eagerly accepted, and yet a man who was not dressed appropriately for such a wedding was then mistreated and sent away.

So what does this mean to us today? It is simply calling out here how society often perceives and treats individuals based on their socio-economic status.

This highlights to us the deep importance of non-judgmental love and respect for all people, irrespective of their wealth or poverty and instead recognise the inherent dignity and worth of each person. But even deeper than that to answer the call to challenge societal structures that perpetuate inequality and to work towards a more just and compassionate society. This is exercising the principle of solidarity, which is fundamental to who we are as Vincentians.

This story and the moral messaging behind it emphasises the importance of being non-judgmental, letting go of preconceived notions and biases, and embracing the spirit of love and compassion towards one another. By upholding this Vincentian ethos, we strive to foster a community that values solidarity, empathy, and justice, where everyone is seen, heard, and supported in their journey towards a better future.

How profound that Jesus was able to confront and call out this behaviour? Not just to anyone but to those who are in leadership. May we always find the courage to be able to hold our leaders to account, where we assess conduct based on respect and how we treat each other. Where we can see that the right thing to do is to always withhold judgment and to see the person and respond to the person.

*(Reflection from Corinne Lindsell)*

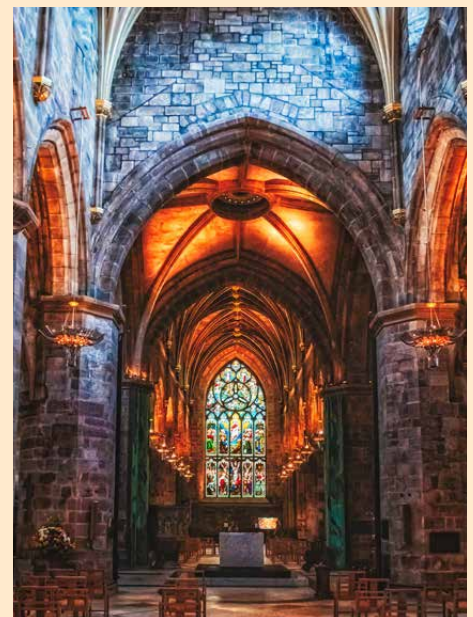
**How can we encourage leaders to examine their own tendencies towards judgment and promote a culture of radical inclusivity?**

## THIS WEEK...

*“Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals.” - Pema Chödrön*

## PRAYER

*Compassionate God, grant us the grace to live in solidarity, sharing burdens, and fostering a world of equity and justice. Amen*



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# Give back to Caesar what belong to Caesar

22 Oct  
2023



## 29<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Is 45: 1, 4-6

1 Thess 1: 1-5

Mt 22: 15-21

It is often said that there are only two certainties in life: death and taxes. In this week's readings, we are shown how to live our spiritual life in a secular world. Ironically, today's Gospel comes from Matthew, himself a tax collector who worked for the Romans. We all know that Judea was a Roman Province ruled by a Governor who ensured that Roman law was adhered to, and taxes collected. This was resented by the people as they supported the occupying force and reminded them every day that they were not free.

The story takes place during the last week of Jesus' life. On the Sunday, he was triumphantly welcomed into Jerusalem and by the end of the week he will have been crucified. The passages recorded in between these two events are rich in parables and teachings from Jesus, about how we should live our life.

He would have been very aware of what was happening, and I imagine trying to live that week to his fullest. The Pharisees and Herodians were challenged by the teachings of this man and needed him silenced. But aware of the trap posed for him, Jesus uses it as an opportunity. When asked if it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, he is aware that if his answer is no, he offends the Romans and can be arrested. If he says yes, he offends the Jewish people. And so, the middle ground. The coin proffered has Caesar's face on it so it can be given back to him. "Give to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and to God the things that are God's."

So what belongs to God? Everything we do and everything we have is a gift, which reminds us of God and his love for us. Whatever we have; whatever we possess should lead us to God. If what we have becomes the focus – "our god", then it takes us away from God and should be given back.

But hold on to everything that enriches us, gives us life and leads us to God.

*(Reflection from Greg Ryan)*

**To whom do you belong?**

## THIS WEEK...

*Be aware of God's presence in you and in the people around you. Be especially aware and welcoming of the people coming to you seeking assistance. God is present there.*

## PRAYER

*Lord, as we build your Kingdom here on earth, open our eyes to your presence in all.  
Amen*



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# You shall love the Lord your God

29 Oct  
2023

## 30<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Ex 22: 20-26

1 Thess 1: 5-10

Mt 22: 34-40

Loving your self doesn't come easy to many of us. Growing up, we were often taught that self-love was akin to pride and therefore sinful. Many of us grew up forgetting this aspect of Jesus' command. The Gospel this week still finds Jesus being tested by the Pharisees to see if he was breaking the Jewish law. "Master, which is the greatest commandment?"

I grew up to believe there were only ten to choose from, but in Judaism there were actually 613 commandments listed in the Old Testament. About half were positive commandments telling the people how they should act. The other half were negative, in that they were lists of things you were not allowed to do. Jesus had plenty to choose from.

This week's first reading from Exodus gives us some guidance on what that love should look like in practise.

*"Don't molest or oppress the stranger. Don't be harsh with the widow or orphan. Don't demand interest from others. Give a person's cloak back to him."*

And it mirrors the message we hear from Jesus throughout the Gospels, but especially in Matthew 25, when we hear about other ways we should treat strangers: "for I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

And this is the work of a Vincentian; to love God and to love others in a very special way. Seeing Christ in the poor is not always easy. In fact, your work can be quite challenging at times, but like the people of Thessalonica who had Paul there to imitate, Vincentians have the example of many who have gone before, back to Frederic Ozanam and the founding members. Members who have been there to show us how to offer a hand up to people in need.

*(Reflection from Greg Ryan)*

**Who are the Vincentians that have inspired you?**

## THIS WEEK...

*Seek the face of Christ in the people we assist.*

## PRAYER

*Lord, we ask your blessing on us and those we help. We pray for each other today and ask you to give us the grace to be your face to the people we serve. We ask this in your name. Amen*



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# The inclusion of Jesus

5 Nov  
2023

## 31<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Mal 1:14-2: 2, 8-10

1Thess 2:7-9, 13

**Mt 23:1-12**

Jesus was a man who accepted the ordinary people of his time. He also reached out to those that were sick, the sinners and those who were deemed unclean and outcast. He treated them with compassion and love and was willing to be with them and serve them. This is also our Vincentian mission.

But it was a different story for the religious leaders of the time. In this Gospel, we hear how he rebukes the Pharisees and lists their imperfections. This would have shocked those listening. In Jewish society, Pharisees were religious leaders and considered good people. They followed the law. They lived pious lives and gave tithes to the temple. But Jesus admonishes them. "Everything they do is done to attract attention." Everything they do is about themselves, not other people or God.

When Jesus spoke here in Matthew's Gospel, he could have been talking to Frederic and his friends or any Vincentian today. "Do not be guided by what they do because they do not practise what they preach." It is similar to the challenge given to the young founders of the Society back in 1833. "What are you doing now for the poor? Show us your works."

But it wasn't about boasting and focussing on how good they could be seen to be. It was about service, about putting their faith into action. Our Gospel passage concludes with this imperative from Jesus. "The greatest among you must be your servant. Anyone who exalts himself will be humbled and anyone who humbles himself will be exalted."

The Rule 2.5.1 reminds us that a Vincentian seeks to emulate Saint Vincent in the five essential virtues essential for promoting love and respect for the poor. These virtues are: simplicity, humility, gentleness, selflessness and zeal. These are the foundations of our service to those who need our assistance. They are also the foundations of the community we create in each conference and the virtues that underpin our relationships with our brother and sister members.

*(Reflection from Greg Ryan)*

**Which of the five essential virtues do you identify with the most in your life?**

## THIS WEEK...

*Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Ephesians 4:2*

## PRAYER

*Lord, teach me to act justly, love tenderly and to walk humbly with you.*



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# The Ten bridesmaids

12 Nov  
2023

## 32<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Wis 6:12-16

1Thess 4:13-18

Mt 25:1-13

I have heard this parable about the ten bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom many times over the years and have always associated it with death. Death, and the fact that we don't know the time when that will eventually happen for each of us, and so the need to be prepared. Prepared to meet God face to face, our final and full encounter with God. But I am now starting to think the message might also be for the here and now. It might be reminding us to be ready and prepared now, to encounter God in our daily lives.

The ten bridesmaids were all prepared to meet the bridegroom and enter the wedding feast. They each had their lamps and oil though only five of them planned ahead, were aware that delays happen and that extra oil might be needed to see the journey through. They waited patiently for the bridegroom to appear and those that were prepared were able to illuminate their world to see and encounter the bridegroom.

We know that God is here with us, yet somehow, we miss seeing God. Maybe it is because of the hustle and bustle of our daily lives. Maybe we are time poor and rushed with deadlines or tasks that need to be completed. Maybe we are focussed on ourselves, what we want and what we need, that we don't have room until Sunday for God. So how can we prepare ourselves and become aware of the many encounters we have with God each and every day.

At the core of Ignatian spirituality is the desire to find God in all things. It means taking time and being still, and aware of self and the world around us. Another strategy is to say, "God is here!" This idea comes from UCC pastor Jane E. Vennard. She says: "Practice saying, "God is here," the next time you are annoyed by your neighbours' quarrelling, see someone carelessly toss rubbish from a car, get drenched in an unexpected rainstorm, or bite into a tasteless apple. Sometimes saying "God is here" is the best way to snap into an awareness that God dwells not just within you but alongside you in every moment, mundane or grand."

Our Vincentian rule too, reminds us to follow the example of St. Vincent de Paul by seeing Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ. Every visitation experience then becomes an encounter with God.

*(Reflection from Greg Ryan)*

**Where do you encounter God in your life?**

## THIS WEEK...

*"The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything." – Julian of Norwich*

## PRAYER

*Open my eyes Lord, help me to see your face.*



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# The parable of the Talents

19 Nov  
2023

## 33<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Prov 31: 10-13, 19-20, 30-31

1 Thess 5: 1-6

Mt 25: 14-30

In Matthew's Gospel we are now getting very close to the time of the Passover and Jesus' passion. He has been busy telling stories and teaching his disciples about the Kingdom and what was coming, both for himself and them. The parable of the talents, the last of the parables in Matthew's Gospel has always intrigued me especially in regards to talents. A search has provided the following information.

In biblical times, a talent was a unit of weight of approximately 36 kg, and when used as a unit of money, was valued for that weight of silver. As a unit of currency, a talent was worth about 6,000 denarii. A denarius was the usual payment for a day's labour.

So, in Jesus' story when the master entrusted five talents to one, two to another and one to the third, he was trusting them with a great treasure, something very special to be grown and developed. We know that the first two showed great stewardship and multiplied their holdings while the third did nothing through fear and was held to account.

We are each given many gifts and talents to be used in the service of the Lord and of his Church to build up God's Kingdom here on earth. The scripture today tells us the servants were gifted, each to their ability. And it is true too for each of us. We have been gifted with what we need. Awareness of, and gratitude for our giftedness is a necessary first step. And we choose how we cultivate these gifts in the service of others, and sometimes fear, a lack of confidence and ability prevent us from using them wisely.

Many of the people we assist experience this lack of ability and fear too. Generational experiences, a lack of role models and guidance have led them into disadvantage and inhibit their climb out. Your hand up may just be the encouragement needed to give them the courage to make life changing decisions.

*(Reflection from Greg Ryan)*

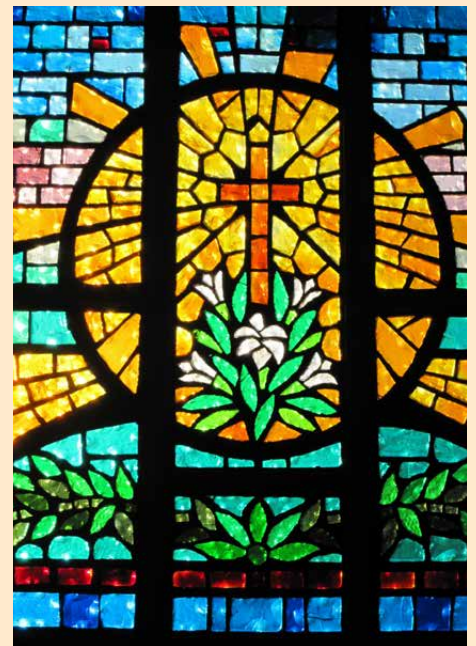
**What gifts do we see in the people we assist?**

## THIS WEEK...

*Take time to be aware and grateful for the gifts I have received in my life.*

## PRAYER

*Lord, give me the strength and courage to use the gifts you have given me, to be of service for you to others. Amen*



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# Great Disguise!

26 Nov  
2023

## CHRIST THE KING

Ezek 34: 11-12, 15-17

1 Cor 15: 20-26, 28

Mt 25: 31-46

To me, this Gospel is completely about being Vincentian - providing *any* form of assistance (1.3) to *anyone* (1.4) and specifically seeking out “*the victims of exclusion or adversity*” (1.5) and seeing Christ in them (1.8).

St Ignatius taught us about seeing God in all things, and our Catholic Social Teaching also emphasises the need to look for Christ in every person.

Given God’s expertise in disguise, it’s so easy to forget that it is Jesus who is coming to us for assistance. A lot of the time, he’s generous with us and adopts a grateful persona, doesn’t ask for much, even looks a bit like us or like we can imagine ourselves looking and sounding, had our lives gone differently. And we might obtain a great sense of pride and satisfaction from being placed in a position to assist.

He doesn’t always make it easy, or even rewarding, though, does He? We don’t get to choose the disguises He wears when He seeks our help.

And He seems to have some great ones at times! Sometimes He brings an attitude of expectation and a lack of gratitude; some of the time, He brings an overwhelming situation so complex that we don’t know how He managed to get there or where we can begin to help Him sort things out; He might come to us after a litany of life choices that we would not have made; and with no intention of changing His *modus operandi*, just hoping for magic. Sometimes, He brings appalling prejudices with distasteful language to express them.

The Jesus we think we know would never do or be any of those things, so it’s not hard to be tricked.

We have no power to choose the disguise or to ask God to put on a different one. When we trip up and fail to recognise Him, we might get frustrated, annoyed and probably a myriad of other emotions. And then, when the Emmaus moment happens, and we realise who is in front of us, we likely feel remorse.

It’s comforting in these moments to be part of a forgiving faith. We may have a direct opportunity to right the wrong. If nothing else, we can always commit to doing better next time.

*(Reflection from Leonie Duck)*

**When do you find it difficult to see Jesus in people you come across?**

## THIS WEEK...

*If you judge people, you have no time to love them.  
St Teresa of Kolkata*

## PRAYER

*Lord, grant me the grace and patience you need me to display in your work.*



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# The Roundedness of Life

3 Dec  
2023

## FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Is 63:16-17, 64: 1, 3-8

1 Cor 1: 3-9

Mk 13: 33-37

Five times in this five verse Gospel passage, we are told to be attentive.

Advent, the time when we prepare for the birth of Jesus, is the ideal time for us to be reminded to remain fully present to our lives - our families, our service and our relationship with our God.

Almost without exception, our lives are busy. It can be difficult to live intentionally. Sometimes we get into a routine of simply 'showing up' which potentially makes for an unfulfilling experience for us and for those we are with.

In John (10:10) we hear that Jesus "came that [we] may have life, and have it abundantly".

I was recently reading from one of the great philosophers, Michael Leunig. In the Curly Pyjama letters, Mr Curly writes to Vasco: "*it is not the length of life which is important, it is the shape and the spaciousness. It is the roundedness of life which matters. A round life is surely a happy life – and dare I say – it is a good life*".

Most of us are blessed to be able to live a "rounded" life, and no doubt, our Vincentian service is not only part of that roundedness, but perhaps also inspired by the blessedness of our lives. My Mum's mantra "There but for the grace of God, go I" has become mine. At the same time, many who are offering Vincentian service have not had perfect lives themselves; have lived through difficult times and have overcome significant challenges.

This part of Mark's Gospel comes immediately prior to his account of the passion and Jesus seems to be letting his followers know that things are not necessarily going to be easy for them.

Advent and Christmas can often be a really difficult time for many of the people we serve, as they are exposed even more strongly to how others in the world are able to celebrate the Christmas season - what other parents are able to give their children, can put on the table, and share within a happy family. It's another key moment where Vinnies may play a significant role in making their lives better.

*(Reflection from Leonie Duck)*

**Am I awake to the presence of God in my life every day?**

## THIS WEEK...

*"To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work." Mary Oliver*

## PRAYER

*Come, Lord Jesus. Grace me this Advent season, with a heightened ability to be fully present to you in my life.*



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## SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Is 40: 1-5, 9-11

2 Pet 3: 8-14

Mk 1: 1-8

The anticipation is building. Last week we were exhorted to stay awake! This week, (actually back at the beginning on Mark's Gospel), we are told that it's really time - both then, and now - to prepare a clear and smooth way for our Lord. The popular and respected, John the Baptist, tells us it's not him. And that the one we are waiting for is significantly superior to him.

It strikes me as almost amusing that (in the letter attributed to Peter), the first/second century Christians were becoming impatient, and here we are, almost 2000 years on, still needing the same message - God works with his own timing.

In his explanation of this passage, British theologian, Michael Green wrote "God sees time with a *perspective* we lack" (a thousand years seems like a day) and "with an *intensity* we lack" (one day is like a thousand years)."

I imagine there is much for me to learn by adopting both perspective and intensity more like God's. I guess perspective helps me to be patient, to remember that my prayer might be responded to in a timing quite different from the one I asked for, not to mention a solution which was not the one I had in mind.

Intensity ensures I make the most of the waiting time; of every moment. Advent is the perfect time for a re-evaluation of the manner and content of my days; my interactions with others, and my expectations of them. If He were to come for me today or tomorrow, would He find me "*spotless, blameless and at peace with Him*"? Unfortunately, I doubt it.

Ok, let's be honest - no "doubt", just a flat out "no" is probably the truth. I'm aiming for "*make every effort*". And this Advent, I will step up my effort.

*(Reflection from Leonie Duck)*

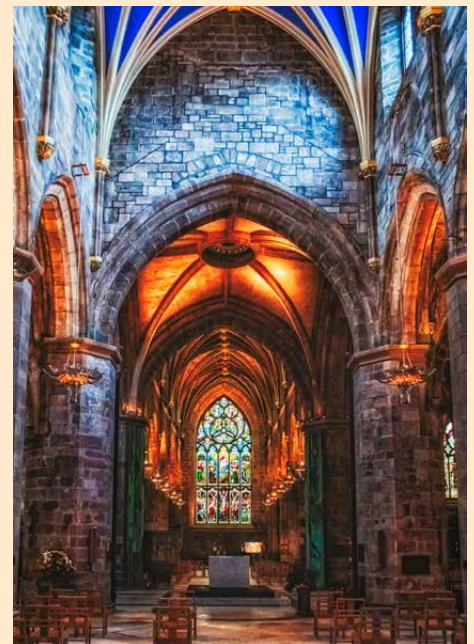
**When time seems to shift from reality, what might God be asking me to consider?**

## THIS WEEK...

*"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens"*  
Ecclesiastes 3:1

## PRAYER

*Lord, when I am feeling anxious for a change, an answer, a solution, give me the faith to trust your timing.*





# The Spirit of Prayer

17 Dec  
2023

## THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Is 61: 1-2, 10-11

1 Thess 5: 16-24

Jn 1: 6-8, 19-28

St Paul urges the Thessalonians to pray constantly; to seek guidance from the Spirit before doing anything.

Prayer is a key element in our Vincentian service. The Society owes its very existence to the regular, communal prayer of Blessed Frederic and his friends 200 years ago and their desire to turn their faith into action. Society members start and end every conference meeting with prayer.

Prayer life is different for all of us and can be different at different times. We pray alone, we pray in community. Some of us can't get out of bed in the morning before praying, some of us have specific times or events in the day or week when we pray. Some of us pray constantly, talking with our Lord throughout our day.

At times, we enjoy the rhythm and familiarity of our traditional prayers; sometimes, we may incorporate a Lectio or Visio Divina, or Christian meditation. Many of us pray through song.

The Rule (1.11) states: “*Vincentians serve in hope. They rejoice in discovering the spirit of prayer in the poor, for in the silence, the poor can perceive God’s Plan for every person*”. When thinking about this, I am reminded of the truly incredible immersion experience I had in Kolkata (India) with education colleagues, and as guests of a clerical order. We were volunteering in some of Mother (Saint) Teresa’s establishments. This part of The Rule very clearly articulates what I observed there – a very spiritual and despite material poverty, a seemingly content and happy people – with perhaps an innate sense of a higher power and purpose.

When I’m seeking to discern an action or a solution, I love to sit quietly in my parish church, in the presence of the Blessed Eucharist – just me and my God – a one on one conversation where I feel the Holy Spirit can have my full attention.

A simple pause to think “What would Jesus do/say?” before acting or speaking can be a very effective call to the Holy Spirit.

*(Reflection from Leonie Duck)*

**Where does prayer fit in my Vincentian service?**

## THIS WEEK...

*Prayer doesn’t just change things – it changes us. Joyce Meyer*

## PRAYER

*Lord, remind us to seek the Holy Spirit routinely, and invoke the God of peace to help us work towards perfection and holiness in you.  
Amen*



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# The first disciple

24 Dec  
2023

## FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

2 Sam 7: 1-5, 8-12, 14, 16

Rom 16: 25-27

Lk 1: 26-38

When I was young I had many plans for the future; what work I might do, where I might go and what life might look like. And yet here I am, many years down the track, and the reality is nothing like that early dream. Much better and richer though than what I imagined, which is a great relief. Life takes twists and turns, some natural and others unexpected. There was a movie called *Sliding Doors*, where a young lady played by Gwyneth Paltrow rushes to catch a train. The story splits into two parallel stories. One where she got on the train and the other detailed what life was like when the train doors closed and she missed the train. What if experiences, are common to most of us, and so it was for Mary. Today's Gospel recounts the Annunciation story that we also hear on that feast day in March.

Life looked well planned. Marriage to Joseph and a simple life together in Nazareth was the future. But God opened another door for her with an angelic invitation to be at the centre of God's love for the world. "Rejoice, so highly favoured. The Lord is with you." She didn't understand, but who could? She was not married and pregnant, yet still a virgin. So how could this be?

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you...and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And the child will be holy and will be called Son of God." And filled with God's grace, Mary said, yes.

With that yes, she became the first disciple of Jesus and a guide for each of us as we follow him. She shows us how to be open to God in our lives, how to accept the unexpected, how to receive the grace of God, how to listen to God's message and how to respond faithfully. Part of the Angel's message to Mary concerned her cousin Elizabeth and her miracle. This demonstrates to us, how as disciples, we serve others in need unselfishly. It is a model of discipleship lived out by Vincentians throughout the year.

Today, we light the last purple candle on our Advent Wreaths. It is called, the "Angel's Candle," and it represents peace. And later this week we end our Advent season and celebrate the birth of Jesus. During this week, many of you will be busy packing and delivering the last of your Christmas hampers before taking a well-deserved break over Christmas. I hope that this time is one of peace and joy for you, your families and your conferences. My hope and prayer for you is that you too feel God's peace, grace and presence as you continue his work into a new year.

*(Reflection from Greg Ryan)*

**Can you recall your "Yes" moments?**

## THIS WEEK...

*Be aware of my "Yes" responses to the Lord.*

## PRAYER

*"Alleluia, alleluia! I am the servant of the Lord: may his will for me be done. Alleluia!"*



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## FEAST OF HOLY FAMILY

Gen:15: 1-6; 21: 1-3

Hebrews 11:8, 11-12, 17-19

Lk 2:22-40

Christmas has passed and we now focus on the Holy Family that came into being that day. Mary and Joseph joyfully celebrating the birth of their son, Jesus. A scene many, many families have experienced with the birth of their own children. The miracle of birth, of new life. I experienced it with the birth of my own two girls and it was an awe inspiring and wondrous gift to become a family. I recently became a grandfather for the first time and the wonder and awe continues as our family grows.

Parents wonder what future lies ahead for their children. Mary and Joseph had many others sharing prophecies about who their baby was and what he was destined to do. Our first two readings focus on the family of Abraham and Sarah and their faith in God. Faith that created Isaac and faith that saved him. The reading from Hebrews has a strong theme of faith which is the bedrock of their life journey.

And so it was for Mary and Joseph too. Faithfully they presented Jesus in the Temple as the Law commanded. Other characters in the story, Simeon and Anna provided prophecy about Jesus and the role he would play in Israel, and once again Joseph and Mary wondered and pondered.

Little else is known about the Holy Family. We are told they returned to Nazareth and the child grew and was filled with wisdom. I doubt they considered themselves to be a 'Holy Family' rather just a normal one with the same trials, issues and joys experienced by all families. We often here that children are the product of their upbringing.

So once we see Jesus enter his public ministry, and see the man he had become, we can surmise that he was brought up in a loving, caring family. A family that nurtured, supported and loved each other. A family that created a home environment that was normal. And being normal, would probably be sometimes like ours. Not always easy, not always smooth sailing, not always perfect, just family.

*(Reflection from Greg Ryan)*

## THIS WEEK...

*Be thankful for the gift of life and the family that shares your life journey.*

## PRAYER

*Jesus, Mary and Joseph, in you we contemplate the splendour of true love, to you we turn with trust. Amen*





Spiritual  
Reflection  
Guide

*Sharing  
Christmas Joy*



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