



St Vincent de Paul Society
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Spiritual Reflection Guide

January – April 2024

The Empty Tomb...



Dear Vincentians and Friends of the Society,

Welcome to another edition of our Spiritual Reflection Guides. The liturgical cycle for 2024 follows generally the Gospel of Mark. The coverage of these Guides is interesting as they begin on the fringe of Christmastide and heads toward our Lenten and Easter Season.

As we follow this Marcan narrative, I think it is important to understand whom this gospel was written for originally. It is believed that this first gospel was written in Rome about 70 CE. It is accepted too that it is a gospel in the preaching of Peter and was thought that Mark was the interpreter of Peter, writing carefully what Peter remembered, though of course not in any real chronological order. Scripture is not so much a historical document but the revealing of God in our salvation history.

The Marcan community was made up of former Gentiles and Mark on several occasions translates Aramaic words and explains certain Jewish customs. As Etienne Charpentier explains, *"We can understand the importance attached to the evangelization of Gentiles, and it is no chance that the finest confession of faith occurs on the lips of the Roman centurion at the foot of the cross."*

Finally, Mark presents a faith under persecution, it is not a quiet faith. He calls for a faith that is forced to take risks and comes up against opposition. This gospel was written under the reign of Nero and the martyrdom of Peter in 64 CE.

Renown biblical scholar, Fr Francis Moloney SDB states that a reading and reflection of this *"enigmatic gospel"* challenges us all to a great hope. As we read the Gospel of Mark our own failures can be given sense and purpose. Jesus *"is going before us to Galilee;"* there we will see him, summoning us towards our experience of resurrection, as we continually meet him, touch him and are inspired by his living presence in our *"Galilees."*

In this way Mark, like the imprisoned Peter, understands and shares a Jesus never-failing presence to the failed and failing disciples always has and always will make sense out of our nonsense. A careful and contemporary reading of this *"story of Jesus"* can teach us that no matter how fragile the Christian response to the challenge of Jesus may be, the Easter proclamation of the Exultet has rightly interpreted the message of the Gospel of Mark: *"Christ has conquered, and darkness has vanished forever"* (Moloney, Francis J. *The Living Voice of the Gospel* © 1986)

Remember too that each reflection in our Guide comes from the red highlighted reading of Sunday. In this you may like to reflect on the reading yourself before venturing into the Guides' reflections.

There is much for us to treasure and explore through the insights from this *"enigmatic gospel"* nourishing your journey toward the joy of Easter morn.

All Spiritual Reflection Guides can be accessed on the website, www.vinnies.org.au, and follow the Publications link. For any mailing enquiries, including changed addresses please contact lewisham.reception@vinnies.org.au. Our Guides are also found in podcast format through Spotify under Vincentian Spiritual Reflections

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The Journey...

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EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

IS 60: 1-6

EPH 3: 2-3, 5-6

MT 2: 1-12

The experience of an epiphany in someone's life is an experience of a sudden and striking realisation. This revelation can occur in any situation in which an enlightening consciousness allows a problem or situation to be understood from a new and deeper perspective and meaning for our personal lives. We discover something new.

In Matthew's gospel narrative, Herod was confronted with the revelation of the Christ-child's birth in Bethlehem and his reaction was not one of "enlightening consciousness" but one of agitation, in fact, the gospel uses the term that Herod was "perturb". In hearing this reaction, I believe that an epiphany in life is only received when we are open to possibilities beyond ourselves. That is, we don't react with our own agenda, but we avail ourselves to a deeper agenda, that is God's agenda within our lives. The key is living a life open in prayer and reflection rather than our own success and ambitions.

For the "wise men" this was the place of enlightenment. Their hearts had been transformed by the journey and now by the joy of their arrival. On reflection, I think true epiphanies are discovered in the journey. Here it is the long journey or pilgrimage of the magi, for the apostles it was the long pilgrimage with Jesus then the enlightenment of encounter with the risen Christ and then the presence of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and for St Paul it was on the road to Damascus.

Epiphanies may come to us through different pathways and through different encounters. The visit of the strangers from the east reminds us of the influence of strangers in our lives. This is a deeply Vincentian charism as we acknowledge Christ in the stranger in whom we learn much from. Fr Ron Rolheiser OMI shares that, "with the stranger lies surprise, new possibility, contact with that part of God and reality that we have never experienced before."

The Epiphany, the visit of the magi strangers from foreign lands to the Christ child, reveals the divine nature of Jesus to humanity. It opens our hearts to the truth of the incarnation. The visit and presence of the stranger in our life may also reveal a different perception of God in our lives. May we always be open to the difference the stranger offers us, their different perspectives, their different ways of understanding, their different reflections of our God. Such new possibilities in our life are the heart of our epiphany experience.

When has an epiphany or journey transformed your perspective?

THIS WEEK...

"And you Bethlehem...out of you will come a leader who will shepherd my people."

Micah 5:2,4

PRAYER

Father, continue to open our lives to new possibilities and greater depth in our relationship with you.

Amen



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“Samuel, Samuel...!”

THIS WEEK...

“Here I am Lord; Speak your servant is listening.”

Book of Samuel

PRAYER

Lord, may we hear your call strong in faith and love.

Amen



SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

1 SAM 3: 3-10, 19

1 COR 6: 13-15, 17-20

JOHN 1: 35-42

Not long after the passing of my wife, Anne, our son Ben, who was only 14, talked to me of his great fear at night of his mother coming to talk to him in some spirit form. His faith that Anne's spirit still profoundly lives reflects this fear of a nightly visit. I simply reminded him that of all people his own Mum knew and loved him deeply and would never want to frighten him and so would only call him in his dreams.

This experience may relate to many of you in your own personal grief and reflects beautifully in the encounter experienced by Samuel in the first reading this week. It is a wonderful encounter of the revelation that the God of all creation quietly calls Samuel in his sleep. Although not stated, I feel Samuel “knew” this voice but assumed it was Eli calling him. Eventually, Eli understood it was the Lord calling and offering the boy a wonderful response; “*Speak, Lord, your servant is listening*”.

There are two aspects to this encounter with the Lord. First, is the simplicity of the call but secondly is the close companionship of God for, “*the Lord was with him and let no word of his fall to the ground.*” The path of companionship opens us, as Vincentians, to a radical relationship with God and with those we engage with. A few years ago, the International General Council of the Society reflected that, “*a fraternal relationship where, eventually, there is no beneficiary nor caregiver, but rather a relationship of friendship.*” Such companionship with each other within the Society is sadly not common and needs changing and revising.

May we continue to be mindful of our companions in the journey, listening to their call not as phantoms in the night but as a response to a love without measure reflecting always the joy of the gospels.

What does companionship mean to you?

Sorry God, but No?

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THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

JONAH 3: 1-5,10

1 COR 7: 29-31

MK 1: 4-20

The story of Jonah speaks volumes of the compassion of God towards the people of Nineveh when they 'renounce their evil behaviour'... "from the greatest to the least." What precedes these verses in the Bible is the compassion also shown to Jonah after he refuses God's first call to deliver the message of repentance to the people of Nineveh. Even after saying 'No' to God, God has compassion and offers forgiveness.

There is much freedom and beauty in God's forgiveness and compassion. God's forgiveness for us at those times we have said no to God or haven't quite done our best, reflects for us the forgiveness and compassion that we are asked to have for others at those times when they haven't lived up to our expectations. And not only forgiveness for others, but forgiveness towards ourselves when we have failed to do what is right in the eyes of God.

Most evenings I try, although most times fail, to spend some time reflecting on my day. These reflections generally end with the penitential prayer of the "I confess...", which opens us to the intimate and profound love, a love that is beyond our understanding, of God; a God who recognises those things that we "have done and for those things that we fail to do."

Through compassion and forgiveness, we have a chance to let go of the past and move on into the future—whether we are forgiving ourselves or forgiving others. Such beauty in that feeling of freedom! And such beauty in knowing that God is always there waiting to forgive.

Have you ever said No to God?

THIS WEEK...

When you forgive, you in no way change the past - but you sure do change the future.

Bernard Meltzer

PRAYER

*Lord, forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass
against us.*

Amen



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“The beauty that had crept unnoticed...”

THIS WEEK...

Be still and know that I am God.
(Psalm 46:10)

PRAYER

Lord, continue to distract our distractions!
Amen



FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

DEUT 18:15-20

1 COR 7: 32-35

MK 1: 21-28

Early last year I shared this wonderful story from the Washington Post who conducted an experience with renowned violinist, Joshua Bell. Bell, who commands at least \$100 for the cheap seats at concerts in the great halls of the world, was asked to play in a busy Metro railway station.

The pieces he played were some of the most exquisite and beautiful music ever composed for the violin as well as the most complicated. In the 45 minutes the musician played, only six people stopped and stayed for a while. About 20 gave him money but continued to walk their normal pace. He collected \$32. When he finished playing and silence took over, no one noticed it. No one applauded, nor was there any recognition. In the presence of such sublime beauty only a few children wanted to stop, but they were hurried along by preoccupied parents.

St Paul's words this week remind us of the distractions of the “*world's affairs*” and how we may lose our sense of appreciation or thankfulness for the beauty around us. Not that we mean to, but we can get so caught up that we forget the important things. As Sue and Leo Kane reflected in “*The Little Brown Book*”; which are a collection of reflections from St Mary McKillop, stated; “...*the beauty that had crept, unnoticed, into their day.*”

I believe this message of St Paul and the beautiful reflection of St Mary of the Cross is vitally important to be heard in today's post pandemic world. It is not an easy message because the world stopped and is now trying desperately to recover but also over one million people died globally. We will breathe deeper when a vaccine is discovered physically but how do we breathe deeper spiritually to move forward in hope?

Blessed Frederic stated near the end of his life that the “*chief work of the Society is the saving of souls.*” In simple terms, I believe Frederic is reminding us that our being present with people, in whatever way we can, lifts hope from the dust in people's lives and enables a realisation or epiphany that our world continues to shares gifts of love and profound beauty.

How often do we see your Vincentian work as “*saving of souls*”?

“Restless I fret till twilight falls”

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FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

JOB 7: 1-4, 6-7

1 COR 9: 16-19, 22-23

MK 1: 29-29

I shared this reflection some time ago, but I feel it says much to this week's readings...

I came across the expression *naturale desiderium Dei* several years ago. This term was coined by St Thomas Aquinas and it is an expression which inspires a deep faith journey which is of the nature, and even essence, of our soul's desires.

In simple terms it means that our soul's essence innately have a natural desire or longing to return to God. In this Aquinas would express that at the point of our dying our souls are “released” to naturally and passionately yearn to be with God. This natural desire I believes give much life and expression to our faith.

St Augustine also spoke for this strong natural yearning for the God, in “*my heart is restless until it rests in you*”. This week's reading from Job reflects beautifully, “*restless I fret till twilight falls.*”

Through this brief journey we can also look toward the theology of the beatific vision in that we only attain perfect happiness when we are standing in God's presence, face to face, at the end of our time. Perfect happiness cannot be attained in this life as we will always yearn, desire, long to return to our very source of being, i.e., God.

What do these musing have for us in our Vincentian journey? On reflection it is firstly companionship, for we are companions in this faith journey assisting each other in our thoughts, kindness, and prayer. Secondly, Frederic Ozanam tasked us as a spiritual Society, for the “*chief work of the Society is the saving of souls*”, to support, to encourage with compassion and to be empathic advocates for each other and for those voices crying in the wilderness. Our spirituality opens us to the call of God in our lives. We are attuned to this call through the scriptures, reflections and prayers, our Christian faith tradition, all as part of the creedal response to our faith journey within the communion of saints.

Is your faith expressed as a “natural desire for God”?

THIS WEEK...

It were my soul's desire to see the face of God, it were my soul's desire to rest in God's abode.
Hymn Morning Prayer Office

PRAYER

Lord, encourage our faith, our hopes and our love which reflect our innate natural desire to stand in your presence.
Amen



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Spiritual and Physical Consolation

THIS WEEK...

"Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."

Saint Francis of Assisi

PRAYER

Lord, grant me the grace to become truly acquainted with those I see as different, and to see your beauty in them.

Amen



SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

LEV 13: 1-2, 44-46

1 COR 10: 31 – 11:1

MK 1: 40-45

Today's Gospel reminded me of the image of Pope Francis, in 2013, embracing a man with a disfiguring skin disease. It was one of many actions that taught us very early in Francis' papacy that this was a man who was going to show the world authentic witness to the love of Christ. He chose prisoners to wash the feet of; he went to the streets to feed and talk with the homeless; his words advocate inclusivity and non-judgment. He would truly represent Jesus.

Apparently, his namesake, St Francis of Assisi had a fear, even abhorrence, of lepers and would go out of his way to avoid them. I don't know about you, but I find it highly comforting to know that some of our greatest Saints had failings too!

Saint Francis writes though of an experience when riding near Assisi. On seeing a leper, he was moved by the Holy Spirit to dismount his horse and go to the man and kiss him. On remounting his horse ready to ride away he looked back and could not see the man at all. He realised at this point, that he had in fact kissed Jesus.

In his Testament, Francis wrote, *"When I was in sin, the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure; but then God himself led me into their company, and I had pity on them. When I became acquainted with them, what had previously nauseated me became the source of spiritual and physical consolation for me."*

While leprosy itself still exists today, many additional forms of disadvantage and diversity can lead a person to be treated as lepers were in Jesus' time. They come to us every day. They are those who are unaccepted and judged by the mainstream community. Day in, day out, even during a pandemic, our network of staff, members and volunteers respond to people who are poor, in ill health, estranged from their support networks due to mental health issues, and lonely.

The leper in the gospel story is healed by Jesus because he had faith. He fully believed that Jesus could heal him, and this gave him the courage to approach Jesus. Those we assist display courage and faith when they come to us in the hope that we will respond in a compassionate, Jesus-like manner.

What is the impact of focusing on the external appearance of those we assist and work with?

Reflection by Leonie Duck

Driven Into Transformation

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FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

GEN 9: 8-15

1 PETER 3: 18-22

MK1: 12-15

Welcome to Lent. We are a few days into Lent of course, and appropriately this year, Lent began on St Valentine's Day. We tend to think of Lent as a sad time, a time of mourning. And as a time of fasting and almsgiving, it generally doesn't feel like a time of joy. But it is also a time for deepening prayer. As such, Lent is a time of love.

We hear today that Jesus is driven into the desert. Not led. Driven. He was tempted by Satan and looked after by the angels. He came out of that period of time and began preaching the good news.

I thought about our own wilderness times. Times of illness, grief and loss, separation, loneliness. Dark times, problematic and difficult times. Often it can feel like we are driven into such times. They are experiences where change is forced upon us, often a moment of crisis.

How do we experience that time and how do we emerge? Jesus emerges fulfilled and clear about where he was going and what his mission was. He experienced a revelation, a transformation in his time of isolation. It wasn't an easy journey. It would have been a painful journey, as are many of our own. But he emerges strengthened.

Does this happen for us in our 'desert' times? Can we be transformed by our crises or challenges? Change occurs constantly in our lives. We can fight it or we can go with it. Often we have no choice but to go with it-in the same way that Jesus was driven into the desert, given no choice. It was a time he needed to experience, in order to be ready for the mission ahead of him.

I'm reminded of the Footprints in the Sand poem, with which I'm sure we're all familiar. It beautifully describes a person reflecting on their life and bothered by the observation of only one set of footprints during their worst times. God assures them that the single set of footprints were his own -and that they were being carried.

What 'desert' period in your life has led to a revelation or transformation?

Reflection by Leonie Duck

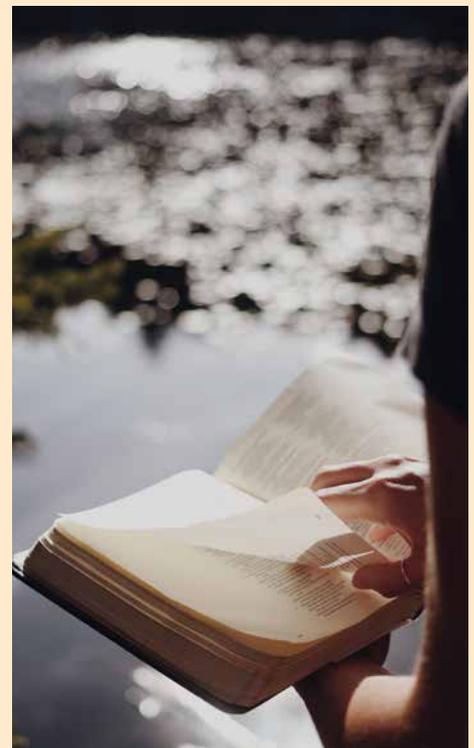
THIS WEEK...

*Keep your face to the sunshine
and you cannot see a shadow.*

Helen Keller

PRAYER

*Lord, remind me in my 'desert'
times, that you are there with me.
Amen*



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Mountaintop Moments

THIS WEEK...

"Climb the mountain so you can see the world, not so the world can see you."

David McCullough

PRAYER

Lord, be with me as I navigate the delights of rollercoaster life. May I be awake to and cherish the purpose of each moment.

Amen



SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

GEN 22: 1-2, 9-13, 15-18

ROM 8: 31-34

MK 9: 2-10

There are so many elements to the story of the transfiguration. Jesus seems to be selecting an 'inner circle' – Peter, James and John. Were they his most trusted disciples? Were they the smartest? Or were they the ones that most needed the lesson to be spelt out clearly?

Their time on the mountaintop was like nothing they had ever experienced before. *Dazzlingly white* is Mark's description, a white unseen on earth. Jesus wasn't simply showered in rays of sunshine. The change came from within and He radiated calm as well as light.

They wanted it to last forever. I dare say we would feel the same! Let's build a tent for each of you, Peter says. Let's stay here – just us. Let's not go through that whole death and resurrection scenario. Let's avoid that pain. Such a human response, don't you think? Life is good, let's keep it that way. Don't make me return to real life - to work, to the challenges that the world is throwing at us and the people we support.

But no, Jesus leads them back. They have a job to do. The job ahead of Jesus is worse than most! The disciples don't realise it yet, but they are on a roller coaster. They've had this moment of exhilaration. They return to real life - one that is already not easy, and soon, after just learning that they should listen to Him above all else, they will lose their rabbi and friend. His crucifixion is not that far away. In Mark's gospel, it's a handful of chapters.

How often do we have those moments of immense happiness or contentment that we wish could last forever? More importantly, what do we learn from those times? Peter, James and John received an enormously important message on that mountaintop, about who Jesus really was. In last week's reflection I pondered the growth or transformation that might come from our life lows, our crises.

Equally, there are lessons in our highs if we are attuned to them.

What mountaintop moments have been inspirational for you in your faith?

Reflection by Leonie Duck

Now is the Time

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THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

EXODUS 20: 1-17

1 COR 1: 22-25

JOHN 2: 13-25

Today's story of Jesus clearing the Temple is contained in each of the four Gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke all have the story taking place towards the end of their Gospels, during the time of Passover or Holy Week.

John however places it very early in his Gospel, also at Passover, but early in Jesus' public ministry. John has the disciples being called in Chapter 1, followed by the Wedding at Cana miracle that commences Chapter 2, which leads directly to the temple clearing. At Cana, we see a very private Jesus. He responds to his mother's request for assistance in a private way with only the servants present as the miracle takes place.

Just a few days later we see another side of Jesus as he enters the Temple courtyard. We see his zeal as the angry and passionate disruptor. With whip in hand he drove the merchants and animals out of the temple, upended the tables of the money changers and scattered their coins. In doing so he challenged the Jewish way of life as it related to the Temple. All Jews were expected to make offerings at the Temple for special occasions. This was also true for Mary and Joseph when they took Jesus to the Temple after he was born, to offer doves as a sacrifice for his birth as commanded by the Law.

This business, ritual or cultural side of Temple life appears to have become more a focus for many of the Jewish community than prayer and worship. And being a marketplace, profits would have been paramount for all involved in this aspect of temple life. As such, it is most likely to have been a struggle for ordinary working-class people to be able to afford to fulfil all requirements of the Law.

So, what might Jesus' message be in this story for us, as we enter the third week of Lent? I believe it might be, now is a time to review and reflect on what is in our heart, our life, our temple, and what are the priorities in my life. How well do they align with what Jesus wants for me?

What am I passionate about that leads me to action?

Reflection by Greg Ryan

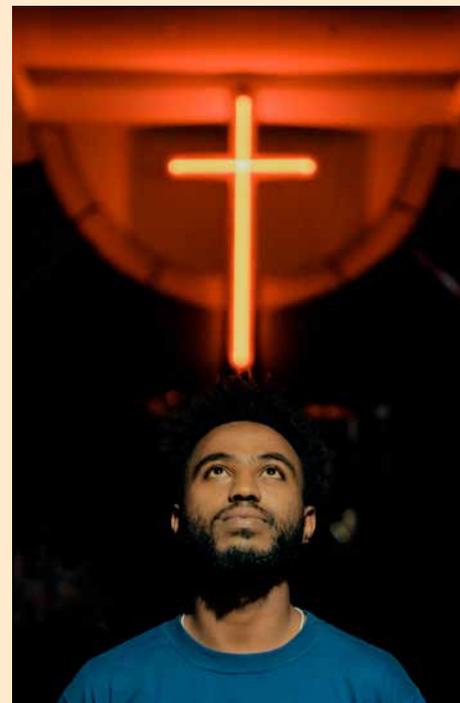
THIS WEEK...

Take time to reflect on your priorities and where you find God in your life.

PRAYER

We pray today for all who suffer injustice and for those living in poverty, that they be recognised and supported.

Amen



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Laetare Sunday

THIS WEEK...

Reflect on and be grateful for the gifts we have been given.

PRAYER

*Father, let us take a minute to say thanks, for the gift of today.
Amen*



FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

CHRON 36: 14-16, 19-23

EPH 2: 4-10

JN 3: 14-21

I don't know about you, but I love visiting art galleries and exhibitions, especially to see old masters. Either Europeans like Monet, Van Gogh, Cezanne or Australians like McCubben, Nolan, Namatjira or Roberts. There is a sense of wonder and joy about the paintings that captures your imagination and takes your breath away. The talent of the artist's creativity, their skill in capturing a moment in time and their ability to literally take you into other worlds is a true gift. And let's not forget the power and beauty of sculpture and music too in the world of art and creativity. In our second reading from Paul to the Ephesians today we hear that, "*we are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life.*" God is the Great Master, and we are His creation. His creation dwarfs the efforts of the other great masters with each of us, made in His image. What a joy to behold we are.

I don't ever remember this until recent years, but to begin the 4th week of Lent we celebrate Laetare Sunday. The day's theme comes from the entrance antiphon reflecting on Isaiah 66:10-11: "*Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her. Be joyful, all who were in mourning; exalt and be satisfied at her consoling breast.*" Laetare is the first word — meaning "*rejoice*" — in the Latin text. So, in the more sombre time of Lent, we see the priest wear rose coloured vestments and we are reminded of the joy that does await us following the crucifixion.

Our readings today reflect the life and faith journey written about in the quote from Isaiah above, and the absolute and total love that God has for his people. The readings also offer us the hope of redemption where we can turn back to God, to the light, if we have turned towards the dark. In the Gospel, John gives us the promise of the resurrection and of new life, eternal life. But before we live that eternal life, Paul's message to us in Ephesians is to be that work of art created by God and to live our best lives.

How can I make others aware of the gift they are to others around them?

Reflection by Greg Ryan

A Life of Service

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FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

JER 31: 31-34

HEB 5: 7-9

JN 12: 20-33

Our readings begin today by the Lord announcing a new covenant with his people. *"The days are coming when I will make a new covenant I will be their God and they shall be my people."* And as we move from Jeremiah's time to the last week in Jesus' life, we find the day has finally come.

As we move to the Gospel reading this week, we see a focus on Jesus preparing his followers for his impending death and resurrection. As always, Jesus uses story and symbol to share this message rather than just issuing plain statements. The imagery is rich. *"Unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest."*

Jesus likens himself to that grain of wheat, a grain full of promise and of new life. From his death, new life will rise up, not only in his own resurrected self but in the seeds of our Church that had been planted and spread by his disciples. A rich harvest indeed. But it would take time for these messages to be understood by the disciples and it would only become fully understood by them later, after meeting and experiencing the risen Jesus.

Today's Gospel begins with Greeks approaching Phillip and asking him if they could see Jesus. So, it was not just Jews now seeking out Jesus and looking for the Messiah, as the Passover Festival is being celebrated, but gentiles. This new covenant was to be for all people now, not just the House of Israel.

Part of Jesus' response to Phillip and Andrew was, *"if a person serves me, they must follow me If anyone serves me, my Father will honour them."* As Vincentians, you live a life of service, assisting and seeing the face of Christ in the poor. Your work is a direct expression of the second great command, *"love your neighbour as yourself."* And I'm sure that for this, your God holds you in the palm of his hand.

How does a life of service enrich your life?

Reflection by Greg Ryan

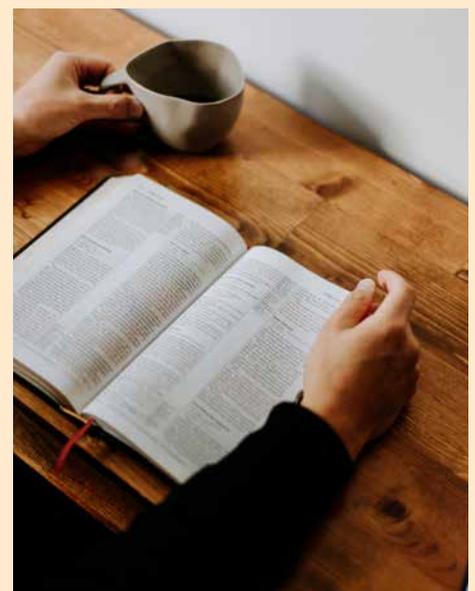
THIS WEEK...

Be aware of the things in your life that you need to let fall to the ground and die, to allow for a new and richer harvest.

PRAYER

Father in heaven, help us to tend the harvest of our lives and communities, working together to ensure a rich yield and promise of new life for all. We ask this in your name.

Amen



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Praise the Everlasting King

THIS WEEK...

“Try to deepen your understanding of these two words, “I Thirst.””

St Teresa of Calcutta

PRAYER

Father, I put my life in your hands.
Amen



PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD

IS 50: 4-7

PHIL 2: 6-11

MK 14: 1–15: 47

If we look at the readings that the Church proposes to us for each week of the liturgical calendar, we can have a sense of fragmentation, of small passages of scripture given to us to think about. Many of the Sunday gospels relate individual parables of Jesus or particular incidents of the preaching and public mission. But when we come to Passion Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday, there is a much more coherent, detailed and confronting account of the events leading to Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

This year, the formal reading is “*the passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark*”, and then the “*Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ according to John*” on Good Friday.

One person who appears only in the account of Mark is a woman; she anoints the head of Jesus with precious nard. Jesus says of her, ‘She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial’.

How important to simply read quietly and at our own pace the sequence of events that lead to Calvary. In fact, I think that a personal reading of Mark’s account in the New Testament is almost as important as being part of the public proclamation at Mass on Palm Sunday. Some of the details are unique to this gospel, such as “*They enlisted a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, father of Alexander and of Rufus, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross.*”

As we reflect on the suffering and death of the Jesus, we remember the deaths too of all the innocent victims of violence and war and we continue to pray for peace in our volatile world.

What word or phrase from the readings of this week touched you? Why?

Easter Morn

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EASTER SUNDAY OF THE RESURRECTION

ACTS 10: 34, 37-43

COLOSSIANS 3:1-4

JOHN 20:1-9

Theologian St John Henry Newman expressed that *“to live is to change and to change often is to be more perfect.”* For Newman, these words were only possible through his profound faith in not just change but in being transformed. For Newman, change is just a part of the process towards the greater goal of transformation. It is in this too that our Mission calls us. For it is a mission in which we transform the lives of those we serve through love, respect, justice, hope and joy - not just simply change their lives.

For Christians, transformation is the expression and nature of Easter. Sadly, much of the sacredness of this time is placed on the events of just Good Friday, the crucifixion of Jesus. But the crucifixion is just a small sum of the greater part. It was the profound aspect of changed needed for the transforming effects of the resurrection. This is what Jesus expressed throughout his life; he changed water to wine and transformed the nature of service, he healed the blind not just to see but to be transformed back to society, he broke bread not just to feed but to transform this simple act to share himself in love for all.

A consistent feature of the post-resurrection stories is that the risen Jesus was different and initially unrecognisable. Resurrection is not resuscitation. Jesus is in a *“new”* space and the disciples were not, they were still in the turmoil of change. Resuscitation and resurrection are not the same. Resuscitation just restores to the same life; resurrection changes and transforms...

The transformation of Easter, the Risen Christ, is not always found in lofty ideals but in creation and all that is around us, *“the ants popping up through the cracks”*, as theologian Ilia Delio expresses. This too is where we discover Vincentian spirituality. *“Serving Christ in the poor”* is not difficult to understand when we recognise Christ, not just a divine person but unconditionally as the continual movement and evolution of creation.

Happy Easter to all!

How do we best bear this witness in our lives?

THIS WEEK...

“The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light...light has dawned.”

Matthew 4:16

PRAYER

Christ our Light, thanks be to God.

Amen



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A Sign of Peace

THIS WEEK...

"You call us to live as brothers and sisters. Give us the strength daily to be instruments of peace."

Pope Francis

PRAYER

*Lord of love, come to our aid!
Grant us peace, teach us peace.
Amen*



SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

ACTS 4: 32-35

1 JN 5: 1-6

JN 20: 19-31

My Lord and My God! What a powerful statement. This is a declaration of faith, one that comes after Thomas had to see the marks of Christ's wounds to believe it is Him. I couldn't imagine the confusion at that time after Jesus was crucified. I am sure anyone's faith would have been rattled too. Like it does whenever we face the profound and significant loss of anyone deeply important to us.

But we hear a sense of relief and belief when Thomas utters those words "*My Lord and My God*".

Faith, at its core, is the unwavering belief in something despite a lack of concrete evidence. In the case of Thomas, his journey from skepticism to profound faith exemplifies the transformative power of unwavering belief, illustrating how even the most committed doubters can find profound faith when presented with powerful confirmation.

Whilst Thomas' words could be seen as the most powerful in this week's reading I'm actually drawn to another statement. One that I believe is what we need to think about deeply when we are serving those who come to us. "*Peace be with you*".

Not only are these words a beautiful gesture of greeting and a lovely thing to hope for someone, but these were the first words the resurrected Jesus chose to say when he stood with His disciples. He could have chosen anything, and yet He chose peace.

This sign of peace is a desire for tranquillity, harmony, and well-being to the person. It is a gesture of goodwill, comfort, an experience of inner calm and serenity. It is to convey a sense of spiritual peace, hope, and faith. So when we approach those we serve, may peace always be the first thing we say, think, offer and embrace for them and for ourselves. Peace be with you.

What experiences of peace have you had when supporting someone in distress?

Reflection by Corinne Lindsell

The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

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THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

ACTS 3: 13-15, 17-19

1 JN 2: 1-5

LK 24: 35-48

This week's reading puts us on a journey with the disciples as they just had an encounter with Christ on the road to Emmaus and how profound that experience was, so much so they were so keen to tell everyone about it.

I remember when I went to work in America for a summer, the agency I was with told us "when you get back home you are going to want to share everything you experienced with everyone, and sometimes they might just want the movie synopsis version". That stayed with me to this day 20 years later. The most meaningful sharing I had from this time was with those closest to me and those who had similar experiences. It then allowed for stories to be told in ordinary moments and the stories themselves became more meaningful to me as the person who experienced it.

When I think about the Vincentian works we do every day, this work is strengthened when we are able to share with our fellow Vincentians the insights that we have received. The marks that were left on us as a fellow human being from encountering someone's pain. And the moments of hope and joy we can offer as we connect with them as someone also trying to figure out this thing called life.

I call this looking for the sacred in the ordinary. Its choosing our moments and to recognise the sacred in what we experienced. The extraordinary in the mundane. Recognising the sacred things in life often requires a shift in perspective, allowing us to see the profound beauty and meaning hidden in the ordinary moments.

Even when the disciples were experiencing the presence of Jesus in their midst "while in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering". **STILL WONDERING**, I love this. This wonder is connected to our wonder and awe that comes in the most sacred moments, and is a deep curiosity that we can bring into our daily lives.

Where can you find wonder and awe in the ordinary things in life?

Reflection by Corinne Lindsay

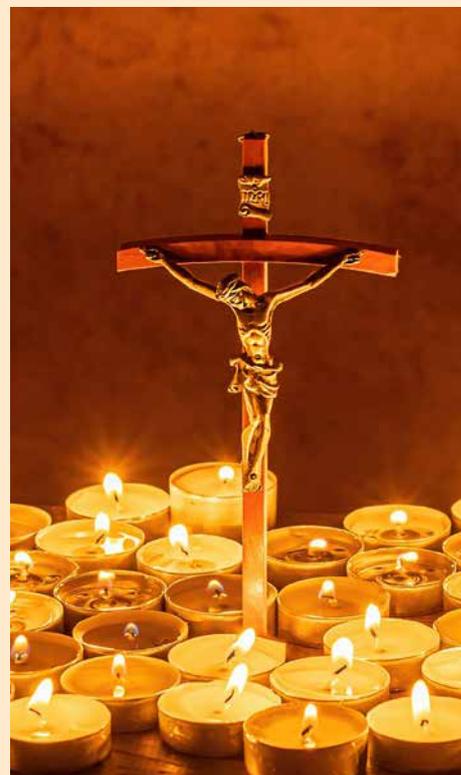
THIS WEEK...

"Every moment is a sacred moment."

John Muir

PRAYER

Lord, May we know where to see the sacred in our every day lives.
Amen



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The Good Shepherd

THIS WEEK...

In unity, we find strength and hope.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we pray that all should be one. Send Your Holy Spirit upon all who seek to serve in Your name.

Amen



FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

ACTS 4: 8-12

1 JN 3: 1-2

JN 10: 11-18

This is one of my favourite images of Christ. The Good Shepherd. I remember when I was travelling through New Zealand 15 years ago when I saw a flock of sheep all together and then a sole sheep outside the boundaries by himself. This scripture passage immediately came to mind. The sheep that was lost was fretting in such a way that until it was guided by the farmer back to the flock he was so unsure of where he needed to be. Once he was back with the flock, he was back in safety. We are not meant to be alone.

This gospel reading serves as a timeless and compassionate example for all who strive to engage in charitable works for those experiencing poverty and rejection of any kind. It highlights the profound value of caring for those less fortunate, demonstrating a boundless love and unwavering commitment to those in need. Jesus declares, *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."* This powerful metaphor illustrates the selflessness and sacrifice inherent in the Society, inspiring us to emulate His profound care for those who are marginalised and vulnerable.

This is a tangible way to activate the teachings of the gospel in our lives today. We are called to be the hands and feet of Christ, extending care to those suffering among us. In following this example of the Good Shepherd, we can help alleviate injustice and offer a ray of hope to those who have been forgotten. Let us remember that as we serve those experiencing isolation and poverty, we are not only offering material assistance but also sharing the love, compassion, and grace that Jesus demonstrated throughout his example.

We do this, because we are all one, no one should be left alone.

What tangible things can we do as Vincentians to ensure no one is alone?

Reflection by Corinne Lindsell

The Fruitful Vine

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FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

ACTS 9: 26-31

1JN 3:18-24

JN 15:1-8

In October last year I was invited by Bishop Vincent Long to attend the historic Diocesan Synod gathering for the Diocese of Parramatta. I was joined by close to 200 members of various parishes and agencies of the local Church of Greater Western Sydney & Blue Mountains.

The gathering prayed, discerned, reflected, discussed and listened to each other in six thematic sessions. Each individual came to the process with different perspectives, differing life experiences and different espousal of the Catholic faith. The one thing we had in common was a deep and profound love of God.

I was reminded of this rich experience through this week's Gospel of John to his faith community. John reflects that we are called to faith not solely as individuals but as one body, or as branches of the one vine.

The fruitful vine offers true life; life which this gospel tells us in the earlier chapter is "life abundant". How does this vine become fruitful? This does depend on the vinegrower who must carefully prune the vine enabling it to bear good fruit. Vines naturally have two kinds of branches--those which bear fruit and those which don't. The non-bearing branches must be carefully pruned back in order for the vine to conserve its energy for bearing good fruit. There is a clear and profound message here: We are either fruit-bearing or non-fruit-bearing. There is no fuzzy in-between. For true growth, the dead bits must be pruned.

So, it is with us I believe. Jesus promises that we will bear much fruit if we abide in him and allow him to abide in us. Abiding in the work of God in our life requires careful reflection each day. My son learnt at school a very simple end of day reflection which I share here. It asks two questions; What was I grateful for today and What was I ungrateful for? The answers need not be complicated or deeply perplexing but simply from the heart. It is in this way that the Spirit will bear much fruit within each of us.

How does Jesus speak to you in this "bearing of fruit" metaphor?

THIS WEEK...

The branches of a vine will bear fruit only if they are attached to the vine.
(Jn15.4)

PRAYER

Father, continue to challenge us in your profound love that we may respond to love of others.
Amen



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Spiritual Reflection Guide

Meet Me in Galilee!