SUNDAY PLUS

Be indestructible!

Carved in stone?

by Bridie Stringer

The seventeenth-century poet Alexander Pope started one of his poems with the line: "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing..." to which a contemporary satirist might add: "… but many people have no cause for alarm!" The stipulations of the Law given in today's reading from the book of Exodus could not be plainer. There are rules and the breach of them has dire consequences. We use the expression that things are "not set in stone", meaning that there is some flexibility in their interpretation, not forgetting, of course, that the rules of Exodus were indeed set in stone. St Paul, however, in his first letter to the Corinthians nuances the severity of the Exodus message in order to be able to offer the crucified Christ as the power and wisdom of God. What looks like destruction is not destruction at all, but the manifestation of the greatness of a God who can also be humble. John's account of the behaviour of an angry Jesus in the Temple challenges the received wisdom of what good Temple practice looks like. The Temple as they know it will be irrevocably changed and it is only afterwards that the disciples are able to make sense of what had seemed to be simply an angry verbal exchange about the currency exchange rate offered by the money-changers.

The final line of today's Gospel passage challenges us too. If Jesus rightfully trusts himself to us, what are our motives in doing what we do? Do we carve our messages in stone and use those stones as weapons or can we place our wisdom at the service of the God whose weakness is stronger than human strength?

Bridie Stringer is a mother, grandmother and pastoral theologian.

Beyond the pandemic

Natasha Pritchard

In today's Gospel we see Jesus destroying what had come to be accepted as normal – the use of the holy Temple as a market place.

During the first weeks of lockdown, we may have felt at a loss for all of the things we had come to accept as normal in our lives. Our lives quietened and many trivial worries or distractions disappeared. It was as if Jesus took a whip to drive out all of the clutter in our lives and perhaps we learnt to use that space for something more meaningful. How many of us used our new-found free time to watch Mass on the television, spend time in silence or change the way we pray? Did we spend more time speaking to or helping our neighbours and friends? Did our priorities change?

For all that was lost in the pandemic, perhaps there was also something precious to be gained.

Natasha Pritchard, a lay Catholic chaplain in a Liverpool hospital, worked to support patients, families, carers and all who needed support during the Covid-19 lockdown.

"Christ redeemed the whole person, and he wishes to restore in each of us the capacity to enter into relationship with others."

Pope Francis

Hold on to hope

by Canon Paul Douthwaite

For over a thousand years, until finally destroyed in AD 70, the Temple had stood in Jerusalem. It was the centre of Jewish worship, the heart of the faith and a sign to them that God dwelt with his people. From its destruction until today, the Jewish people have prayed three times a day that a third Temple be erected.

In John's Gospel, unlike the others, the Temple scene is placed at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. In challenging the authorities to destroy the Temple and in promising that he will raise it up in three days, Jesus aligns himself to the Temple and predicts his own passion, death and resurrection.

The Jewish people hold onto the hope that another Temple will be erected, that God will once again dwell with his people. Jesus, in his death and resurrection, gives us the hope that we can dwell with him for all eternity.

Canon Paul Douthwaite is the National Catholic Chaplain for Prisons and HMPPS Roman Catholic Faith Adviser.

Loving Lord, it is hard to be good and yet, more than anything, I want to be close to you for ever and for always. During these days of Lent, help me on my journey towards you. ✠ Amen.

Today:	Monday:	Tuesday:	Wednesday:	(S) St John Ogilvie (Feast):	Thursday:	Friday:	Saturday:	Next Sunday:
Exodus 20:1-17 1 Corinthians 1:22-25 John 2:13-25	2 Kings 5:1-15 Luke 4:24-30	Daniel 3:25. 34-43 Matthew 18:21-35	Deuteronomy 4:1. 5-9 Matthew 5:17-19	Isaiah 50:5-9 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 John 12:24-26	Jeremiah 7:23-28 Luke 11:14-23	Hosea 14:2-10 Mark 12:28-34	Hosea 5:15 – 6:6 Luke 18:9-14	2 Chronicles 36:14-16. 19-23 Ephesians 2:4-10 John 3:14-21

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SUNDAY PLUS

Live with integrity

When two hungers meet

by Fr Denis McBride C.Ss.R.

In today's Gospel scene a Pharisee talks to Jesus about God. Nicodemus has arrived under cover of darkness and he misunderstands what the light of the world is saying to him. This gives Jesus the opportunity to clarify his meaning, so he declares: "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son." God's supreme gift was given out of love, not out of a desire to humiliate or condemn the world. If God is greedy for anything, it is for people's acceptance of his love.

There is a divine hunger for human love – that is why God sent his only Son. So there is a human hunger for divine love – that is why God sent his Son. In the person of Jesus two hungers meet and two hungers are satisfied.

Perhaps we would come into the light more readily if we believed that the light we are entering is not the light of condemnation. If some of us are afraid of the dark, all of us are afraid of the light. We are afraid of standing in a place that is over-lit, exposed and defenceless. But that is a dark image of God. The purpose of the light is to enlighten, not to blind. God wants to see us in the light. After all, as the second reading tells us: "We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it."

Fr Denis McBride's many books, CDs and DVDs are available from Redemptorist Publications, www.rpbooks.co.uk.

Live in the light

by Mary Bell

People commended for their heroism often say, "I didn't think about it. I just acted on impulse." This disregard for their own lives is apparent in their selfless actions and rightfully recognised, sometimes with a medal.

However, there is the often unrecognised but also equally commendable heroism where someone knowingly and constantly puts their life at risk for the sake of others: carers for people with communicable, possibly fatal, diseases; volunteers ministering to wretched and neglected communities, often in places which we would avoid; ordinary people who generously devote their lives to many kinds of daily service, going out of their way to be helpful even if it means difficulty for themselves.

If Jesus goes up to Jerusalem he will be in grave danger. Yet he still intends to go. From the seed of his death will grow an infinite harvest of souls. He is willing to sacrifice himself in a voluntary act of pure love, supreme generosity.

This "heroism" is the price we must all pay if we want eternal life: to voluntarily place our lives into God's hands, showing our love by submitting to his will. No crucifixion for us, but instead, like Jesus, willingly accepting life's tribulations and rejecting the easier, more comfortable worldly way.

Mary Bell is a retired teacher, U3A lecturer and devoted grandmother.

Open the eyes of my heart, Lord. Let me see how you gave of yourself without ever counting the personal cost. Teach me to be generous, Lord, so that I might fill my little world with your love. ✝ Amen.

Sometimes it takes an emergency…

by Sr Janet Fearns FMDM

"It was basically down to either leave the kids in the cave to die or give it a go. If we brought them out, there was a chance some might survive..." Australian anaesthetist and caver Dr Richard Harris continued. "It was about a three-hour trip to get in each day to where the children were. The problem with the cave is that it was essentially zero visibility and very tight restrictions."

When rising flood waters trapped twelve children and their football coach underground in Thailand in 2018, the world waited in case the 7,000 volunteers needed help with the rescue.

Almost two years later, during the coronavirus pandemic, countless volunteers offered their time, efforts and resources in order to support the NHS, carers, key workers, people confined to their homes…

We all remember it, don't we? We saw the urgent need and prioritised. We worked together to save lives – and celebrated the sometimes hidden goodness in each other's heart. Sometimes it takes an emergency…

Sr Janet Fearns is a Franciscan Missionary of the Divine Motherhood.

"If we wish to dialogue, we should do this in the first place with the poor. They are not just another party to be won over, or merely another individual seated at a table of equals."

Pope Francis

Today:	Monday:	Tuesday:	Wednesday:	(E&S) St Patrick (Feast): 1 Peter 4:7-11; Luke 5:1-11	Thursday:	Friday:	Saturday:	Next Sunday:
2 Chronicles 36:14-16. 19-23 Ephesians 2:4-10 John 3:14-21	Isaiah 65:17-21 John 4:43-54	Ezekiel 47:1-9. 12 John 5:1-3. 5-16	Isaiah 49:8-15 John 5:17-30		Exodus 32:7-14 John 5:31-47	2 Samuel 7:4-5. 12-14. 16 Romans 4:13. 16-18. 22 Matthew 1:16. 18-21. 24 or Luke 2:41-51	Jeremiah 11:18-20 John 7:40-52	Jeremiah 31:31-34 Hebrews 5:7-9 John 12:20-33

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Limitless generosity

A voice like thunder

by Eldred Willey

It was Wednesday 1 July 1981. Fr Jozo Zovko, the parish priest of Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina, was praying in the village church. A week earlier, while he was away conducting a retreat, some children from his parish had claimed to see an apparition of the Virgin Mary on the hill above the village. "We don't need signs and wonders to have faith," he had said.

Now the crowds were on the hill and he was in the church – alone and in anguish. "I cried out from the depths of my despair and helplessness," he said, "and God answered. I heard a voice – not an inner voice, but a voice like mine, a voice that rang all over my life: 'Go and protect the children.'" Going to the church door, he found the young visionaries outside. They had just fled across the vineyards from the police.

Was it like that for Jeremiah when he heard a voice which rang all over his life? As for Jeremiah, so for Fr Jozo, obeying the voice would mean beating and incarceration. Having offered up prayer and entreaty with loud cries he would have to learn obedience through his suffering. In October he was sentenced to three years in prison. Yet after sharing in the sufferings of Christ, he would also experience the power of his resurrection.

Eldred Willey works in communications for the Diocese of East Anglia.

Clap for the NHS – and others

by Natasha Pritchard

"If anyone serves me, my father will honour him."

To serve others is to serve God. During the pandemic, the whole nation came together to honour those who were serving in our hospitals, care homes and communities. Neighbours, who might never have spoken together before, smiled and waved to each other on their doorsteps every Thursday night. People posted notes through strangers' doors, offering assistance. Community spirits were restored as we joined together for a common purpose. At a time when we were forced apart, we came together more than ever before. Our streets were alive with gratitude and hope.

Following in Jesus' humble footsteps, ordinary workers in our society accepted the very real risk of death, giving of themselves to serve others despite the danger. These were our modern-day acts of selfless and sacrificial love. The love that God generously wrote on our hearts spilled out onto neighbour and stranger alike.

Natasha Pritchard, a lay Catholic chaplain in a Liverpool hospital, worked to support patients, families, carers and all who needed support during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Loving Lord, why do I sometimes avoid praising someone for a job well done? Help me to unselfishly recognise the talents and achievements of the people around me. ✠ Amen.

Without counting the cost

by James Gallogly

For ten consecutive Thursday evenings during the spring of 2020 we gathered on our doorsteps to clap the carers. In a time of national trauma, this assembly brought joy and happiness. The creative cacophony of noise, even fireworks for some, lifted the nation. For many it was the highlight of the restricted, locked-down week. This socially distanced get-together brought cheer and bolstered morale. How marvellous to see communities that once were too busy to notice each other, now staunch allies in fight against Covid-19.

Some of our national reticence and social isolationism died in those weeks. For a brief moment walls between age and class and race appeared to tumble. We recognised our common humanity. Like the "wheat grain that falls on the ground and dies" the result was a rich harvest. As we look back we can see what love without counting the cost looks like.

James Gallogly is a Catholic lay chaplain in a UK prison.

"Dialogue must not only favour the preferential option on behalf of the poor, the marginalised and the excluded, but also respect them as having a leading role to play."

Pope Francis

Today:	Monday:	Tuesday:	Wednesday:	Thursday:	Friday:	Saturday:	Next Sunday:
Jeremiah 31:31-34 Hebrews 5:7-9 John 12:20-33	Daniel 13:1-9. 15-17. 19-30. 33-62 John 8:1-11	Numbers 21:4-9 John 8:21-30	Daniel 3:14-20. 24-25. 28 John 8:31-42	Isaiah 7:10-14; 8:10 Hebrews 10:4-10 Luke 1:26-38	Jeremiah 20:10-13 John 10:31-42	Ezekiel 37:21-28 John 11:45-56	Procession: Mark 11:1-10 or John 12:12-16 Mass: Isaiah 50:4-7 Philippians 2:6-11 Mark 14:1 – 15:47

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28 March 2021

SUNDAY PLUS

Alone but not lonely

Bend the knee

by Bridie Stringer

One of the major challenges of the Palm Sunday readings is that we know we are in for a long session of narration and we think we have heard it all before. Those who are less active and athletic know that they will be standing for the entire duration, although some pastorally pragmatic Mass celebrants may invite those "those less able" to sit.

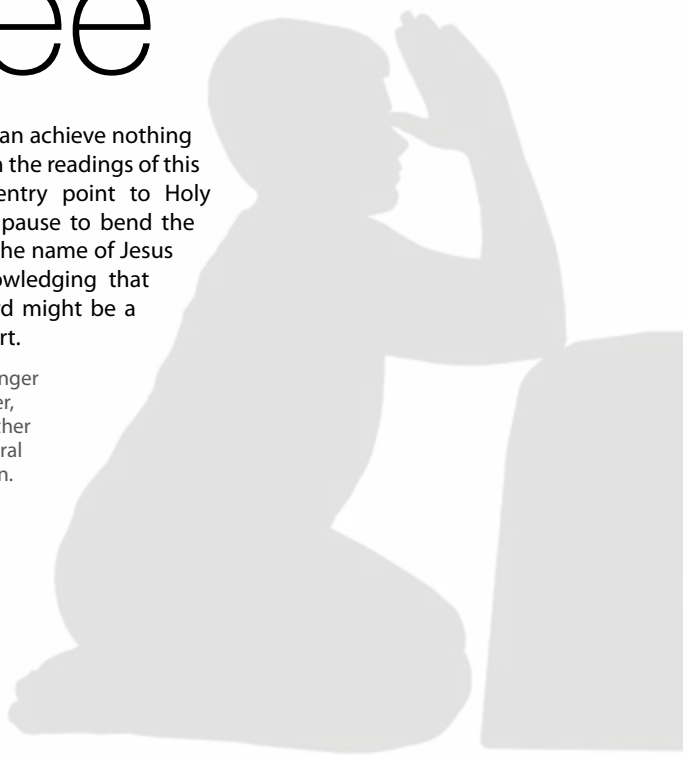
The incident which perhaps grabs our attention least in the readings is the anointing at Bethany. The fact that it took place in the home of "Simon the leper" places Jesus very much in a setting associated with those in the margins of society.

The unnamed woman, with her jar of expensive ointment, is also a controversial figure. For a start, she breaks the jar, so is clearly not trying to be economical with a product which would have cost a year's wages for a labourer. She was not intending to save any of the ointment to take home with her afterwards. Her anointing of Jesus on his head signifies his status as Messiah and, as the rest of the story unfolds, he embraces his destiny as the suffering servant spoken of in Isaiah 50.

St Paul celebrates Jesus as Lord in his summary of the passion narrative in the second reading. He urges his listeners to bend the knee at the name of Jesus and acclaim Jesus as Lord.

If we can achieve nothing else from the readings of this special entry point to Holy Week, a pause to bend the knee at the name of Jesus in acknowledging that he is Lord might be a good start.

Bridie Stringer is a mother, grandmother and pastoral theologian.



The solitary hero

by Christine Clark

It is possible to be alone yet not be lonely. It is also possible to be with people, even friends, yet feel lonely. The people you are with may have no bearing on how you feel inside, or how isolated you feel.

On the day of the festival of unleavened bread Jesus was surrounded by people. He told his disciples, "You will all become deserters." As usual Peter disputed this but Jesus told him that he would deny him three times. Again Peter, and indeed all the disciples, disputed this.

Jesus knew what lay ahead and that he could not rely on his friends at what would surely be a challenging time. He would have to do it alone. During those difficult days leading to his death, more than once he might have run away from God's plan for him. Even as he died, his despair and loneliness led him to cry out, "My God… why have you forsaken me?"

Despite that last anguished cry, he knew his loyalty lay with his loving Father, how his future would map out – and gave himself up to it.

Christine Clark is a retired member of the editorial staff of Redemptorist Publications.

Lord, I have sometimes avoided someone for the sake of my own comfort and convenience. Your apostles ran away from you. Give me the courage and patience to stay with others in their time of need. ✝ Amen.

"Right is might"

by Br Royston Price C.Ss.R.

I imagine that Palm Sunday is one of the most popular in the Church year, with the procession, folding and waving the palms, and in one or two churches, even the appearance of a donkey! In many ways, the Christian life is quite like being the donkey ridden by the Lord as he entered Jerusalem. We're not necessarily much to look at, our talents can be rather humble and as for our singing voices… But Jesus chooses each one of us personally for his mission and work in the world. When the Lord rode that donkey into the city, it became the bearer of the one who is the Good News itself. It achieved a dignity that far outstripped its scruffy appearance. For each of us, when we let the Lord take the reins and direct our life through grace, we can be confident that we're not alone, that we're valued and wanted by Jesus, and that he's loved us from all of eternity.

Br Royston Price is the Vocation Director for the Redemptorists' London Province.

"Starting from our roots, let us sit around the common table, a place of conversation and of shared hopes. In this way our differences, which could seem like a banner or a wall, can become a bridge. Identity and dialogue are not enemies."

Pope Francis

Today: Procession: Mark 11:1-10 or John 12:12-16 Mass: Isaiah 50:4-7 Philippians 2:6-11 Mark 14:1 – 15:47

Monday: Isaiah 42:1-7 John 12:1-11

Tuesday: Isaiah 49:1-6 John 13:21-33. 36-38

Wednesday: Isaiah 50:4-9 Matthew 26:14-25

Thursday: Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper: Exodus 12:1-8. 11-14 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 John 13:1-15

Friday: The Celebration of the Passion of the Lord: Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9 John 18:1 – 19:42

Saturday: The Easter Vigil in the Holy Night Genesis 1:1 – 2:2 Genesis 22:1-18 Exodus 14:15 – 15:1 Isaiah 54:5-14 Isaiah 55:1-11 Baruch 3:9-15. 32 – 4:4 Ezekiel 36:16-28

Next Sunday: Acts 10:34. 37-43 Colossians 3:1-4 or 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 John 20:1-9

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